Putin, Patriotism and Political Apathy

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How can we explain Vladimir Putin's extraordinary levels of popularity in Russia? Beyond accusations of poll manipulation and propaganda, Carine Clément traces the history and characteristics of "Putinism", a system of ideas and practices feeding on patriotism and a general sense of political apathy throughout Russia.

Vladimir Putin's popularity ratings among his fellow Russians are record-breaking, reaching 89% according to a poll conducted in June 2014 by the Levada Center. Some say the poll was rigged and some call it manipulative propaganda, while others lament the Russian people's incorrigible authoritarianism. Yet what if Putin quite simply enjoys the support of a large majority of the Russian population? There are several reasons for believing this may be the case. First, there is the revival of national pride following Russia's annexation of Crimea; the Kremlin's firm position in the face of repeated rebukes on the part of the Western powers; the country's relative calm compared to Ukraine's instability; and unrest in Armenia and elsewhere. Next, it is widely believed that there is no real political alternative, an insight based on the reasoning that "Putin may not be ideal, but everyone else is a lot worse."

These are the central components of what I call "Putinism," a political system that is strongly centered and focused on the person of Vladimir Putin. This focus is not simply the result of the carefully orchestrated propaganda that credits Putin with every political success, while blaming failures on his undisciplined subordinates. It is also the consequence of Russians'—including the opposition's—impression of the outsized role that Putin plays in the country's affairs. "Putinism" refers, finally, to a system of ideas and practices associated with the current government—a blend of conservatism, traditionalism, patriotism, and populism.

Research that I undertook with colleagues in 2014 on the origins and meaning of apoliticism in particular socio-professional categories[1] sheds light on the logic of this political support, including that of the Russians who, in 2011-2012, marched in the mass demonstrations under the slogan "for honest elections." Some of those who had protested electoral fraud and even professed their personal "hatred" of Putin declared in 2014 that they approved his Crimean policy and recognized "the government's greater attention to

[1] The research project was called "The Creation of Socio-Political Attitudes in Contemporary Russia" (2014), and was financed by the Faculty of Sciences and Liberal Arts at Saint-Petersburg State University. The cases studied included educators, cultural professions, information technology professions, doctors, market professionals, and teenagers.

the needs of ordinary people." Other studies[2] suggest that some of those who joined the protest wave of 2011-2012 are now tired and disillusioned. The interviews abound with testimonials of the following kind: "I participated in most demonstrations, at first, but nothing happened; there were no results"; "I'm fed up with abstract slogans, protest for protest's sake, and wanted to do something concrete." Some of the erstwhile protestors have since come out publicly in favor of Putin, who, they now think, "isn't so bad." An anarchist who is an experienced and well paid programmer and system administrator—the epitome of the anti-Putin demonstrator of 2011-2012—went so far as to declare in 2014: "In fact, if I were in power, if I were in Putin's shoes, I'd do the same thing." Should we see this as a sign of resignation? Of fear?

Though repression has increased significantly, fear is rarely mentioned as a reason for renouncing activism. Far more than political repression, the fear of jeopardizing one's job or career is often a factor. But the crux of the problem lies in the sense of the protests' futility—the fact that they "accomplished nothing." Yet the so-called "Putin opposition" movement of 2011-2012 did in fact achieve results: in particular, they led to an easing of the requirements needed to register political parties seeking to participate in elections and a partial return to the election of regional governors, which had been abolished in 2004. A number of local elections that were widely discussed in the media also contributed to the impression that a liberalization of sorts was underway. This was particularly true of the 2013 municipal elections.

At the same time, this partial liberalization was accompanied by measures that tightened the state's grip on civil society: one law required NGOs receiving foreign funding and engaging in "political activity" to register as "foreign agents"; another penalized "propaganda promoting non-traditional sexual relations aimed at minors"; penal sanctions were introduced against public activities deemed "offensive to religious sentiments"; the repression of public demonstrations increased, legally and in practice; a law on "undesirable" foreign and international NGOs was passed; and Russia retaliated against European sanctions directed against its involvement in the eastern Ukrainian war with its own counter-sanctions. All these measures arose from the same conservative and nationalist mindset: defending Russia's "traditional values," thwarting the efforts of hostile foreign powers to destabilize the country, and proclaiming—at least at a symbolic level—the sovereignty of the Russian state.

Arbitrary Repression

The Western media and international human rights organizations speak of heightened repression in Russia. Many activists who are deemed "opponents" to Putin's regime or threats to the "public order" have been, in practice, incarcerated. Among the most well-known scandals is the Bolotnaya affair, named after the square in central Moscow where clashes between demonstrators and the police occurred on May 6, 2012, following Putin's reelection to the presidency. A total of thirty people were charged. More than a dozen remain imprisoned, including Sergei Udaltsov, the leader of the Left Front, and Alexey Gaskarov, an anti-fascist activist who had already been convicted for his participation in the campaign to save the Khimki Forest. Other leaders of the 2011-2012 movement who became known in the media are free but under surveillance, notably Alexey Navalny, who was placed under house arrest following his success in the elections

[2] Sveta Erpyleva and Artemy Magun, eds., *Politika apolitičnyh. Graždanskie dviženiâ v Rossii 2011-2013 godov*, M: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2014 [The Politics of the "Apolitical": Citizens Movements in Russia, 2012-2013]; A. Kal'k, *Trudovoj opyt i otnošenie k politike: slučaj rabotnikov sfery informacionnyh tehnologij*. Saint-Petersburg European University, Master's thesis, 2015. [Work Experiences and their Relationship to Politics: The Case of High Technology Workers].

for Moscow's town hall. The famous chess player Gary Kasparov and State Duma member Ilya Ponomarev have sought refuge abroad. The fate of another renowned anti-Putin opposition figure, Boris Nemtsov, who was assassinated near the Kremlin in February 2015, is, sadly, well known. Consequently, there remain few media celebrities who are still active in Russia, even among those involved in public opposition to Putin.

So does this all make the "Putin regime" a repressive system? Repression is not occurring on a massive scale. Many independent initiatives that are critical of current authorities still operate in broad daylight. One of the most troubling problems is that there are no clear criteria for gauging the risks involved in opposing the regime: where does the boundary lie that must not be crossed if one is to avoid persecution? This boundary, which, until recently, was perfectly clear to most people, has since disappeared amidst the increasing chaos that seems to characterize the policies pursued by Russia's political leaders.

We can distinguish between three types of repression. First is the repression of the political opposition, which is mostly symbolic and media oriented. It is directed against leaders and well-known establishment figures. Harsher repression, resulting in actual prison sentences, is aimed at political newcomers. The goal, in this case, is most likely to discourage ordinary people from getting mixed up in politics. A third form of repression targets activists for social causes that are not directly political, but which interfere with specific financial and economic interests. The repression targeting these organizations tries to prevent them from doing harm while denying them publicity. This is especially visible in the repression of labor activists and employees who are simply trying to defend their rights.

It is hard to measure the impact of such repression on public opinion. Based on polls,[3] repression is not something most Russians worry about (only 3% of those polled in February 2015 considered repression to be a "major threat"). Declining living standards, rising poverty, and the economic crisis are seen as far more troubling. In a society that has abandoned the democratic illusions and the rousing, abstract slogans about human rights that it embraced in the 1990s, these priorities are not terribly surprising. This is particularly true given that the public is largely unaware of this repression and that, in some instances, the latter is widely supported by public opinion, as seen with the incarceration of the oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky (at least initially) and, to a lesser extent, the singers of Pussy Riot, whose disrespectful behavior towards Orthodox beliefs and places of worship was denounced by many. Finally, for many Russians, if repression means avoiding instability, civil war, and blood baths, it can be tolerated.

The Roots of Putin's Support

The support that a majority of Russians offer Putin is primarily tied to jittery fears of chaos and instability, which they associate with the 1990s and the rule of the first post-Soviet president, Boris Yeltsin. Much of the population views these years as a dark period, when they concentrated on survival as the country disintegrated, factories closed, salaries went unpaid, and inflation was rampant. Yet it was precisely during these years that the media, politicians, and intellectuals preached the triumph of democracy and human rights. It is hard not to conclude that this is one of the main reasons these values have lost their legitimacy and one finds an eagerness to challenge democracy as a system that is unjust and contemptuous of the "people."

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[3] Poll conducted by the Levada Center on February 20-23, 2015, http://www.levada.ru/26-02-2015/bednost-khuzhe-diktatury-chego-boyatsya-seichas-rossiyane (accessed July 3, 2015)

In the 1990s, parents and grandparents skimped to feed their children, even as, on television, they watched unscrupulous individuals make fortunes through small or big-time fraud. And while most of the impoverished simply did their best to work and get by, they were often mocked by the media as the "losers" of the reforms, as "maladjusted," and even as "nostalgic for bygone communism." I personally experienced this contempt for the "masses," the "people," and the "ordinary folk" while conducting my initial research in Russia between 1994 and 1999. The "ordinary folk" were hard-working and conscientious, Soviet citizens who were neither over-critical nor overzealous who, in the flash of an eye, had lost their nation, their ideological compass, and their values, income, and savings. Why wouldn't these people identify with Putin's populist rhetoric, which recognizes their importance and respects and acknowledges their demand for a socially progressive state, rather than scorning their purported sense of entitlement and preference for paternalism? Why wouldn't they support patriotic discourse that finally gives them a reason to be proud of their country, which their ancestors defended, but which has since been allowed to decline?

Sufficient consideration is not always given to the traumatic character of the Soviet Union's brutal dissolution, when families suddenly found themselves strewn across different countries. Nor do we take full measure of what, for the ordinary Russian, the day-to-day experience of democracy means when it is associated with poverty and oligarchy, or of human rights when they are paired with unpaid salaries and pensions. And what is freedom of speech, which Russian intellectual and Western circles see as having experienced its golden age in the 1990s, when the voices of workers and other impoverished groups were almost never heard in public debates, other than to be belittled and scorned?

While I did not find these concerns articulated as such in my interviews from the 2000s, they are nonetheless implicit in most of the studies of groups lying beyond the political, economic, intellectual, and cultural elite. Consequently, mass support for Putin strikes me as neither irrational, strange, nor symptomatic of a "Russian" affinity for authoritarianism. To the contrary, it seems to me to result logically from the social disarray and the political ostracism that afflicted most Russians in the 1990s. Whether or not this is tied to Putin himself seldom matters. He is associated with a return to economic growth and paid salaries and pensions. Thanks to him, Crimea now belongs to the Russian Federation and the wounded pride of several generations of Russians resulting from the dissolution of the Soviet Union has been healed. Thanks to him, the "ordinary citizen" and the "people who work" and "love Russia" (to quote Putin's speech at the rally held on February 23, 2012 at Luzhniki in Moscow against the "for honest elections" movement) once again have something resembling a social and political status.

In these ways, Putin's popularity is rooted in the connection between democratic disenchantment and profound social disarray. Such conditions, as Pierre Rosanvallon has explained,[4] give rise to a demand for populism, which is Putinism's base. Putin's populism addresses the aspirations of the "little people" for greater recognition far more than the opposition's "anti-Putin" populism, which celebrates the "people" for the sole purpose of uniting the masses against the enemy that is Putin. Putin's brand of populism plays on the rejection of elites and oligarchs. It is also a form of plebiscitary democracy, in which a people becomes "the people" through the mediation of a leader. It does not correspond to the procedural democracy of the "for honest elections" campaign. Rather, this populism is

[4] See Pierre Rosanvallon, "A Reflection on Populism", November 10, 2011, *Books & Ideas.*

a response to the crisis of democracy, in which the people, in particular the "social people", have lost their place. At the same time that it puts the people first by becoming their spokesperson, Putinism deprives the people of their sovereignty.

An Opposition Cut Off from the People

This opposition, whose successes and reversals of fortune are avidly followed by experts, draws support primarily in Moscow and several other major Russian cities from the highly educated upper middle classes, intellectuals, and independent or free-lance workers. Even if the image of opposition leaders is partly shaped by propaganda from pro-Kremlin media outlets, they are in fact far removed from the concerns of "hard working and patriotic common folk" whose interests the current regime claims to defend. Generally speaking, the "opposition," which in the Western media is described as "democratic" and "liberal," is primarily focused on Putin himself. The problems that preoccupy most Russians, as indicated by polls, including poverty, housing, education, and health, do not appear as priorities in the discourse of the opposition, which focuses on laying bear the corruption, "dishonesty," and "thievery" of the "Putin regime."

An incident recounted to me by one of my interviewees perfectly illustrates the way in which the "opposition" is perceived. Lyudmila is a professor who participated in several protest marches against electoral fraud in Saint-Petersburg in 2011. She spoke at length of an incident that illustrates her relationship to politics. In 2013, she joined other residents in nearby buildings who regularly walked their dogs in a local square to fight the "dog killers" who were poisoning the neighborhood's pets. They formed a committee and sent a delegation to the Municipal Council, which took several measures as a result of this meeting. But Lyudmila mostly remembers another incident. One of the "dog walkers" was a "nice" young man who was "fascinated by politics." He advised her to go to the local offices of Yabloko, one of the oldest democratic parties and now considered part of the "opposition." She recalls: "I arrived at the local office. Young people, proper in every respect, were sitting around. They asked what I wanted. I explained, but all they could say was: 'yes, of course, we see the problem. But tell us, how are we going to fight the regime?' I exclaimed: 'What regime are we fighting? I came to talk to you about a dog problem!' And the girl replied: 'I understand what you're saying, but it's a political problem. It's political. We need to show the regime that people are in revolt!' But I replied: 'Miss, thank you, but I'm not a part of your audience.' And I left. You understand. Was that about politics? No…"

This story is symptomatic of the divide between an "opposition" obsessed with the "regime" and fighting the "regime," on the one hand, and people with everyday concerns and personal problems, on the other. Alexei Navalny is probably an exception, as he is genuinely popular in Moscow. Part of this is presumably explained by electoral platform, as he emphasized problems that concern most Muscovites, notably corruption, transportation, and housing, as well as the large percentage of immigrants, whom Navalny, a liberal and a nationalist, wants to regulate and control more strictly than the current regime. With the exception of Navalny and perhaps a few other figures, the "opposition" thus reinforces as much as it counters the depoliticization of society. Even the large marches of the "for honest elections" movement, despite the fact that they were directed in part against the "current regime," was not really a political demonstration so much as a form of self-representation that declared: "we're here in the street; there are lots of us; we exist." The interviews conducted by the Laboratory of Public Sociology makes it clear how much the protestors reject any ideological or partisan affiliation other than that of being "united against Putin."

A Paradoxical Apoliticism

As numerous studies have shown,[5] many of the "newly mobilized" of 2011-2012 have turned to local struggles. Their thinking is summed up by this remark: "I'm tired of protesting just to protest. It's pointless. So I thought about something concrete I could do, something that could yield actual results. So I told myself that I really needed to get involved in my neighborhood, to get things moving here." Local groups were formed in the aftermath of the "for honest elections" movement according to a logic that is the opposite of what I described in a previous article:[6] rather than going from something more concrete and limited to something more general, these groups reflect a trajectory from the general to the particular.[7] There is indeed another form of politicization, arising "from below" and rooted in local concerns and the realities of daily life. In this way, people come to believe in collective action and reconnect with the feeling of being able to impact their own milieu; they rediscover themselves, at least to some degree, as the agents and subjects of their own lives.

Local mobilization, which emerged beginning in 2005 during Putin's second term and under the impulse of liberal social reforms, continues to flourish. From the first stirrings of the "for honest elections" movement, large local mobilization illustrated the dynamism of this kind of activism: in Saint-Petersburg in January 2013, several demonstrations mobilized thousands of participants against the closure of a hospital for children suffering from cancerous diseases. Battles fought in Moscow sought primarily to defend schools that were in danger of being shut down or "fused" with others and to oppose "densified" constructions (in apartment building courtyards, sports fields, and green spaces). In the Voronezh region, the residents of threatened areas have, since 2012, mobilized against a project to start mining the region's copper-nickel deposits. The movement, which has been around for over three years, attracted support from across the region and beyond, including such divergent groups as the Cossacks—who are generally more conservative and loyal to the existing order—peasants, and small business owners.

Also sprouting up across the country are "initiative groups," the most popular form of autonomous organization in Russia. They are leading struggles in the realm of housing, ecological issues, urban planning, and social and medical infrastructure. Since 2007, labor disputes are back, despite legislative reforms from the early 2000s that make strikes almost impossible to organize legally. The economic recession that began in early 2015, which resulted in lower income, salary arrears, and layoffs, led to a proliferation of conflicts, less in the form of strikes than in rallies, demonstrations, petitions, road blockings, work slowdowns, and hunger strikes. Protest actions are underway throughout the country, affecting every sector, including industry and transportation but also teaching and medical employees.

Conclusion

"Putinism" is thus a distinct form of state populism that is a response to the expectations of the majority of the population who self-identify as "the people" by way of its leader. Paradoxically, it is strengthened by the political opposition, which focuses on personal attacks against Putin while neglecting the aspirations and social demands of those

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[5] Erpyleva and Magun; Mihhail Alekseevskij and Aleksandra Arhipova, eds., *My ne nemy: Antropologiâ protesta v Rossii 2011–2012 godov* [We are not Mute: Anthropology of the Russian Demonstrations of 2011-2012], ÈLM, Tartu, 2014.

[6] Carine Clément, "Civic Mobilization in Russia: Protest and Daily Life," *Books & Ideas,* June 14, 2013. http://www.booksandideas.net/Civic-Mobilization-in-Russia.html

[7] Laboratory of Public Sociology, "Apoliticism and Solidarity: Local Activism in Russia," *LeftEast*, October 6, 2014. http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/apoliticism-and-solidarity-local-activism-in-russia

who are fed up with elite contempt. Support for "Putinism," as for the opposition, is a political posture that contradicts the purported apoliticism of the Russian population, even if this form of politicization is paradoxical and limited. Social mobilization "from below," even when it declares itself apolitical, is especially political when emphasizing the demand for social justice and acknowledging the agency of actors who are disinclined to self-identify as such. What limits the politicization is the narrowness of a politics that boils down to either supporting or opposing Putin, leaving little room for a political understanding of the problems of daily life that trigger such mobilization. It seems to me, however, that a (re)politicization—a recovery of cognitive, emotional, and practical bearings—has no choice but to follow the tentative paths of mobilization "from below."

Books&Ideas.net, published on October 19th 2015

This text was published in partnership with the American Journal Public Books.