

# Putin in Russian Historical Context

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The second president of Russia seems as surprised as anyone by his rapid ascension to the helm. Vladimir Putin's machismo, stiffness, the blurtings of hooligan jargon and the almost brazen ideological evasiveness--are all signs that add up to a gloomy teenager who cannot decide whether to be the best pupil or the schoolyard bully, and so does both. For now, let us leave Putin interpreting and instead focus on the horizon that he faces.

## **The Russian Tradition: Trying Hard and Being Tough**

The key advantages of the Russian state have been its relative geopolitical proximity to Europe, its sheer size and resources. Geopolitical and military parity with the West was achieved three times:

- in the reign of Ivan the Terrible in the 16th century when Russia first emerged as a new gunpowder empire abreast the contemporary empires of Spanish Hapsburgs and Ottoman Turks, newly capable of battering its former nomadic nemeses and conquering the expanses of Siberia;
- in the 18th century when Peter the Great upgraded Russian geopolitical capability to contemporary standards by adding the strategic navies and the regular corps of military and administrative officers who ensured the centralized command of war supplies and human recruits; and
- lastly, under Stalin in the 20th century when Russia's century-long tendency to drift into the agrarian periphery was forcefully reversed and the newly-developed mechanisms of war-time industrial mobilization were effectively applied to outproducing the Nazis in tanks and airplanes, then matching the Americans in strategic nuclear weapons and missiles.

All three historical successes were evidently achieved by the application of state coercion. All three were rooted in geopolitical competition with the increasingly capitalist West. There was nothing exceptional in this situation. All the formidable territorial organizations of modern times--be it the Ottoman Empire, Persia, China, Japan, or Spain--faced similar challenges and constraints. This resulted in the familiar nativist/Westernizing cultural splits, political struggles, and the intermittent bouts of reform and revolution aimed at strengthening the state and living up to the perceived Western challenges. With the end of the Cold War and the manifest redundancy of Soviet superpower enterprise, Russia is once again at a historical nadir.

## **Globalization as a Russian Dilemma**

Contemporary globalization is more than ever based on decoupling the extraction of profits from the burdens of statehood. Although capitalism is by nature cosmopolitan, historically men of money have had to rely on men of swords (statesmen) for protection and aid in creating the infrastructure of a state. In the previous globalization of the 19th century (Pax Britannica), the access of investors to all the exotic places on Earth had to be secured by colonial armies and administrations, which also educated the natives and laid the rails and telegraph cables.

Today's global investors can choose among two hundred modern states competing to attract them. The governments assume the costs of upgrading local infrastructure, training labor, and securing the enclaves visited by foreigners. The promising learners are offered tutoring and stipends from global monitoring agencies such as the World Bank, plus a spate of non-governmental organizations that inherited the noble and naïve causes of the missionaries. The unruly and the laggards are punished by isolation and starvation.

The global regime of this kind no longer requires formal imperial administration. Yet contrary to the overhasty predictions, nation states are far from being superceded--they remain the essential supporting structures of the world system. The change was rather in the balance of relative power between states and markets. Among other consequences, this change means that war becomes a dubious way of accruing power (which is a better-grounded analysis than the foggy proposition of democratic peace). By extension, the idea of social revolution as the mass-supported forcible seizure of state offices has been invalidated--markets have escaped too obviously beyond the reach of national governments, especially the weaker non-Western ones.

## **"The Heavy Artillery of Cheap Goods Battering Any Great Walls"**

The Russian state faces such grave dilemmas because capitalism in the globalization mode is antithetical to the mercantilist bureaucratic empires that specialize in maximizing military might and geopolitical advantages--the very pursuits in which the Russian and Soviet rulers were enmeshed for centuries. The Soviet state was superbly designed for war-like campaigns. But the long peaceful period after 1945 brought tasks most unnatural for such an organization--namely, the cost-efficient, flexible and uninterrupted production and distribution of consumer goods and services. For three decades Soviet leaders have been toying with various surrogates of market discipline and accountability. The reform attempts culminated in Gorbachev's perestroika, which initially questioned central controls--and then spectacularly failed to install the necessary competitive mechanisms in politics and the economy.

## **Implosion from the Middle**

The Soviet Union was brought down neither from without (presumably by the West, which in fact stood watching in amazement), nor from above or below. Rather, it

imploded from the middle and fragmented along the institutional lines of bureaucratic turfs. The particularly cynical apparatchiks of the disintegrating Young Communists League (Komsomol) led the way. Following them were the governors of national republics and Russian provinces, senior bureaucrats of economic ministries--all the way down to supermarket managers. As in many declining empires of the past, the vile servants--emboldened by the incapacitation of emperors and frightened by chaos--rushed to grab the assets nearest them. Typically, they were helped by enterprising personalities ranging from the self-styled yuppie imitators to former black marketeers and outright gangsters. The luckiest few from this motley category became the celebrity post-communist tycoons.

With the removal of its organizing central stem, the Soviet power pyramid fell into segments and has remained in this awkward position. At a closer examination, Yeltsin's Russia felt much like Brezhnev's USSR, only more chaotic, unbundled, and worse off. Most trends in Russian society of the 1990s are traceable to the 1970s or before. No longer contained within the Soviet framework, after 1991 they simply came into the open.

### **Putin as Anti-Gorbachev**

Colonel Putin is a paradigmatic anti-Gorbachev--he talks little, exudes masculinity and professional harshness, dislikes the media and parliament chatterboxes, praises state farms and the military-industrial complex, uses unrestrained force against ethnic separatists, and makes sounds to appease the West after his subordinates produce an uproar.

Putin served well the original purpose of his surprise promotion--to cover Yeltsin's retreat. This mission was coterminous with beating back the opportunistic coalition of provincial governors who were posed to divide the spoils of what in 1999 seemed the imminent demise of Yeltsin's quasi-monarchy. Chechnya was selected as the beating boy--the first step in re-centralizing the Russian state. But success now hinges on the promised pacification of Chechnya, which appears remoter than ever.

The common cliché of Russia "at war with the whole Chechen people for three centuries" is a gross generalization. The bitter irony is that Russian bureaucrats--under the tsars, Stalin, or Yeltsin--invariably sought to rule this frontier tribal society in the harshly direct manner to which they were accustomed. Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov--who persistently offered Moscow his service as surrogate governor of a nominally independent Chechnya--is the latest victim. The best outcome Putin can now hope for is the perennial blockade of the mountainous parts of Chechnya and the dispersal of Chechens in the internal (Russian) diaspora. But diaspora breeds nationalism too, unless its leaders are assiduously bribed. The Moscow handlers of minority nationalists must be learning this imperial game by now.

Fairly soon, Putin will have to seek a distraction from the Chechen quagmire. Most likely it will be a massive anti-crime campaign. This fits Putin's profile and the recent trend towards squeezing the illegal providers of coercion from the protection market. The

policemen on active duty or in the more lucrative private protection agencies will eagerly join the attack on their criminal competitors (which Russian society surely will not mind).

It will be far trickier to reign in the governors of provincial fiefdoms and the notorious economic oligarchs with their mechanisms of political corruption and media manipulation. A clash is unavoidable--an isolationist Moscow cannot rely on external credits, and must therefore wrestle back internal resources. The central ruler probably wins, and Russian politics and media will become boring.

Some enthusiasts wishfully predict that Putin will become a Russian Pinochet, which to them means the harsh midwife of liberalized markets. Pessimists fear an aggressive re-militarized Russia (the present condition of the Russian military warrants a thorough re-militarization.) We shall see a bit of both, because neither the capitalist nor the imperial option is quite available.

Putin may become the founder of a fourth Russian empire--one that is informal and more capitalist. Russian capital would begin to realize the longer-term interest of staying within former Soviet borders. The majority of Russia's enterprises are redundant on world markets, and this condition will persist. Though cheaper in comparison to the West, post-socialist labor remains too costly and undisciplined compared to the huge and widely available labor pools of the Third World. The former Soviet bloc is attractive to Western corporations only as a large concentration of consumers. In the meantime, big Russian capitalists will enjoy sufficient leverage to demand protection from their state. If the new class manages to consolidate itself around the state, it will certainly demand special preferences in the former Soviet republics--but no further, because the Russian state is too weak to aspire for more than establishing military and commercial protectorates within former Soviet frontiers.

If in the coming decade Russia re-militarizes and manages to build a new professional army (to which the current Chechen war seems conducive), we may yet see the emergence of a mercenary Russia--a state that undertakes, for a fee, the risks of imposing stability in some of the world's nastiest geopolitical areas. If the markets emerge victorious and globalization endures, the supply of military protection will become a marketable commodity, as it was in early modern markets. Obvious applications include Central Asia and the Transcaucasus, the Balkans, perhaps parts of the Middle East and Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and the biggest worry of all--the China-Korea-Japan triangle. Everywhere Soviet memories and rising anti-Americanism can make Russian military policing more attractive. The West will have to decide how to react, for a re-militarized Russia could prove an even more effective destabilizer of potential conflicts.