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The Decay of the Russian Public Sphere

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As I write this essay in September 2015, the long and, for all practical purposes, continuous rule of Russian President Vladimir Putin is approaching its inevitable end. While the results of this reign have been negative in all sectors of national life, I submit that it is the public sphere—the traditional domain of political and cultural debates in which Russia was historically strong and respected, even glorious, among nations—that has suffered the most.

Public Spheres

Second in a series

This deterioration of the Russian public sphere has been deep, conspicuous, and skillfully engineered.

Its effects have varied among different cultural genres, but this decay has been deepest for those institutions of public life that are politically relevant because of their large audiences, such as television and major newspapers. Their decline since the 1990s has been dramatic, even tragic. From a slow, highbrow mode of functioning that was culturally rich, ironic, and even snobbish, the TV channels and their news programs, reality shows, and soap operas have all turned to flashy, fast-paced, and over-sexualized standards of presentation. Technically sophisticated, they make even Silvio Berlusconi’s famously vulgar Italian television empire look sluggish, though it was the model for Russian producers. While the visual tropes and technical equipment that are used in all these shows are unmistakably Western—indeed, they are the worst examples of fully commodified, ultra-capitalist culture one could imagine—their current message is universally anti-American, anti-European, and in fact anti-modern. With some investment of skill and art, producers man-

age to encode this message not only into the news but also into reality shows, sporting events, and beauty contests.

A more complex transformation has been typical for major newspapers, though in Russia they do not have the broad geographic reach that is the privilege of the TV and radio channels. During the Putin era, a sharp divide has emerged between the newspapers that claim a national circulation and those that cultivate specific niches only in the metropolises of Moscow and St. Petersburg. The Kremlin closely controls the nationwide newspapers; characteristically, these still carry their old Soviet names, such as *Izvestia* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, though much of their content has nothing to do with the sexless, endlessly theorizing Soviet press. The niche newspapers articulate a broad range of political positions, from ultranationalist to liberal. So far these niche papers have not been closed down, even those that are explicitly anti-Putinist, such as *Novaya Gazeta*. It is rarely known who supports them. There are examples of relatively large newspapers such as *Vedomosti* that are still free-thinking and pro-Western; however, they are partially owned by Western corporations and therefore would become easy prey under recent legislation that forbids foreign agents to invest in Russian media or provide funding for nongovernmental organizations.

In this respect, the plight of Russian newspapers is somewhat similar to the situation of the universities. The large, traditionally prestigious institutions such as Moscow State and St. Petersburg State universities have been intellectually ruined. In every discipline, a few eminent professors have emigrated, many others have retired, and those who stayed are struggling with an enormous, traditionally mindless bureaucracy and ever-increasing political control. But there

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are several institutions—some of them relatively large such as the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, and some small but vigorous such the European University at St. Petersburg—that are still thriving.

It is instructive to observe that although the level of political control in Putin's Russia is not much different from what was typical for the late Soviet period, the means of control have changed entirely. Throughout Putin's reign, the transformation of media content has been largely determined by change of ownership. The TV channels and newspapers that were privatized right after the end of the Soviet Union in 1991 have been renationalized, and now they belong either to the state or to its resource-trading arms such as Gazprom, the giant natural gas company. The former owners of these media, who in many cases created them from scratch, have been pressured into emigrating, which has proved comfortable for some and deadly for others. Putin's victory over these people was probably the biggest story of his reign.

Although largely unprofitable and therefore subsidized by the state, paper media depend on advertising, which has grown into a big market; but the main sponsors of the ads are big businesses that are controlled by the Kremlin and comply with its policies. It often feels as if Russian advertisements do not pursue a commercial purpose of boosting popular interest in competitive goods such as perfumes or cars. Instead, they promote big businesses such as banks, airports, or developers that are recycling state profits and do not rely on mass consumption.

TROLL FACTORIES

In this situation, the Internet plays the crucial role of a public sphere in articulating opinions, arbitrating controversies, and seeking resolutions—a role that becomes only more important in times of crisis. The Internet's reach in Russia is extensive. Ranked by the number of users, Russia is now first in Europe and sixth in the world; by percentage of users, it is on the level of Poland and Portugal. Native social media services such as VKontakte and global platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are all very successful in Russia. There is no scholar or student who does not use Wikipedia in its Russian language ver-

sion, even though the government has already started trying to ban it through regulation. The state has also created and financed the infamous “troll factories,” which generate a multitude of fake individuals who jam online communications with stupid, obscene, or random comments. Probably due to the huge scale of social media in Russia, their efforts have not been very destructive so far.

It is important to understand why the Putin administration, which has worked so assiduously to control television and paper media, is less vigilant with respect to the online public sphere. The Russian-American expert Evgeny Morozov has proposed one explanation: By giving protest groups quick and easy methods for self-organization, social media provide the authorities with equally perfect means of surveillance. (It is also true that social platforms give much relief to potential protesters: Facebook, with its option to block unpleasant voices, is particularly comforting.) In their cost-benefit analysis, the authorities might decide that banning these networks would prove more damaging than keeping them available and controlled.

These vast networks of communication in Cyrillic perform slightly different functions than their counterparts in the Anglo-Saxon world. In Russia, blogs and posts are more emotional and self-expressive, and they also place more emphasis on compassion and solidarity. Conversely, they do not perform to the same extent the roles of self-assertion, competition, or plain information dissemination that social media play in the West.

ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT

Putin's Kremlin and its ally, the Russian Orthodox Church, are trying to restore the Stalinist historiography that glorified Russian leaders who were cruel and powerful, from Ivan the Terrible to Stalin himself. However, in contrast to the late Soviet period, there have been few state-sponsored attempts to deny Stalin's terror or to downsize the count of its victims. To be sure, much more should be done to commemorate these victims, and the voluntary association that is dedicated to that task, the Memorial Society, is persecuted now as a “foreign agent.” In one sense, however, the memory of Stalinism is indeed very much alive in Putin's Russia. Statistical analyses of Russian blogs

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and articles in the paper press tell us that very few names are used in some proximity to Putin's more frequently than Stalin's, whether for comparison or contrast.

But relations between memory and history are often tricky. Putinism and Stalinism are vastly different. The old regime used unprecedented violence to consolidate the power of dogmatic, self-effacing bureaucrats. It promoted the ideals of self-sacrifice and scientific rationality. Corruption was taken seriously as a crime and punished as such (though it continued to grow). Industrial development and military victories were real, but their price was an enormous death toll. The state was dependent on the labor of the people, which it organized in the draconian ways of the gulag.

For the current regime, corruption is an accepted norm. Amounting, in some estimates, to the largest share of state expenditures, the level of corruption is outlandish. The title of Karen Dawisha's recent book about this regime, *Putin's Kleptocracy*, is correct as a diagnosis. In many important ways, Putinism is the opposite of Stalinism: It has led to the deindustrialization of the country, is embedded in corruption, and shuns mass violence. Of course, Putin's regime does make use of torture and show trials, and has launched regional wars. It will do so more often as public protests grow. Yet this is still a far cry from Stalinism.

Russia's arrested development has nothing to do with tradition or inertia. I do not believe the historicist argument, which was popular during the Cold War (for example, in the works of George Kennan) and seems to be reviving again, that Stalinism and now Putinism embody the Russian historical tradition. Explaining Putinism in terms of an eternal Russia absolves the regime's very specific origins and crimes. There are persons and institutions, not a national tradition, to blame for the murder of journalists, the suppression of rallies, and the extraordinary incarceration of female performers from the punk-rock group Pussy Riot for publicly praying against Putin in Moscow's main cathedral in 2012. It is essential for Putinism to perpetuate the Orientalist idea that Russia is a country in which the individual does not count, the people are primitive, and society cannot rule itself. Therefore Russia needs a

ruler like Putin. And it has always had one, except for the times of trouble that happened, as the story has it, precisely because there was no such ruler at the moment.

OIL CURSE

During two long post-Soviet decades, Russia had an excellent chance to reshape itself into a peaceful, law-abiding, and hard-working country, a success that would have been hugely beneficial for the Russian people, Europe, and the world. If Russia is still "post-Soviet" (a euphemism that both insiders and observers of Putinism are using to conceal its novelty), it is due to the concerted effort of a narrow group that has actively prevented Russia from becoming a productive, prosperous, European country. This group has captured Russia's oil and gas, on whose rising prices the development of Putinism has entirely depended. The massive security apparatus and the

corrupt, irrational bureaucracy recycle the wealth that is produced, as if by God's will, from holes in the earth rather than by the work of the people.

For this massive and greedy group that gets almost all its lifeblood from the trade in oil and gas, the population seems redundant. Moreover, sometimes—and particularly in times of crisis—the large and ambitious population becomes a nuisance, and potentially a danger. Students and intellectuals dominated the anti-Putin protest movement in Moscow in 2011–12, as they did the democratic movement in Ukraine. Even though the distance between the intelligentsia, which uses the Internet for debates, and the television-watching masses has proved to be larger in Russia than in Ukraine, this situation might change at any moment. Revolutions occur in the capitals, and this was a historical truth even in a country as vast as Russia. I believe that this speculation—I would call it the idea of the Moscow threat—is very much present in the minds of the Kremlin dwellers.

The particularly Russian combination of resource dependency and a large population defines the pathetic situation of the Russian educated class. The dismantling of meritocracy; the decoupling of human capital and the wealth of the nation; the creation of outlandish riches that

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have nothing to do with the labor or talent of their owners—this situation has revised some of the most basic intuitions about modernity. The peculiar itinerary of the recent past has done much to convince the nation that work and education have no correlation whatsoever with success. From the start, Soviet standards of life were pretty low; the ill-conceived reforms of the 1990s pressed them even lower. But under Putin's rule, until recently, fossil fuel prices were climbing steadily, and Russian incomes rose apace. It was a stroke of pure luck for Putin, his political blessing, that all this time he had enough money to feed both his predatory "elite" and the unproductive population. For all the players of this game—the rulers, the elite, and the people—success was decoupled from work.

But now the game is largely over. Carbon prices are going down, but social inequality is going up. Now that there is less money, choices must be made, and, not surprisingly, the interests of the elite have taken precedence over those of the people. For the latter, this process exposes the incompetence of Russia's rulers better than the public sphere ever could. In modern Russia, only one percent of the population participates in the extraction, transportation, and trading of oil and gas. These chosen people provide about half the state's revenue and two-thirds of national exports. Boom and bust have been determined by the inflows and outflows of petrodollars. Russia is not unique in all this; indeed, it is rather exemplary. Due to its geographic scale and military might, it amplifies the typical problems of many petrostates, from Venezuela to Saudi Arabia. But the oil curse has played a particularly vicious role in Russia precisely because, unlike some other carbon-dependent countries, it has a large and well-educated population.

The oil curse also has a gender dimension, which I think is relevant for current and future Russian developments. In his study of countries in the Middle East, the political scientist Michael Ross of the University of California at Los Angeles showed that women have higher education, better employment, and more legal rights in states that do not have much oil. Since it provides employment and status mostly to the men who are involved in resource extraction, transportation, and security,

carbon dependency is also a female curse. This mechanism's effects in Russia are understudied. Although most participants in the Russian democratic movement of 2011 and in the Ukrainian revolution of 2014 were men, the most successful symbols of these movements were feminine. From Pussy Riot in Russia to Femen in Ukraine, from former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko in Kiev to the pioneering female journalists in Russia's anti-Putin press, women have taken symbolic leadership of the protest movements in both countries. When they confront an overbearing masculine state, these rebellious manifestations of femininity act as all-embracing political symbols. As victims of the regime, women become the heroes of the resistance.

COLONY AND COLONIZER

There is a long and noble tradition of seeing Russia as a European country. Putinism has demonstrated that this historiographical tradition is wrong, or at least dated. As I pointed out in my recent book, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience*, Russia was—and, I should add here, still is—both colony and colonizer, subject and object of imperial domination. Formerly a utopian space of equality and the greenhouse of a great intelligentsia, the country has turned into a supplier of fossil fuels with an unpredictable leader, a corrupted elite, and one of the highest indexes of social inequality in the world. Reenacting what happened in imperial times but for entirely different reasons, the country has become a colony that could not be more distant from its overblown, militarized, and hollow colonizer, the state.

Toward the start of his reign, Putin was asked what had happened to a Russian submarine, the *Kursk*, that sank in the Barents Sea in August 2000. "It sank," Putin answered with a cynical smile. The tautology of his response masked the reasons for the catastrophe; they remained unknown even after the submarine was salvaged from the bottom along with its dead crew. Now he is trying to rescue the legacies of the Russian past—Orthodox, imperial, and Soviet—and to melt them into a new substance whose only name is Putinism. But there is no melting pot for doing this. It sank. ■