

Putin: First as Farce ... - “Putinist stability always represented an interminable succession of states of emergency”

Sunday 20 March 2016, by [BUDRAITSKIS Ilya](#) (Date first published: 14 March 2016).

A few days ago came the 16th anniversary of Vladimir Putin's rule, which is traditionally celebrated by endless fantasies on the theme of 'Russia after Putin'. This intellectual exercise, which is constantly reproduced by the liberal opposition media, has an obvious therapeutic function: no one believes that it will actually end, and therefore the question of the end of this era, as it is beginning to seem endless, becomes the subject of utopias and anti-utopias. In a similar vein, during the depressive atmosphere of the Brezhnev stagnation, dissident Andrei Amalrik wrote his famous text *Will the Soviet Union Survive until 1984?*. What was most shocking at the time was not the pamphlet's content – the majority of Amalrik's predictions were proven to be incorrect – but the title itself. No one, not even the regime's most radical critics, found it easy to imagine that Soviet reality could have an end point/ finite horizon, located in a historically foreseeable time.

However, this illusion of the end of history, of “the eternal present” is the only element that the Putin regime fully adopted from Brezhnev. In fact, everything about it seems artificial, drained of colour, rotten. No one believes in the slogans they themselves proclaim. An ideology, which, as it appears, rises above societal concerns, loses all content and preserves only its exterior form. The distinction to be made is that unlike Brezhnevism, representing the last stage of the Soviet regime's ideological decomposition, Putinism has represented a farce from the very beginning.

In 1999, when Vladimir Putin was named as Boris Yeltsin's successor, the Russian post-soviet statehood had finally lost all traces of a meaningful project with an idea of a future based on a strong belief in its place in history. The consensus that had enabled Putin's triumphant rise to power was a consensus of universal disappointment. A majority had been traumatised by poverty and the extreme violence of the primitive accumulation of capital and now found itself disappointed by dreams of individual success and self-actualisation in the marketplace. The intelligentsia, which had counted on occupying first place in the new enlightened reality of liberal democracy, now experienced disorientation and social dispersion. At the same time, the newly victorious elite felt insecure due to a lack of security in their newly acquired status and property. As had happened before in history, such a sense of powerlessness coupled with the disintegration of society created space for a Caesar – a figure able to ‘normalise’ the country through sheer force of will. This situation called not for a real hero who believed in his mission, but for an actor who was able to play the required role with a greater or lesser degree of talent. In many ways Alexander Prokhanov's novel *Mr Hexogen* provides an accurate diagnosis of the state in which the country had found itself before Putin's ascent to power. The new president, who appears only on the final pages of the book, has no face. Fighting a bitter war against each other, liberals and patriots, members of the special forces and the military, seem to almost push onto the well-lit stage of history a person without a past, without ideas, an absolute tabula rasa, onto whom everyone projects what they wish to see. Putin's many faces, coupled with his constant change of masks, each of which could equally turn out to be his true image, have accompanied the entire history of his rule. In turn, the imperial nationalist, pragmatist, supporter of liberal top-down reforms or the nostalgic heir to Andropov are on show. What

distinguishes such a slippery identity by the Caesar is that it always rises above politics, the state apparatus and unofficial lobbying groups, forever remaining a pure projection of desires. This is the simple secret to the mystery of the president's unfailingly high approval ratings: people don't trust the government, the police, political parties or their neighbours, but they do believe in Putin – as one believes in one's imaginary best friend.

The figure of the absent hero serves as justification not only for the atomisation of society, but also for the state's degradation. Defining the particular political system of Putin's Russia as either class-based, neo-feudal, or – further developing Max Weber's famous category – neopatrimonial, runs as a common theme across all political analyses. The large-scale redistribution of property was followed by the privatisation of the state itself. Offices and departments as well as regions and cities were turned into collective fiefdoms of private groups, who used their position in the power vertical for rent-seeking.

While any public investigation of this system's logic proves shocking to the enlightened public (the most recent illuminating instance being the reactions to the film 'Chaika'), it still manages to successfully avoid any open war for the redistribution of power and property. Not only does Putin lend it an air of stability in his role as final arbiter who is capable of balancing the appetites of different elite groups, through his very existence he reminds these groups of their common higher calling. Vladimir Yakunin's recent comments that the Russian ruling class should turn into a 'new nobility' reflect the elite's need for a collective Weltanschauung. Every single act by civil servants operating in Putin's regime is not only motivated by cynicism and mercenary corporate interest; it also represents an underlying idea of higher justice. Putin's portrait, which hangs in every manager's office, constantly serves to convey the illusion of a large state organism, of which this very manager represents a natural component, all the while being motivated by his own passions and desires. While he may think of himself as a statist, he simultaneously destroys all remnants of rationality in state institutions with his actions.

In essence, Putinist stability always represented an interminable succession of states of emergency: terror threats, special operations, and open and hybrid wars. This extremity, and the state's constant need to 'concentrate its efforts' have long since become the norm, part of the state apparatus' usual working regime. External and internal threats, as well as artificially created 'historic events' (the Olympic Games, summits and anniversaries), are connected to an increasing concentration of resources, which on the one hand generates ever-new possibilities for the extraction and redistribution of rent, and on the other hand creates the, albeit temporary, illusion of solidarity among the ruling elite, seemingly united over the same cause.

The large-scale historical exhibitions, which took place over the last few years in Moscow's Manege, represent the essence of Putinism's philosophy of history. The absent, phantom state aims to convince itself of its existence through continuity of form; a 'historical Russia' with a continuous existence from Prince Vladimir to Peter the Great, and from Nicholas II to Stalin.

The hollow nature of these exhibitions, which are full of billboards and video re-enactments but without a single original historical artifact, completely highlights the farcical, artificial character of Putinism as a construct that tries to dress itself in the clothing of bygone eras.

After the annexation of Crimea it became fashionable to accuse Putin of 'romanticism', exchanging the contemporary pragmatic approach to international politics with references to archaic ideas of the «holy land» and the restoration of «historic justice». It cannot be said that these constant appeals to the past are merely a propaganda manoeuvre for Putin's elite. Rather, it seems that Putin and his surroundings truly want to believe in the possibility of a 'new Yalta' which will restore the global balance of powers, or in the possibility of restoring the 'tri-union of the Russian people'

(incorporating Ukrainians and Belorussians). Such a hunger to believe is the reverse side of the gaping absence of any consistent Russian strategy in the post-Soviet space. This state's facelessness and its lack of a political or economic model that could serve as a template elsewhere constantly forces it to play someone else's role – badly, and with unintelligible words to boot.

Putinism is not the organic product of a thousand years of Russian despotism in its eternalised form (though this is exactly how it wants to appear), but a tragicomedy, with a beginning, climax and end. The comic element here consists of the fact that the denouement (even if it is extended over time) will involve and reveal everything that was already contained in its beginning, albeit in an unrealised form. One after the other, guns hanging on the walls will start shooting; repressed fears will materialise; ghosts of the past will appear and self-fulfilling prophecies will come true. One could say that now, in 2015, we have fully entered the play's final act. And if the history of the Putin era represents a farce, then it is bound to end as a tragedy. Of course, this is not because the worst is still to come. It is a tragedy in the sense of the Hegelian philosophy of history, as a striving of people who, having found faith in their own power, defy fate, thereby putting into doubt the concept of history as an ugly infinitude of defeats and disappointments.

Ilya Budraitskis

P.S.

* LefEast. March 14, 2016:

<http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/putin-first-as-farce/>

* To be published in Russian in the April issue of the Сеанс magazine.

* Ilya-150x150Ilya Budraitskis(1981) is a historian, cultural and political activist. Since 2009 he is Ph.D. student at the Institute for World History, Russian Academy of Science, Moscow. In 2001-2004 he organized Russian activists in mobilizations against the G8, in European and World Social Forums. Since 2011 he has been an activist and spokesperson for Russian Socialist Movement. Member of Editorial board of "Moscow Art Magazine". Regular contributor to the number of political and cultural websites.