



Russia's Decline as a 'Brave Re-Stalinized World'

Irina Pavlova

In my view, the most prominent feature of Russia's decline has little to do with its struggling economy, runaway corruption, and poor governance; or even with its alarming demographic trends. It is about the process of re-Stalinization, which has dramatically defined and perpetrated the decay of Russian societal identity. Never before have such anti-Western, Great Power sentiments been as widespread in Russia as they are today. Despite his enormous crimes, for the majority of Russian people, Joseph Stalin represents the ultimate embodiment of these ideas. [1] Documentaries and feature films about Stalin and his era have flooded Russian screens. Bookstores are crammed with apologetic publications that present him as a model political leader, effective modernizer, builder of a Great Power empire and the ultimate victor of World War II. Most alarming, these attitudes are not limited to those of the older generations of Russians nostalgic about the Soviet Union. On the contrary, it is the newly indoctrinated younger generation reared in an atmosphere of re-Stalinization that has absorbed all the apologetic clichés about the Soviet dictator.

Re-Stalinization began in the mid-1990s, as the Kremlin sought to formulate a "national idea" (or, "patriotic idea," as it is currently referred to) that could unite people around the central power. This move coincided with the intention of former KGB members—who consider Stalin as a model political leader—to stabilize the country. Planning to assume power in the Kremlin, they recruited a number of authors to promote a positive image of Stalin instead of exposing his crimes, or what had been known as de-Stalinization. This new ideological "operation" was a resounding success due in large part to an impoverished, disoriented Russian society extremely dissatisfied with the results of unfair privatization and the turmoil of the 1990s. The austere image of Stalin offered the populace a welcome contrast to the injustice, criminality, and disorder that had been associated in people's minds with the Yeltsin era.

When Vladimir Putin came to power, the vector of his politics should have been abundantly clear: a consistent reversion to a Stalinist political model. Even those political commentators and experts writing about the transition to democracy after the so-called liberal and democratic revolution—which, in their opinion, took place in Russia in August 1991—agreed that Russia

was shifting back toward authoritarianism. However, the search for historical analogies to Putin's regime was less than clear. Analysts tried comparing it to Russian authoritarianism under Tsar Alexander III or even to the reign of Nicholas I, to Leonid Brezhnev's era, or to authoritarian regimes in Latin America. In the last two years, comparisons went even further—to the fascist regimes of Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler.

Political experts have consistently rejected the idea that Putin has reproduced the mechanism of Stalin's power. They ridicule out of hand the very thought of it, arguing that Putin is not Stalin on the basis that there are no repressions today comparable with those in Stalin's time and that there cannot be. This rejection sometimes takes the form of outlandish exaggeration (if not outright fabrication), for example, when Dimitri Simes Jr. writes in "Putin's No Stalin" [2] that "numerous academics, journalists and politicians have been pressuring the US government to view modern-day Russia as the second incarnation of the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin." Sometimes, such a comparison is used as a figure of speech, but as far as I am aware, this decline of the Russian power toward Stalin's political model has never been a subject of serious historic and political analysis.

Why? I argue that this is primarily due to a superficial understanding of Stalinism and Stalin's mechanism of power. The core of Stalinism was not mass repressions but a clandestine model of power, in which the worst traditions of Russian authoritarianism going back to the time of Ivan the Terrible obtained their complete expression. The model is ideal for consolidating power by a group of individuals, thus perfectly serving the interests and goals of President Putin and members of his corporation. It guarantees a secure hold on both their power and their assets, and satisfies their Great Power ambitions on the world's political stage.

Putin has resolved the problem of consolidating and maintaining his power even more efficiently than Stalin because in a modern informational society the same goals can be achieved by effective manipulation of public opinion, which makes mass repressions redundant. Television shows like Vladimir Solovyov's, which Simes considers "venues for open debate and dissenting points of view," are in fact the perfect example of such manipulation.

The preconditions for the development of this political system have existed since August 1991, when the mechanism of Communist power, with its infrastructure of ruling and secret decision-making, remained intact. The absence of any independent civil structures in the country that could change the essence of Russian statehood predetermined Russia's return to a familiar governing mode.

Putin's reinstatement of the so-called "vertical of power," with governors appointed by the federal government, was the last missing piece that cemented central power and made the Russian Federation a unitary state. The main principle of Stalin's—and now Putin's—mechanism of power is the absolute secrecy of its politics. This secrecy covers not only foreign policy, but also all aspects of the internal life of the country. In such a manner, the central power acts like an occupier of a foreign land. Secrecy hides the real center of power, its main players, their motives, the very process of decision-making, and the decisions themselves. Some of these come to light—but only if they are allowed to come out. On the surface, everyone can see that the sham institutions of Putin's "sovereign democracy" are akin to the institutions of "socialist

democracy” in Stalin’s time. In addition, Putin has successfully managed to adapt Stalin’s mechanism of power to the era of global informational access, allowing the existence of not only the so-called systemic opposition but the non-systemic opposition as well, which can even harshly criticize him. Yet in reality, such opposition reinforces the stability of the contemporary political system, serving as an integral part that exists on the Kremlin’s terms.

Though this model of power can easily adapt to and employ modern informational technologies, it acts according to the same logic as Stalin’s mechanism of power. Just one example: Political commentators and experts, exactly like some historians of Stalin’s time [3], unanimously accuse Putin’s power base of poor governance in the Russian provinces as characterized by corruption, disorder, arbitrariness, etc. However, this kind of precise focus on daily issues and problems distracts people from the objectives of the central power, dispersing their forces as they engage in a constant struggle for survival. For the people in power, unpleasant things such as chaos, corruption, and disorder are incomparably lesser threats than the organized resistance of people, which must therefore be kept within certain boundaries. Moreover, it is important to understand that organizing normal social life in the country is not the Kremlin’s first priority. Its main objectives are holding and strengthening its own power and modernizing military industry in every possible way in order to dictate its rules on the world stage. As for the lives of millions of people, the Kremlin cedes control to the local authorities. While requiring the unquestioned execution of directives from above, the Kremlin leaves them complete discretion in all other affairs. This arrangement has confused the experts, leading them to believe not only in the Kremlin’s poor governance and weakness but also in the disobedience and even opposition to it from the local authorities.

Putin’s regime has not only restored Stalin’s mechanism of power. It has also consistently exploited the people’s memory of the Second World War, using it as fertile soil for cultivating new images of the enemy and a hostile environment that wants to break Russia down, to bring the chaos to the country in the form of a so-called Colored Revolution, and to usurp its natural resources. This tactic has further helped to consolidate those around the central power, demonstrating that in the 21st century, Russians remain archaically paternalistic people, completely dependent on the central power. The basis of such consolidation is composed of traditional anti-democratic, anti-Western, Russian and Soviet values that have congealed into a kind of ideology that I term “Russian fundamentalism.” Its main features are: 1) the idea that the Russian people are bearers of a particular “cultural code,” special morality and a special sense of justice; 2) rejection of the soulless West as a model of social development; 3) a vision of Russia as an empire and a great power; and 4) confidence in Russia’s special historical mission.

Ideological decline, manifesting itself in the rise of Russian fundamentalism, has affected not only the notorious 86 percent who support President Putin. Russian fundamentalism unites both the central and local powers, their elites, and the people. It is important to emphasize that Russian fundamentalism today is not solely a result of imposed ideological pressure, but a conscious choice of people who have traveled the world and who have free access to information.

Russian intellectuals bear a large responsibility for the rise of Russian fundamentalism, as they have participated enthusiastically in the advancement of Great Power ideas and the process of re-

Stalinization. It is by their efforts that “Stalin” and “Victory” have become inseparable in the minds of people; it is by their efforts that the historical value of Stalin’s modernization has been hammered into mass consciousness. It is by their efforts that the whole Stalinist era has been glamorized. Just one example can be seen in the work of popular writer Dmitri Bykov, who associates himself with 14 percent of people who disagree with Putin’s policy today. In 2012, he was convinced that in the West there was “no way out, there is a dead end there, everything is on us, we must again show the World the way ... Russia should become great... In fact, Russia will show the light to the World, as she did it in 1917, and until 1937 the entire Western intelligentsia perceived it exactly in such a way...” [4]

It is clear that the Kremlin will continue to dole out generous rewards to the intellectuals from its “informational forces” who are keen to promote the regime’s ideas and interests. The Kremlin today refers to the West rather condescendingly, using the weaknesses of Western leaders in its propaganda. Many pro-Kremlin experts, numerous Russian think tank fellows, political talk show television anchors and their regular participants who now very aggressively attack the policies of the United States, have spent a lot of time in this country, absorbing the American experience in think tanks, universities, and foundations created to promote democratic values, etc. They have successfully adopted an arsenal of rhetoric from international law, mastering the methods of modern informational warfare. The main goal of these “informational forces” is to weaken the West—primarily the US—fundamentally, to set Europe against the US, to undermine Western values, to corrupt political leaders in the West, and to expand the sphere of the Kremlin’s influence in the world, making Russia a leader of all anti-Western forces.

It is my strong conviction that the contemporary Russian regime is not going through a stage of agony, as liberal critics of the regime argue continually in hopes of its quick end. One paradox of the Russian reality is that there is no direct link between the deterioration of living standards and the strengthening of the regime, as the two processes essentially go hand in hand. As the quality of life of ordinary Russians continues to decay in the years to come, the regime’s core constituents—namely, the *siloviki*, the power elite, the military, the national corporations—will continue to thrive. Once again, this paradox resembles that in Stalin’s time, during which Russian society suffered a tremendous decline while the regime itself was at the peak of its might and strength, both within the country and on the world stage. Putin’s regime is in such a period of consolidation today.

Despite the predictions of many political commentators and agencies [5], I do not see any signs of Russia’s collapse in the near future. Instead, I foresee rather realistic new challenges that the rise of the Stalinist model of power and Russian fundamentalism will pose to the West. For me it is obvious that contemporary Russia is more dangerous than the Soviet Union was during the Cold War. Without the “Iron Curtain,” Putin’s Russia is much freer to communicate with and to influence the world, and to penetrate into the West via its agents. Since 1991, while the West thought that it was “civilizing” Russia, Russian authorities were using this opportunity to seek and recruit anti-Western allies from the West. Furthermore, because of the Internet, the world is now more vulnerable to the dangers of hacker attacks and unprecedented opportunities for the coordination of terrorist acts.

Never in its history has Russian authoritarianism been so aggressive, so determined, and so consistent in its actions. The main tools of its foreign policy arsenal remain, just as they were in Stalin's time—blackmail, provocations and bluffing. Unfortunately, the West has not drawn a lesson from Stalin's behavior in World War II, because it has not acknowledged his pivotal role in the provocation of the war and his secret plan to Sovietize the whole of Europe all the way to Spain. President Putin is the same type of provocateur, ready to propagate chaos, corruption and destruction. Only in this kind of chaotic and corrupt world may he seem like a victor.

The question is whether the West, especially the US, will have enough reason, insight and political will to oppose these political challenges and to learn how to counteract the Kremlin and the rise of Russian fundamentalism. Thus far, only Western military authorities have begun to consider Russia as a serious threat. It is imperative that the strategic objective to oppose the Kremlin's opportunistic behavior must have a peaceful solution because the Kremlin's response to an overt military confrontation may be unpredictable—to the point that the use of nuclear weapons may become a real possibility. Therefore, the West must develop a smart, precise and unexpected response. Russian authorities must be deprived of their temptation to base policy on human ignorance, lies and disinformation. It is vital to find an approach that will undermine the Russian fundamentalism being cultivated within the country; to change the image of the global world that the Kremlin is trying to create using the methods of Stalin's Great power policy; and finally, to arrest the decline of Russia and its corruptive influence on the world.

Notes

1. "More than a half of Russians have supported Stalin's activity," Lenta.ru, January 20, 2015, <http://lenta.ru/news/2015/01/20/zastalina/>.
2. Dimitri Simes Jr., "Putin's No Stalin," The National Interest, September 4, 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/putins-no-stalin-8991>.
3. I.V. Pavlova. "Contemporary Western Historians on Stalin's Russia in the 1930s (A Critique of the "Revisionist" Approach)," *Russian Studies in History*. Fall 2001, vol. 40, no. 2, p. 65–90.
4. "2012: Youth is out of politics, politics is out of youth," Ekho Moskvyy, August 31, 2012, <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/year2012/922867-echo/#element-text>.
5. "Decade Forecast: 2015-2025," Stratfor, February, 23, 2015, <https://www.stratfor.com/sample/forecast/decade-forecast-2015-2025>; Alexander J. Motyl, "Lights Out for the Putin's Regime. The Coming Russian Collapse," Foreign Affairs, January 27, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2016-01-27/lights-out-putin-regime>.

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