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Russia Day in Moscow: Long-Stripped of Its Original Meaning (Op-Ed)

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Tourists pose for a photo with actors dressed as Soviet-era leaders Vladimir Lenin and Josef Stalin in the park in front of the Bolshoi Theatre in downtown Moscow, Russia, Sunday, June 12, 2011. Russia's first president, Boris Yeltsin, established the June 12 holiday after the Soviet breakup to mark the 1990 declaration of sovereignty by Russia's Soviet-era parliament.

It was no coincidence that President Vladimir Putin was evasive while delivering his official Russia Day speech on June 12, the national holiday commemorating the proclamation of Russia's sovereignty.

Originally referred to as Russia's Independence Day, the holiday was renamed simply "Russia Day" in 2002.

In 1990, the Congress of People's Deputies of the Russian Federation, then part of the U.S.S.R., chose this day to declare Russia's independence from the Soviet Union, setting the path for a new era in the country's history. In political terms, the declaration established priority

for Russian legislation over Soviet laws, which were still formally valid across the territory of the Soviet Union. It also gave more power to Boris Yeltsin, who signed the declaration as the newly-elected chairman of the Russian Supreme Soviet.

A year to the day in 1991, Yeltsin was elected Russia's first president, taking more than 57 percent of the vote. In just a few months, the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

Now, 25 years on, just 9 percent of Russians say that they would vote for Yeltsin again if faced with the same choice, while 34 percent would choose to abstain, a survey by the independent pollster Levada Center revealed. Regardless, 41 percent of respondents agreed that the first presidential election had been an important and positive event in the nation's past.

As a date, June 12 symbolized the rise and birth of a new, free Russia, emerging from the ruins of the collapsing Soviet empire. The symbolism in proclaiming this day Russia Day suggested from the very start that the new nation was not the heir, but the freed prisoner of the Soviet regime, alongside the other nations oppressed by Soviet rule in the 20th century.

Speaking at the official Russia Day reception, Putin said that June 12 was the beginning of a fundamental transformation. "It was necessary at the time, but like many radical reforms, it created great difficulties and, at times, dramatic moments for our country and our people," he said. "Today, we remember that time as the distant past, though not much time has gone by."

He mentioned neither Russia's sovereignty, nor Boris Yeltsin's first presidential election.

In fact, the more that Russia thinks of itself as the Soviet Union's successor on the global stage, the less meaningful and symbolic the date become in its original sense.

Some 26 years after proclaiming independence, and a quarter of a century after electing their first president, Russians do not truly celebrate Russia Day. Instead, they enjoy the national holiday simply as an extra summer day off.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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