

Vladimir Putin's Populism, Russia's Revival, and Liberalism Lost.

Kathryn Stoner, Stanford University

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In this memo, I wrestle with whether or not Vladimir Putin's regime, established initially in 2000, can properly be called populist. I argue that it has many of the core characteristics of a populist regime, but the causes of populism's rise in Putin's Russia were rather different from its development in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria as well as in the United States, and European Union. It is, therefore, a different kind of populism (and thus, I am cheered that this conference is called Global Populisms) in many, but not all respects. It is the same genus, but perhaps a slightly different species of organism.

First, the direction of evolution of Russian populism has not been from a regime that was liberal democracy to populist democracy/emerging autocracy, but from soft autocracy to populist autocracy. Putin's brand of populism drained the lifeblood out of the fledgling, but far from consolidated, liberal political, social and economic order of Russia in the 1990s. But the populism that has emerged in Russia really came about after Putin's return to the presidency of Russia in 2012. It was not a reaction to a corrupt, underperforming former regime, so much as it was a strategic choice to maintain the corrupt, underperforming regime over which he and his cronies had presided for the previous 12 years. Thus, the source of Russia's populism is quite distinct from other cases we are considering: it is a survival strategy in an already de-institutionalized, autocratic regime. The enemy of "the people" in Putin's Russia is not a corrupt domestic elite (although certainly

opposition figures are deemed enemies of Russia); rather, the enemy is outside of Russia – in “gay” Europe, and in the United States.

Second, populism in Russia has consolidated a system of grave social inequalities, rather than pursuing any sort of redistribution of wealth from rich to poor as in some other populist regimes. Putin has not proposed nor executed upon any particularly “populist” economic policies that would result in short term gain versus long term pain to win the votes of average Russians. He has, however, explicitly rejected liberalism in politics, and to some degree, in economics in his pursuit of de-privatization of many key sectors of the Russian economy.

But third, in line with most definitions of populism, Russia’s political system is highly dependent on a charismatic leader who perceives himself to have a unique bond to the common Russian “muzhikh” (or man). Even before Russia could properly be called populist, Mr. Putin has infamously been seen shirtless riding horses in Siberia, or flying in bushplanes to put out forest fires. His hours long annual call in shows maintain a direct link (literally) with his people. But Russian populism has developed a particularly strong reliance on Mr. Putin personally; far more than on a political party, or even a group of politicians who share his policies generally. This excessive reliance on the figure (real or imagined) of Vladimir Putin, is inherently unstable. There is no successor on the horizon to whom Putin might pass his charismatic authority and legitimacy (he tried that with Dmitri Medvedev in 2008, and it didn’t work), and although he has outlived the average life expectancy of the average Russian man by five or so years, no one lives forever. So, while populism may have arrived earlier in Russia than the most recent wave of this

phenomenon elsewhere in Eastern Europe, it's not clear that it will survive and thrive beyond Putin.

Putin the Evolutionary Populist

In contrast to other political leaders under discussion at this conference, Vladimir Putin did not come to power with a message or political party that was expressly populist. He did not, in the presidential campaign of 2000, for example, lay out an economic policy platform to redistribute income from the rich to the poor; nor did he have a message that was particularly nationalistic, or critical of his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, and the reigning elite. Vladimir Putin became Russia's president for the first time almost eighteen years ago. He was a virtual unknown to most of the Russian public until December 1999, when his predecessor, Russia's first president, Boris Yeltsin, abruptly resigned from office at midnight on December 31 apologizing for his attempts at radical reform in the decade that had passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991: "what we thought would be easy turned out to be very difficult." Yeltsin reported in that same speech that in making Putin acting President of Russia as of January 1, 2000 he had asked him to "take care of Russia." Putin, however, was an accidental president in many ways. He tells us in "From the First Person" that he was not looking to serve and that he was as surprised as anyone when Yeltsin asked him to become acting president (although he was prime minister at the time). Putin had always served other leaders from the shadows; first as deputy Mayor of St. Petersburg under Anatoly Sobchak, and then in Moscow as Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration's property division (and ultimately briefly as Head of the FSB). He did not, therefore, have a clear plan for

ruling Russia before he came to office. He lacked a campaign message that we might consider classically populist. There was no “us” versus “them” component; he did not seem to have much of a personality or charisma that would have made him an obvious populist; and he quite pointedly avoided any specific campaigning or speeches about policy between January and March 2000. Indeed far from attempting to build up a reputation as a man of action and decisiveness in favor of Russia or Russians, in his first big test as president, the sinking of the Kursk submarine with xx sailors alive, he at first stayed away from the media in favor of vacationing in Crimea.

Rather, Putin’s regime evolved first in his first term as president (2000-2004) into a competitive autocracy, and then into hardened form of *autocratic populism with a culturally conservative, anti-Western bent*.¹ I think this shift began around 2011-12, as his approval rating dipped to some of its lowest levels since he first entered the Russian presidency in 2000. The shift to populism was, in a sense, a strategic choice to strengthen his position within Russia. Recall that in the fall of 2011, Mr. Putin announced that he would be coming back to the Russian presidency (he had been serving as Prime Minister of Russia from 2008) in place of his protégé, Dmitri Medvedev, who would return to the prime minister’s office. The response to this announcement by Russia’s middle class – the very people who benefitted most economically from the considerable growth in the Russian economy between 2003-2008 – was to take to the streets in protest. Protests spread further in December

¹ M. Steven Fish, in a recent piece that will be in a forthcoming edited special issue of *Comparative Politics* on Russia (that I edited, actually), calls the regime “a conservative, populist autocracy.”

2011, in response to what many urban voters thought was a flawed election to the Russian Duma that inflated results in favor of Putin's preferred party, United Russia. Protests continued through the spring of 2012 against Putin himself when he won back the presidency in what was in all likelihood (I'm being kind here) a flawed vote. In Moscow, St. Petersburg and far beyond, for the first time Russians were actually on the streets yelling "Russia without Putin!" and demanding free and fair elections.

Just as troubling for Putin, the economic growth Russia had enjoyed in his first two terms as president (2000-2004 and 2004-2008) came to an abrupt and dramatic halt as a result of the global financial crisis of fall 2008 and the resulting hit to Russian revenues from its oil and gas exports. Although the Central Bank of Russia, and the Ministry for Economic Development managed the crisis well with astute macro-economic policy decisions, by 2013, the economy, though stailized, had begun to stagnate. Incomes were flat, unemployment began to creep up, and there were few indicators that without a dramatic increase in natural resource export prices, the Russian economy would ever grow beyond 1-2 percent ever again. In sum, the economic situation was degrading, and with global oil prices still low relative to the highs of the early 00's, there was no end in sight.

At the same time, a storm was brewing in neighboring Ukraine. In November 2013, demonstrators were (again) out in Maidan Square protesting the Ukrainian president's last minute decision not to sign an accession agreement with the European Union. Eventually, they toppled their corrupt, Russian backed President, Viktor Yanukovich. Putin and his administration could not tolerate the prospect that

anything similar could happen *in* Russia. Russian forces seized Crimea ostensibly to protect Russia from Western/NATO intervention in Ukraine; and Russia has assisted a simmering conflict between Russian backed Ukrainian separatists in the Donbass region and Ukrainian forces. Both the seizure of Crimea, and support of Ukrainian separatists can rightly be construed as “populist” and popular policies.²

Distinct then, from other populisms we are discussing in 2017, where populist parties and leaders rose to power in elections that represented protest against an underperforming, liberal elite, in Russia’s case, the “us” versus “them” of populism is the Russian nation versus an international enemy. Vladimir Putin presents Russia now as the last bulwark against European and American hedonism, materialism, and liberal cultural imperialism. Russia, in contrast, is modern, but socially conservative, where cultural and religious orthodoxy are paramount, but other religions are tolerated. The regime’s nationalism is not xenophobic, but it is pro-Russian in the sense of being strongly in favor of the Russian nation “Rossiski” – which is comprised of different nationalities -- not ethnic Russians alone (“Russki.”)³ It is the geographic and cultural sovereignty of the traditional Russian nation that Putin himself must defend against an ever encroaching, threatening liberal, permissive “West.” To the extent that there is an ideology in Putin’s populism, then it is decidedly illiberal, anti-European and anti-American in both domestic policy (as for example, the anti-gay lifestyle laws, which were in line with a

² See Henry Hale, “How Crimea Pays: Media, Rallying ‘Round the Flag, and Authoritarian Support,” forthcoming, *Comparative Politics* Special Issue on Russia, K. Stoner, guest editor, spring 2018.

³ Yoshiko Herrera et al., *Xenophobia on the Rise?*, *Comparative Politics* Special Issue., forthcoming, 2018.

majority of Russians according to most reliable opinion polls) , but also in its foreign policy.

The last thing to note about Putin's strategic turn to a populist form of autocracy is that the strategy, at least so far, has succeeded. Despite the economic troubles that have persisted and even worsened (under the influence of sanctions and Russian counter-sanctions) since the spring of 2014, Putin's personal approval rating has soared. It remains to be seen, however, how resilient this personalistic form of autocratic populism will remain if (or rather, when) Putin is no longer in power.