

The Unique Banality of Vladimir Putin

We've seen it all a thousand times before.

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Russian President Vladimir Putin. kremlin.ru

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Two years ago in an interview with the Financial Times, Vladimir Putin said categorically: "Liberalism is obsolete." Years have come and gone, and here he is again pushing the theory of anti-liberalism to justify his militaristic and imperialist policies.

Liberalism may be obsolete, but throughout human history the rejection of its practical application leads to the persecution of dissenters, prisons, wars, great bloodshed and the degradation of the human condition. Not to mention the fact that since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was written, liberal values have been recognized as universal. They even naturally fit into the Constitution of the Russian Federation, the guarantor of which is, in theory, Putin himself.

The Russian autocrat is both unique and banal. He is unique in that he established a regime in the 21st century that is more typical of the mid-20th century. In the post-heroic age, which knows no borders for the movement of people, capital and ideas, he staged a theater of the "heroic" defense of a sovereignty that no one had ever attempted to destroy. And he orchestrated the triumph of the practical application of imperialism in an era when no empire exists.

At the same time, he is as banal as the dictators and autocrats of the 20th century — they are all alike in many ways. They all fostered the cult of the leader, relied on the indifference and obedience of the masses, deified the state, maintained a cult of strength, militarism and heroic death, confused themselves with the state, built an autarkic economic model, often surviving by extracting rents from resource dependence. They also refused on principle to allow a rotation of power, fought against "national traitors," imprisoned their opponents, imposed censorship, and sought to rule forever.

At a recent meeting with the leadership of the State Duma and its factions, Putin sat at a great distance from the members of parliament and once again developed the theoretical foundations of a suicidal and archaic policy. He began with the economy and with the now banal idea that the sanctions have not undermined Russia's economy, that macroeconomic parameters are stable, the labor market is supported by the state, etc. Of course, he did not say a word about the fact that the country is steadily heading towards a budget deficit, that real disposable income is falling, that the shadow economy is becoming legal — which is essentially a message to private businesses to survive as best you can. Meanwhile, the official labor market indicators are good because jobs are formally preserved even if there is no work or work process.

The one thing Putin was right about was that Russians don't care about the sanctions — at least for now.

On to the banal stuff. We did not unleash the war; it was the West that unleashed it by organizing a coup in Ukraine in 2014 and encouraging "genocide" in the Donbas. Who sent troops into a neighboring state, who are millions of migrants fleeing from, who destroyed the lives and infrastructure of essentially Soviet and ethnically Russian people — this is not discussed. People are put in jail for voicing these facts in Putin's Russia. But here's something remarkable: Putin actually legalized the word "war": "We are told, we hear today, that we started the war in Donbas, in Ukraine. No, it was started by the collective West."

All right, then. We'll use that term, since the boss gave us permission.

Then it's all banal again: the West was holding Russia back. How and where it's holding Russia back is, as usual, not specified. Actually, if the Chekists hadn't held back Russia's development, it would have long ago become a prosperous country with a place in the choir of developed nations. Putin and his cronies needed Russia without a chance to develop, since it's easier to control the masses running from freedom. We were attacked, we resist, we are all so unique and great again — not that we are living well and passively watching Putin's friends enrich themselves to a level unheard of in world history. It's all the fault of the "collective West," Biden and everyone else on the list.

This regime cannot survive without enemies. And here they are: Once again it's the "fifth

column," and once again the West supports them.

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The next Putin-style platitude: what is happening is "the beginning of the cardinal breakdown of the American-style world order." We seem to recall that this break has already occurred, in fact many times in the decades of the Soviet period. Somehow, the world order — which is, of course, not American but human — has held its own and even expanded to the east. And still the soft power of the Western liberal order is many times more attractive than the sullen imperial charm of Putin's Russia. People flee to them, not to us.

Another thesis: "This is the beginning of the transition from liberal-globalist American egocentrism to a truly multipolar world." Neither Freud nor Marx will help here. Why have decades of Soviet/Russian leaders been so American-centric? It's all America's fault. Catch up and overtake — who else but the U.S.? The world is crumbling — in the U.S., of course. If a currency is on the brink of failure, it's the dollar. And then...nothing happens. The dollar stands, America stands, while Western values, institutions, and procedures remain a reliable safety net against all the "sunsets" of the West, the U.S. and Europe predicted by people smarter than Putin and Nikolai Patrushev.

Next up —banal whataboutism. It turns out that the Stalinist "self-purification" of society didn't happen here; no one here got a seven-year prison term for speaking out against the war; the body of an innocent physicist who literally died in the hands of the FSB is not handed over to his relatives, the epidemic of informants and totalitarian laws that let you put the yellow star of "foreign agent" on someone for no reason — none of this took place here in Russia. This is all in the West. Totalitarianism is there.

Who taught the Kremlin speechwriters the oxymoron "totalitarian liberalism"? Or did Putin himself coin this term during his heart-to-heart talks with Kovalchuk and Patrushev? They gave themselves over to liberalism! It feeds them all: even the remnants of the market economy keep those religious (Orthodox) Chekists who redistribute property in power. Without a liberal environment and a rational monetary policy, perhaps everything would have collapsed long ago.

And then there is the comforting, "We have many supporters." It is strange that two *idee fixes* were not mentioned: import substitution and technological sovereignty. At a meeting in the Kremlin this was done for Putin by Gennady Zyuganov, the leader of the Communists and the autocrat's court jester. But here's the problem: import substitution without imports and international trade is also impossible, while technological sovereignty in today's world is as much of an oxymoron as totalitarian liberalism. "Technological sovereignty" is a prison laboratory (*sharashka*, as described by Solzhenitsyn) or the theft of secrets from "liberal-globalist American egocentrism." There is no other way.

Incidentally, Zyuganov expanded on Putin's theories with a thesis about the demise of not only liberalism, but also capitalism. The autocrat replied evasively, understanding that capitalism, even if it's oligarchic, provides him and his subjects with food on the table. In his book "Capitalism, Alone," the famous economist Branko Milanovic distinguishes two types of capitalist order in the world: liberal meritocratic capitalism and authoritarian capitalism (he

also calls it "political capitalism"). Putin's mode of production and consumption is based on authoritarian capitalism.

And finally: "We have already heard a lot that the West will fight with us 'to the last Ukrainian'." No one in the West has ever said such nonsense. Defense Minister Shoigu said it in one of his sparkling speeches. They got confused in the rhetoric up at the top — as confused as in Leonid Brezhnev's gerontocracy. Or perhaps one speechwriter doesn't read the work of the other speechwriters.

But what is the "last" thing Putin is fighting for during a demographic disaster, attrition of the working-age population, the flight abroad of the best specialists, the hunt for conscripts, war losses, the impending primitivization of the economy? What is he fighting to? To the last conscript? To the last spare part from a malfunctioning airplane or car? Digging chips out of old debit cards and putting them in new ones is true sovereignty, no doubt about it...

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Putin has crushed every living thing in his own country. When he successfully zeroed out his presidential terms, he zeroed out himself and the reputation of Russians. But this was not enough for him. He decided to become the ruler of the world, like a character from a clichéd cartoon about a villain who wants to take over the whole universe. The West did not want to be good and play by his strange rules? Well, now they'll be defeated the hard way.

Of course, the elites — at least part of the elite, including those who have lost everything or nearly everything — understand that all Putin's decisions, including the most important one of Feb. 24, are suicidal for the country and society, for the economy, human capital and the reputation of Russia. But they do nothing to rectify the situation. They are afraid. Unable to join together. They do not have the instruments to change the autocrat. They destroyed those instruments themselves for lack of use during the past two decades, because they thought that democracy wasn't worth a damn, that the way to make money is by hooking up with the Kremlin and the FSB without any kind of competitive elections.

We can't do anything but endure while we cry over our life that was abolished overnight. But as the clever economist Sergei Pavlenko once wrote, "Back in 2014, it became clear that stabilization was not so much unlikely as unnecessary. Because the lower classes are ready to keep living the way they are and worse, while the top is ready to govern the way they are and worse."

Although it should be said that the Russian elite will no longer be able to "live like Abramovich and govern like Stalin."

And so we continue our steady movement down the world's garbage chute. After almost five months of "special operations" on the heart of the nation, the flight down could be expected.

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