

The Code of Putinism

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 399
November 2015

Brian D. Taylor¹
Syracuse University

Is Vladimir Putin a pragmatist or an ideologue? And if he is an ideologue, then what exactly is Putinism? Putin seems like an unlikely founder of an -ism, and for many years, experts tended to depict him as a pragmatist. Recently, however, especially since the domestic tightening of the screws from 2012, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the subsequent war in Ukraine, Putin is said to have gone ideological.

This memo argues that “Putinism” does indeed exist and that it has for some time, but that it is a mistake to see it as a coherent ideological scheme. Rather, Putinism is best thought of as a “code.” A code is both more and less than an ideology; more, because it involves not just ideas but other stimuli for action, and less, because it is not a coherent and encompassing system of thought. Further, although it would be a mistake to see Putin as a pure ideologue, it would be equally mistaken to reduce Putin’s actions to simple pragmatism. Rather, as the sociologist Max Weber observed long ago, rational self-interest is not the only motive for human action. In addition to what Weber called “instrumental rationality,” other important motives for human behavior include values or ideas (“value rationality”), emotion (“affect”), and habit (“tradition”). I refer to this combination of motives that fall outside the realm of instrumental rationality—habit, emotions, and ideas—as a code.

This memo can only provide a rough outline of the contents of this code, a sketch rather than a portrait, with little nuance and limited evidence. My goal is to suggest a way to think about Russian behavior that gets beyond the pragmatist-or-ideologue distinction. This code is not Putin’s code, but the code of Putinism, which means these beliefs, emotions, and habits are shared to a large extent by other members of Putin’s team. Although he is obviously the most important person in the system and its central decisionmaker, he has surrounded himself with people who share similar backgrounds and beliefs. Further, this code took some time to develop and show itself, becoming readily apparent in the aftermath of the Beslan terrorist attack of September 2004 and

¹ [Brian Taylor](#) is Professor of Political Science in the Maxwell School at Syracuse University.

Ukraine’s Orange Revolution in December 2004. Although somewhat dormant during the Medvedev interregnum, the code of Putinism has returned in full form since Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012. The basic components of the Putinist code are shown in the following table.

The Code of Putinism

Ideas	Habits	Emotions
Statism, including great power statism Anti-Westernism and anti-Americanism Conservatism/anti-liberalism	Control Order Unity/anti-pluralism Loyalty Hyper-masculinity	Respect/disrespect and humiliation Resentment Vulnerability/fear

Putinist Ideas

Perhaps the most fundamental component of Putin’s thinking is that he is a **statist** (*gosudarstvennik*). In his first major [statement](#) as ruler, in December 1999, Putin declared that building a strong state was “the key to the rebirth and rise of Russia.” But what kind of state does the Putinist code envision? The evidence suggests that, contrary to initial claims that the state must be democratic, the Putinist code gives the state primacy over the individual. The Putinist state is a traditional Russian “service state” –not one that provides services to its citizens, but one that expects citizens to serve it.

Putin is not only a statist, but a **great power statist** (*derzhavnik*). He [said](#) in 2003, “All of our historical experience shows that a country like Russia can live and develop in its existing borders only if it is a great power. In all periods when the country was weak – politically or economically –Russia always and inevitably faced the threat of collapse.” Russia should be a great power not only so it will not be pushed around globally, but also so it can resist infringements on its sovereignty and stand up to those lecturing Russia about the deficiencies of its domestic political system—hence the concept of “[sovereign democracy](#)” propagated in 2006-2007 by Putin’s deputy chief of staff Vladislav Surkov.

The need for a strong state internally and externally, and for forceful resistance of Western pressure, is connected to another core Putinist idea, that of **anti-Westernism** in general and **anti-Americanism** in particular. This anti-Americanism has been evident from at least 2004, when after the [Beslan](#) attack Putin [blamed](#) outside forces who “want to cut from us a tasty piece of pie”; two years later he [attacked](#) “Comrade Wolf” who

“knows who to bite and doesn’t listen to anybody.” According to Russian leaders, the United States developed the technology of “[color revolutions](#)” as a form of political warfare against Russia, most importantly during Ukraine’s 2004 Orange Revolution and 2014 Euromaidan. As Security Council Secretary Nikolai [Patrushev](#) put it earlier this year, “The Americans are trying to drag Russia into an inter-state military conflict, using the Ukrainian events to bring about a change in power [in Russia] and in the final analysis dismember our country.”

A final ideational attribute of Putinism is what might be called **conservatism** but is more properly seen as **anti-liberalism**. Philosophically, liberals tend to stress the importance of individual rights and freedoms, and have a generally positive view of human nature and the possibility of rational progress. Conservatives, in contrast, tend to stress the group over the individual, be more skeptical about human nature, and prioritize order and tradition over change and reform. In 1999 Putin [stressed](#) that Russia was historically very different from liberal America and England, contending that “collective forms of life have always dominated over individualism” in Russia and that the Russian people look toward the state and society as a whole for support rather than believe in their own efforts. This collectivist and statist orientation is decidedly conservative. Putin’s embrace of conservatism has become more explicit in his third term as president, with his defense of traditional values and spirituality.

Putinist Habits

It is common in political analysis to attribute someone’s behavior to things they believe; it is much less common to claim people act politically based on things they do without really thinking. Referring to this as “habit” is in a certain sense misleading, because the issue is not whether someone smokes or bites their fingernails. Rather, when Weber emphasized the importance of “traditional” behavior “determined by ingrained habituation,” he was referring to an “almost automatic reaction” without reflection or deliberation.

One key impulse of Putin and his team which fits our understanding of a habit is the desire to establish **control**. This includes a distrust of spontaneous action. For Putin and many of his close associates, this habit is at least in part an attribute either acquired or strengthened by time working for the Soviet secret police, the KGB. As Russian sociologist Olga Kryshtanovskaya [put it](#) in 2007, “What is ‘disorder’ in the eyes of a man in uniform? It’s the absence of control. If there is not control, there is the possibility of independent influence. And the *siloviki* [people with backgrounds in the security services, law enforcement, and the military] perceive the presence of alternative centers of power in the country as a threat to the country’s integrity.”

Closely related to this attitude about control is a commitment to **order**. Putin and most of his closest associates made their careers as bureaucrats, not as politicians, and are

therefore used to hierarchical organizational structures. This habitual orientation was evident in the first slogan adopted by Putin to explain his goals as president, the “vertical of power.” It is also apparent in Putin’s obvious distaste for revolutions, which he sees not as spontaneous domestic uprisings brought on by popular dissatisfaction but as events instigated by someone, often outsiders, particularly the United States.

Habits favoring control and order also lead into a preference for **unity**, or what more politically might be called **anti-pluralism**. Ideationally, this is connected to conservative and anti-liberal ideas that stress the importance of national unity and downplay the importance of individual freedoms and expression. Putin [maintained](#) in 2003 that it would only be possible for Russia to achieve its “strategic goal” of returning to the ranks of the great powers through “consolidation...mobilization...[and] the uniting of forces.” Dmitry Medvedev, at the time head of the presidential administration, went further, [arguing](#) in 2005 that “if we cannot consolidate the elite, Russia could disappear as a single state.”

There is a general connection between habits favoring control, order, and unity and ideas that are statist, anti-liberal, and anti-Western. Putin has repeatedly emphasized the need to unite against foreign and domestic enemies for the good of the country. This continual linking of domestic critics and foreign adversaries represents a return to a traditional “[besieged fortress](#)” image of Russia, a tendency that resonates naturally with the Putinist team.

Another habitual tendency that has marked the Putin era is personal **loyalty**. A St. Petersburg journalist described Putin in an interview as “a friend to his friends,” which is both a “strong and weak point” of his personality. Loyalty to “the guys” and sticking together was a key part of the social code in Putin’s childhood milieu. Putin’s demonstration of loyalty to his two key patrons, former St. Petersburg mayor Anatoly Sobchak and former president Yeltsin, played a crucial role in his rise to the top. Loyalty is not just a personal characteristic, however, but a more general feature of the system, with loyalty to the “clan” or “team” being seen as a key practice.

The final habit that is part of the code of Putinism is **hyper-masculinity**. Even the most casual observer of Russian politics is familiar with Putin’s penchant for macho displays: demonstrations of his judo prowess, fishing and riding horseback bare-chested, tranquilizing a tiger, hanging out with a biker gang, and so forth. These are not just stunts, according to a different St. Petersburg journalist, but the realization of Putin’s “childhood dreams.” Putin also has a tendency to use criminal slang to emphasize his toughness. Although this tough talk and behavior is clearly in part a public relations construction and legitimization tool, it also seems to reflect habitual tendencies that affect how the Russian leadership sees the world.

Putinist Emotions

Emotions, like habits, are often disregarded by social scientists trying to explain political behavior, especially that of elites.² Feelings are things to be ignored or suppressed or controlled, to allow the rational part of the brain to do its work. Psychological research, however, show that emotions are fundamental to decisionmaking.

The first emotion of central importance to the Putinist code is **respect**. More specifically, the Putinist elite feels that it has been disrespected, offended, even humiliated, in particular by the West. In February 2000, Putin emphasized the danger of disrespecting Russia, [declaring](#): “Anyone who offends us will not last three days.” This feeling of having been disrespected has intensified in recent years, with the Russian economist Igor Yurgens [observing](#) in 2014 that “both Putin and his closest circle are overcome with feelings of humiliation and betrayal.” Similarly, foreign policy analyst Sergei Karaganov has [noted](#) a “feeling of humiliation and a desire for *revanche*” on the part of “a significant part of the elite and the population as a whole.” The political commentator Stanislav Belkovsky, emphasizing the importance of emotion to decisionmaking, [stated](#) that Putin felt that he had “tolerated humiliation from the West for many years” and that the annexation of Crimea was not so much a pragmatic defense of Russian interests but the “redemption of his own humiliation.”

Closely related to this feeling of disrespect is the emotion of **resentment**. The fancy/preentious way this emotion is discussed in academic literature is to use the French term *ressentiment*, a feeling experienced when one group takes another group as an example or model but then feels angry and frustrated when it is unable to meet the standards, whether objectively or subjectively, of the exemplary unit. Multiple Russian scholars have highlighted the importance of *ressentiment*, including PONARS Eurasia members Sergey Medvedev and Eduard Ponarin.³ The political scientist Olga Malinova [notes](#) the inherent tension between Russia’s position of “pupilhood” vis-à-vis the West in terms of building democracy and capitalism in the 1990s versus its perceived status as an equal great power. Resentment was all but inevitable under the circumstances.

A final emotion that is an aspect of the Putinist code is **vulnerability** or even **fear**. This claim probably sounds dubious, given the amount of power wielded by Putin and his government and the degree of popularity Putin has enjoyed over the last 15 years in Russia. But close observers of Putinism insist that this feeling is genuine. Former Kremlin insider Gleb Pavlovsky has [described](#) among the elite “an absolute conviction that as soon as the power center shifts, or if there is mass pressure, or the appearance of

² For more on mass emotions in Russia today, see: Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, “[Emotions, Cognition, and the Societal Dynamics of East-West Polarization](#),” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 355, September 2014.

³ Sergei Medvedev, “[РУССКИЙ РЕСЕНТИМЕНТ](#),” Отечественные записки, 2014; Eduard Ponarin, “[Russia’s Elite: What They Think of the United States and Why](#),” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 237, August 2013.

a popular leader, then everybody will be annihilated. It's a feeling of great vulnerability." Further, Pavlovsky maintained that Putin believed that Russia was not ready for an elite rotation of power without score-settling: "Putin always said, we know ourselves, we have not reached that stage yet; we know that as soon we move aside, you will destroy us. He said that explicitly: you'll put us up against the wall and execute us."

Implications

Is Putin a pragmatist or an ideologue? He is both and neither, sometimes one and sometimes the other. His politics and decisions are motivated by a combination of circumstances, rationality, ideas, habits, and emotions. He has a mentality and certain goals, but not a detailed road map. He is, in short, a human being.

Importantly, these elements can reinforce one another. The idea of Russia as a strong state at home and abroad is connected to habits of control and order, as well as feelings of resentment and disrespect. The overlap and blurring between the elements is what makes it a cohesive code or mentality. Reducing the motives of Putin and his ruling team to just one thing—whether rationality or ideology—misses a lot of the story.

Outside observers and foreign interlocutors need to resist the tendency to dismiss the code of Putinism as either a product of irrationality or propaganda and instead understand how it shapes Russian government behavior at home and abroad. For the Kremlin, Russia's domestic and international situation is quite precarious and the West is out to get Russia and makes common cause with Russia's domestic opposition; as a result, strongly centralized "[manual control](#)" is necessary to hold the state together.

Russia's besieged fortress mentality is real. The impact of this code has been [captured](#) well by pro-Kremlin Russian journalist Dmitry Babich: "Living without enemies and having a besieged fortress mentality is indeed stupid. However, living in a besieged fortress and not having a besieged fortress mentality is downright idiotic." Putin and his team are not idiots. Rather, their life experiences (including feelings, habits, and values) reinforce this fortress mentality.