



PUTIN: EURO-ATLANTIC POPULIST ICON

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For right-wing populists on both sides of the Atlantic Vladimir Putin is an idol. Since long before Donald Trump's arrival in politics, the most reactionary wing of the Republican Party – the Tea Party – and racist groups on the US extreme right had shown their admiration for the Russian president. During the presidential campaign, Trump cited Putin as a prototype for his presidential ambitions. Something similar is happening with most of the European xenophobic movements. The Front National (FN) in France, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) seem fascinated by the image Putin projects (and cultivates): Putin the energetic, virile, traditionalist leader. Along different lines, parties such as Syriza in Greece, the Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy and Podemos in Spain – which can be defined as left-wing populists – also align substantially with Moscow, although in this case it is for supposedly “geopolitical” reasons. Hence their sympathies tend towards a kind of wider “axis of resistance” that, besides Russia, includes countries such as Iran, Syria and Venezuela, all united by confrontation with Washington. In this context, questions must be asked about the nature of Putinism and whether it should be included as part of the populist wave in Europe or not.

The ideological characterisation of the Putin regime raises intense debates among experts, with consensus on the conservative agenda pushed since his return to the presidency in March 2012 particularly scarce. For some, like Michel Eltchaninoff, the roots of the Russian president's convictions lie in the most nationalist, conservative strands of Russian thinking (especially the work of the rediscovered Ivan Ilyin) and reflect a consistent attempt to shape a *Russian idea* and identity that is redefined along these lines and is, to a large extent, opposed to the liberal, cosmopolitan West. For others, like Marlène Laruelle or Kadri Liik, if anything characterises Putinism it is its flexibility and instrumental use of various doctrinal registers, with pragmatic goals and little interest in articulating a new official ideology. To be sure, the

Putin regime has oscillated significantly in its proposals and public narrative – or, if you prefer, evolved – but its statist conception, the centrality of the state in social and political life, is a constant and unvarying element. This, in my opinion, is the key feature of President Putin’s political thinking.

At first sight, the Putin regime does not fit easily within Cas Mudde’s definition, adopted for this volume, which places its emphasis on the dichotomy between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite”. If the common Russian has anything clear it is that there is an unbridgeable gulf between them and the country’s wealthy political and economic elites. And if anything reveals the growing electoral disengagement, as confirmed repeatedly by the polls, it is that the average citizen considers their capacity to influence politics to be nil.

Nevertheless, the *people* axis is a constant in Putin’s discourse and in the Kremlin’s narrative. In fact, the regime presents itself as the incarnation of the aspirations and destiny of the Russian people (following the Soviet tradition). Beyond the social and political passivity, one of the keys to explaining this situation – apparently acceptable for the vast majority of the population – relates to the place given to the state in the symbolic space, as a tangible manifestation of the collective Russian identity. In this way, not only are they unable to conceive of one without the other, but the interests of the *people* and the *state* cannot, from this perspective, appear to be divergent.

To reinforce the popular legitimacy of its message, the Kremlin employs the *national-populist voices* of the loyal parliamentary opposition on both left and right – the Communist Party of the Russian Federation led by Gennady Zyuganov, and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia led by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy – which shake up the public space with fiery demagoguery, but never pose any real political challenge or question the figure of President Putin. In addition, to condition public opinion the Kremlin constructs a supposed foreign enemy – the West – which aspires to destroy the Russian *state* and with it the *people’s* prosperity. This facilitates the alleged convergence of interests and a *fortress under siege* scenario in which local critics become *fifth columnists* and *traitors*. And as it is not about the West in general, but its elites in particular, it is possible to construct a narrative in which a Kremlin run by millionaires with ostentatious lives and mansions in London and the Costa Brava is presented as the guardian and guarantor of the interests of the *common people* – the Russian people – against “globalist, cosmopolitan elites”, that are supposedly predatory in economic terms and depraved morally (and, it should be added, there is an ethno-racial aspect too).

And it is this foreign dimension that helps us grasp how an opposition figure like Alexei Navalny, who aspires to lead the resistance of the *pure people* against the *corrupt elite*, can be characterised as a *liberal in the service of foreign interests* by

the Russian media and be perceived as such by a large number of the population. And this despite the fact that Navalny's movement is based on the continual denunciation of the corruption that reigns among the ruling elite, which makes him similar to populist European movements on the left and the original spirit of the *indignados*. But Navalny also toys in his speech with the rejection of immigration from the Caucasus and Central Asia – attributed to the Kremlin and its Eurasian integration projects – and flirts on occasions with xenophobic nationalism, which brings him closer to the FN, AfD and UKIP. At any rate, the nature of the Russian political system, and the Kremlin's use of all kinds of formal and informal resources to prevent any alternative from consolidating, mean taking power by electoral means is unviable. In other words, a Podemos simply could not emerge in Russia.

The conservative agenda and the idea of the besieged fortress promoted by the Kremlin intensified with the wave of protests in Moscow and St Petersburg at the end of 2011 and the Ukraine crisis. Alongside them, the deterioration of the Russian economy and the poor medium-term prospects have obliged the Kremlin to seek new sources of legitimacy. As a result, the annexation of Crimea must be read as an operation that is motivated in part – if not mainly – by domestic political priorities. As Ivan Krastev pointed out in an interview published in June 2015, with the annexation – and the resulting *Krim nash* (Crimea is ours) fever – Putin managed “to decouple his own legitimacy and the legitimacy of his regime from Russia's economic performance”. Though on this point, it is important to note that Putin's legitimacy and his power structure are partly independent. The president's genuine popularity is in contrast to the prevailing malaise among common people in front of the socioeconomic context and low expectations. And this despite the enormous concentration of power in the president's hands. But in the eyes of many, as in other authoritarian environments with strong cults of personality, the formula “if only the king knew what his ministers were up to” holds true.

Like other populists, Putin has at least had the political instinct to sense a latent state of mind among Russian citizens that, Krastev suggests in the same article, wanted fundamentally to be given *meaning* in response to crisis. This translates to nationalist and patriotic agitation that galvanises popular support and diverts attention from other issues. The so-called Putin consensus has been redefined and in the absence of economic prosperity he now provides *meaning*, spectacle and glorification – within limits clearly set by the Kremlin that are considerably tighter than is normally believed. The great unknown is, of course, whether this scheme is sustainable and for how long. We are no longer dealing, as in the first two mandates (2000-2008), with a proposal of normality (that has failed) but with one of exceptionality. It is a gamble that is highly dependent on a regional and international context with few signs of short-term improvement. Categorise it as populist or not, for these reasons the Putin regime will continue to prompt enormous uncertainty both at home and abroad.

