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## **Putinism: Russia's Authoritarian Unity**

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### **Introduction**

Russia today is almost unrecognizable from Russia in the 1990s. Fresh with hope and the promise of democracy, the 90s symbolized a decade of potential change. After paving the road to a more democratic Russia and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russians, young and old, rich and poor, were wondering what the future had in store for them. Boris Yeltsin, Russia's first president during the new period of the Russian Federation, would face controversy and hardship as he attempted to steer Russia to a more modern and democratic path. Yeltsin transformed Russia's command economy into a capitalist market one by implementing policies such as economic shock therapy, the market exchange rate of the ruble, nationwide privatization, and the lifting of price controls.

However, one cannot bolster an entire nation to change in one decade or even one presidency. Yeltsin's biggest adversaries were the Supreme Soviet, old Communists who retained their power and control in the government. Yeltsin would eventually resign in 1999 and hand the reins of power to a 46-year-old former KGB operative, Vladimir Putin. Putin was about to put

his name in history books as a prolific leader who would shape Russia for the next 21 years. However, unknown to Russian citizens in 1999, Putin would become one of Russia's wealthiest, authoritarian, and dangerous men of the 21st century. After ten years of Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost*<sup>1</sup> and *perestroika*<sup>2</sup> reform policies which opened the door for a more democratic Russia, Putin slowly but systematically dimmed the light on those policies and brought the nation back into the 20th century of economic and political unrest and nationalistic tendencies. Over 20 years, Putin has changed Russia through an iron fist of repression, corruption, and propaganda.

The term to describe this sliding scale of events and ideas over these 20 years has been coined Putinism. This term describes and embodies the changes that Russia has experienced through its movement away from democracy and modernization, and instead towards conservatism, nationalism and communist censorship. Throughout this paper, the aim will be to assess the critical tenets of Putinism and determine what a post-Putin Russia could look like through the lens of economics, internal politics, and the Russian people.

### **Putin's Rise to Power**

Russia's current president was born Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin in Leningrad, Russia (now St. Petersburg) on October 7th, 1952. Coming from a low-income family and the youngest of three children, Putin lived in a *kommunalka*<sup>3</sup> and attended school in Leningrad. He graduated from Leningrad State University in 1975 with a legal degree where he would also join the Communist Party. After his law studies, he joined the KGB working in the

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<sup>1</sup> Meaning openness. This reform policy was aimed to increase transparency and freedom of information in government and society.

<sup>2</sup> Meaning restructuring. This reform policy sought to reform the Soviet economic and political system, moving towards market-oriented practices and decentralization of government authority.

<sup>3</sup> Russian for a communal apartment, specifically shared by various unrelated people.

counterintelligence department in Leningrad. Speaking on Putin during his KGB training school days, a retired colonel states, “he was sharp-witted and always ready with a quip. Putin was a steady student without slips. There were no incidents. There was no reason to doubt his honesty and integrity.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1998, after moving to Moscow, Putin would enter the political world as first deputy chief of presidential staff for Yeltsin, quickly rising through the ranks as a favorite of Yeltsin. In August 1999, he was appointed first deputy prime minister and prime minister of the Russian Federation a week later.<sup>5</sup>

After Yeltsin stepped down and Putin became president in May 2000, he faced a Russia in economic and political ruin. Russia was still new as a nation rather than an empire. With the nation in disarray, the Russian people were looking for an identity and a person “that could unify their still vast country and legitimize a postcommunist government.”<sup>6</sup> Putin’s first presidency and success in those first formative years turned him into a cult personality. With internal Russian disasters such as the *Kursk* submarine disaster<sup>7</sup> and the 2002 terrorist attack in a Moscow theater,<sup>8</sup> Putin was saved by rising oil and gas prices. The Russian economy grew seven percent

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Laqueur, *Putinism: Russia and Its Future with the West* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2015), 111.

<sup>5</sup> The delineation between “first deputy prime minister” and “prime minister of the Russian Federation” is that the former was one of three men in charge under the current prime minister at the time, Sergei Stepashin and the latter placed him as number two in power and control to Yeltsin. The latter is what resulted in his same-day candidacy as president. The constant switch in roles reflects the new and unstable reality of a new democratic federation for a nation that for decades had been communist.

<sup>6</sup> James H. Billington, *Russia in Search of Itself* (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2004), 47.

<sup>7</sup> An incident on August 12, 2000, where a Russian Navy nuclear-powered submarine sank in the Barents Sea. This resulted in the deaths of the entirety of the 118-member crew.

<sup>8</sup> Also known as the Nord-Ost siege. Chechen terrorists took 912 hostages at the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow, resulting in 170 deaths due to Russian forces using gas to rescue the hostages.

annually,<sup>9</sup> which led to the DNP doubling since Yeltsin's presidency era in the late 90s.<sup>10</sup> This meant that the government was now debt-free, and the middle class was thriving. As a result, the Russian people looked to Putin as their saving grace and deemed his leadership the key to Russia's survival in this new post-Soviet world. All of this paved the way for Putin to successfully establish and maintain an authoritarian regime that has effectively taken control of its resources and controlled Russia's curated solid and independent image to the people.

### **A Sanctified Leader**

Putin's first years were formative as he aimed to correct any failures built over generations of past presidencies during the Soviet Union. Like Gorbachev and Yeltsin, Putin started his presidency supporting the U.S. and having a solid relationship with them via foreign policy. He portrayed himself as a president who earnestly wanted to help Russia grow, which meant focusing on economic and political reform problems in the nation. He also stood out by using "authoritarian means to achieve democratic ends"<sup>11</sup> and fell into various roles that the Russian people needed, namely a sanctified leader.

The idea of a sanctified leader comes from Ivan Ilyin, a man who believed in Christian fascism and that a set redeemer (*spasitel'nyi*) would push the nation forward while adhering to God's command. "God's command" to Ilyin, and reciprocated by Putin's administration, meant discouraging the idea of individuality or free will to the people. Through the Russian Orthodox Church, Ilyin argued that "autocracy was compatible with a rigorous rule of law... [and that]

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<sup>9</sup> Laqueur, 112.

<sup>10</sup> Laqueur, 112.

<sup>11</sup> James H. Billington, *Russia In Search of Itself* (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2004), 50.

autocracy, law, and Orthodoxy were all necessary to prevent the fragmentation and breakup of a post-Soviet Russia.”<sup>12</sup>

While Putin leaned heavily into the role of a sanctified leader and cult personality, he also heavily subscribed to the idea of using the best from the West while maintaining a strong pro-Russian stance. This meant that during his early presidency years, Putin followed a formula of following the traditional religious base of the Russian Orthodox Church, borrowing democratic policies from the West, and relying on Russia’s land and nature for the rest. Russian culture, above all, was to be revered and honored, and this led to “an increasingly urbanized and professional new generation [that became] disillusioned with communist ideology”<sup>13</sup> and yearned for the old Soviet ways. Even with a parliament, several political parties, and the ability to vote, Putin slowly but surely began to use an iron fist around any semblance of individualism and democracy. Putinism was developing “a state capitalism, a liberal economic policy, but also a great amount of state intervention.”<sup>14</sup> This new Russia, led by Putin, was taking hold. As a sanctified leader, the foundational aspects of Putinism begins to appear, highlighting Putin's initial efforts to navigate Russia's complex historical legacies while embodying the sanctified leadership model inspired by Ivan Ilyin.

### **Corruption, Liberalisms, and Dissidents**

The privatization of the Russian economy in the early and mid-1990s under Yeltsin was both a positive boon and negative reality to Russian citizens. Through privatization, oligarchs<sup>15</sup> made their fortunes. However, only a few who had made them under Yeltsin still retain them under Putin’s presidency. Under Yeltsin, the rules and ability to be an oligarch were more

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<sup>12</sup> Billington, 52.

<sup>13</sup> Billington, 48.

<sup>14</sup> Laqueur, 118.

<sup>15</sup> Defined as a wealthy individual with exceptional political power.

straightforward; there was no fear of stepping out of line or favor of the president. Oligarchs frivolously spent their money on yachts and luxury goods that brought targets on their backs as it further ruined the Russian economy. The message that oligarchs sent under Yeltsin's period were that those with the money held all the power, even more power than the president.

In contrast, Putin's Russia is filled with political backroom deals and bribery. Under his rule, the *siloviki* (politicians with a military background) have the real power, not the oligarchs. The oligarchs swiftly lost standing in the government once Putin came to power if they tried to criticize his government, get too involved in Putin's politics, or support Russian opposition of any kind. Unlike the oligarchs, the *siloviki* were loyal only to Putin due to their KGB backgrounds: "They did their work not for money, but from a sense of duty—that is to say, patriotism and idealism."<sup>16</sup> These officials would become immensely rich and, like Putin, hid their wealth discreetly so that no one knew their actual net worth. By being one of the select elite who has the trust of Putin, you were "bound in secrecy"<sup>17</sup> with the protection of the government behind you.

Moscow is a beacon for billionaires now, and "the 110 richest Russians own about 35 percent of the country's GNP... [while] 93 percent of Russian citizens own less than \$10,000."<sup>18</sup> This great wealth disparity not only shows that the wealthy own Russia, but that privatization ruined the middle class in the long run. The largest firms and enterprises controlled by these billionaires are either "'useful' (*nuzhnye*)—that is, those deemed politically loyal and willing to 'share'" or "'useless' (*nenuzhnye*), those who are looked at with suspicion."<sup>19</sup> Businesses loyal to Putin are "allowed" to grow while those opposed are destroyed through pressure to sell. This

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<sup>16</sup> Laqueur, 60.

<sup>17</sup> Leon Aron, "Putinism," American Enterprise Institute, 2008: 8, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep03039>.

<sup>18</sup> Laqueur, 59.

<sup>19</sup> Aron, 8.

process is known as “velvet re-privatization,” and it rules Russia’s internal economy. As a result, public wealth has remained low since 1994, while private and national wealth has risen due to these extortionist backroom policies.

Russians today live under a significant wealth disparity that is hard to break across due to blatant corruption. Moreover, the Kremlin under Putin has “eroded or destroyed the legitimacy of all the key political and social institutions: the parliament, the local governments, the courts, and the media,”<sup>20</sup> intensifying the wealth disparity problem and violating the economic and social rights of Russian citizens. However, even with apparent corruption, liberalisms, and dissidents apparent in Putin’s cabinet, many Russians still deem his presidency the only rightful and effective political institution left in Russia. Through corruption, liberalism, and dissidents, Russia begins the drastic shift from the chaotic privatization under Yeltsin, where oligarchs reigned supreme, to Putin's era, where loyalty and secrecy within a tight-knit *siloviki* became paramount, drastically altering Russia's economic landscape and power dynamics. This transition, culminating in significant wealth disparity and the erosion of institutional legitimacy, aligns with the main point of how Putinism profoundly impacted the economic, political, and social effects of Russia and its people.

### **Ideology**

At the heart of Putinism are the conflicting ideological differences present in Russia, including Eurasianism, nationalism, conservatism, and jingoism.<sup>21</sup> Of course, ideological differences have always been present in Russian history. Still, since Putin came to power in 2000, these differences have grown tenfold, and with the rise of extremist ideology came

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<sup>20</sup> Aron, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Jingoism is defined as extreme patriotism and a belligerent foreign policy, characterized by an aggressive stance and support for the use of force to assert Russia's power and interests internationally.

growing policies and wars against ethnic groups (Chechen Wars), the West, and an emphasis on defining the difference of identity of “ethnically Russian (*russkii*) rather than a pluralistic mix of ‘all those within Russia’ (*rossiiskii*).”<sup>22</sup> Putin’s Russia, like many other authoritarian governments, has spread ideological differences amongst the population while pointing the blame at “others,” including the West, any democratic nation, Muslims, Jews, Caucasians (people from the Caucus region), Africans, Asians, and namely any group or region who Putin deems a threat to him and his administration.

This constant search for a new threat to blame for economic and democratic travesties is precisely how the ideology Eurasianism began. Created by Russian émigrés after World War I, Eurasianism in the 20th century was centered around opposing communism while still hoping for a new and better Soviet regime; it acknowledged “the unbridgeable divide between Russia and the West and even the bitter enmity between them”<sup>23</sup> and partook in “minimal religion,” being secular, exclusive, and non-subscribing to the Russian Orthodox Church. This ideology changed and evolved over the 20<sup>th</sup> century as Russia’s relationship with itself and the West was constantly developing but remained “a geographic conception of Russian identity.”<sup>24</sup>

The Eurasianism revival can be heavily attributed to Alexander Gelyevich Dugin, a political scientist known as “Putin’s Brain.” This revival, called Neo-Eurasianism, formed in the 1990s and is no longer a simple ideology but a political movement. Dugin’s reformulation of the ideology is tied to his anti-scientific, anti-globalist, and anti-American views on politics and economics. The appeal of Neo-Eurasianism arises “from anger at the loss of empire and revulsion at the perceived ‘Russophobia’ of the new Westward-looking liberal elites” and “is

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<sup>22</sup> Billington, 68.

<sup>23</sup> Laqueur, 88.

<sup>24</sup> Billington, 70.

more political and less philosophical than the earlier Eurasianism.”<sup>25</sup> Putin has heavily played into Eurasianist ideology in his foreign policy and nationalism speeches. His portrayal of Russia is an island (*ostrovitianstvo*), isolated and safe from the corrupted West. The ideological foundation of Putinism, marked by a stark revival of Eurasianism alongside nationalism, conservatism, and jingoism, highlights Putin's strategy of exploiting ideological divisions. By framing Russia as a unique entity distinct from the West and promoting an "ethnically Russian" identity, Putinism amplifies internal divisions and external animosities. This manipulation of ideology reinforces Putin's authoritarian rule. It sets a complex stage for Russia's future, suggesting a post-Putin era deeply influenced by these entrenched ideological narratives and their effects on Russia's socio-political landscape and interactions with the global community.

### **Revival of the Church**

Another key tenant of Putinism is the revival of the Russian Orthodox Church and its relationship with the Kremlin politically. Christian fascism has become highly present within the Russian Federation, and more civil liberties are prejudiced each year through the relationship of the Church and the State. Not only has gay rights and women's rights been under attack, but the Church heavily condemns other religions and denominations, such as Catholicism and Protestantism. Understanding the historical role of the Orthodox religion is crucial to learning why Putin has placed such an emphasis on having a shared relationship with the Church.

The patriarch guided the Russian Orthodox Church at its inception in Constantinople (Istanbul). After the fall of the Byzantines in 1453, the Russian Orthodox Church evolved and became independent of other churches. Putin's reign is not the first time the Church has held political power. In fact, “up to the Russian Revolution, the church, or to be precise religion, had a

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<sup>25</sup> Billington, 70.

considerable impact on all sections of society, including the intelligentsia.”<sup>26</sup> Under the height of the Soviet Union, the Church was held under Communist beliefs, and their existence only remained if they stayed on a common front with Stalin.

The 1990s was when the Church began to regain power, and it began by “endorsing social discipline over Christian evangelism in 1997, when it helped shape a new federal law on religion that recognized only Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism along with Orthodoxy as historic faiths of Russia.”<sup>27</sup> The dislike of Catholicism and Protestantism remained, and the Church was gaining power through their counter-stance to the idleness and atheism of the West. In 1996 a nationwide poll was conducted where “nearly three-quarters... ‘completely agreed’ that ‘power should be strong and strict,’ and two-thirds contended that ‘only the hard hands of a strong leader can bring order and put matters right in the country.’”<sup>28</sup> The timing happened to be perfect with Putin’s first presidency. Finally, a young, strong man would lead Russia into the 21st century while promoting the idea that to be Russian is to be Orthodox.

Putin saw the value in a “spiritual renewal,” as the State and the Church could benefit from a symbiotic relationship where the Church would unofficially support Kremlin policies. In return, the Kremlin would increasingly support and push aid towards the Church through legislative means. This manifested slowly, but by 2009 the Church held much power over Russian society.

From that point on, the Church had the power to claim lands seized during the Soviet era, provide religious education in public schools, and benefit from tax breaks from the State to include partial ownership of energy firms and government subsidies on utilities. With the 2016

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<sup>26</sup> Laqueur, 70.

<sup>27</sup> Billington, 53.

<sup>28</sup> Billington, 53.

Yarovaya Law,<sup>29</sup> the Church proved its true power, as it now could limit any religious assembly from occurring anywhere that was not a recognized religious building. This affected relations both with ethnic groups and other religious groups. However, even with the authoritarian nature of the Church, only “two-thirds of Russians thought religion should play a greater role in Russian life” and “only a tiny fraction said that it was trying to live according to Christian principles. In embracing the Russian Orthodox Church's revival, Putinism intertwines state and religious goals to create a nationalistic identity, significantly shifting Russia's social landscape. This strategic alliance, underscored by the erosion of diverse civil liberties and the marginalization of other faiths, suggests a regression from church and state separation to orthodox hegemony. The reconnection of church-state relations under Putin, crucial for understanding Putinism's broader socio-political and economic ramifications, predates a symbiotic exchange of policy endorsement for legislative privileges, reshaping public discourse and identity.

### **Censorship**

Censorship can be tied back to January 1, 1703, when Tsar Peter the Great created *Sankt Peterburgskie Novosti* (*The St. Petersburg News*),<sup>30</sup> “which was meant to promote the tsar’s decisions and circulate government regulations.”<sup>31</sup> This paper began the inevitable reality of state censorship and strict regulation over civic-minded thinking in Russia. Under the Soviet Union and Putin’s regime, censorship has reached its peak. In authoritarian regimes, this is not uncommon: “in ‘undemocratic systems,’ opposition is not permitted to participate in elections, or

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<sup>29</sup> Several counter-terrorism measures that significantly expanded Russia’s surveillance and data retention, increased penalties for extremism, and imposed restrictions on religious groups and missionaries, raising concerns about privacy, freedom of speech, and religious freedom.

<sup>30</sup> The first Russian newspaper.

<sup>31</sup> Nadezhda Azhgikhina, “Censorship in Russia: Old and New Faces,” *World Literature Today* 85, no. 6 (2011): 35, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41310382>.

it is ‘curbed and harassed,’ its newspapers are ‘censored or closed down,’ and votes are ‘manipulated or miscounted.’”<sup>32</sup> These facts are true for Putin’s Russia, where the Kremlin can create, destroy, and manipulate whatever role of civic life it wants.

Soviet censorship and propaganda were heavily affected by the first inkling of democracy in 1985; Gorbachev’s new policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost* were instrumental in liberating the media from the clutches of extreme censorship. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, previous limits on the arts, media, and literature were eradicated. However, due to Putin’s authoritarian backsliding regime, while the Russian constitution technically protects freedom of speech and the press, restrictive legislation has made it difficult for independent journalists and activists to work and live in Russia.

This new period post-Soviet Russia resulted in “economic chaos and political instability in Russia.”<sup>33</sup> All Russian media found themselves on the verge of bankruptcy as they had been financed under the Soviet system. Without a Soviet Russia to cover the costs and any deficits, “soaring publishing and distribution costs, aggravated by inflation, sent subscription and newsstand prices sky high. As a result, newspaper and magazine circulations decreased dramatically.”<sup>34</sup> During this new period of post-Soviet Russia, Russian journalists were also forced to reconsider their role in a new fragile state, which led to a schism of varying ideologies for how the media should be run and what it should focus on. For writers and journalists, this focus was split between either focusing on true news (investigative journalism) or gaining the support of the Kremlin by creating propagandistic content for the Russian masses to obtain.

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<sup>32</sup> Aron, 1.

<sup>33</sup> Vitaly F. Konzhuikov, “Post-Communist Media in Russia,” in *E-Political Socialization, the Press and Politics: The Media and Government in the USA, Europe and China*, ed. by Christ’l De Landtsheer, Russell F. Farnen, Daniel B. German, Henk Dekker, Heinz Süner, Yingfa Song, and Hongna Miao (Peter Lang AG, 2014), 242, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2t4csq.15>.

<sup>34</sup> Konzhuikov, 244.

Besides censorship of the media, Alexey Simonow, the chair of the Glasnost Defense Foundation, states that there are “five forms in existence in Russia: political censorship, economic censorship, censorship conducted by an editor in accordance with his/her personal views, group censorship, and self-censorship.”<sup>35</sup> Corruption in all of these fields is widespread and even routine in Russia today, and the news is generally not respected or trusted anymore. Due to the harsh economic turmoil of the media, bribery is common and latches on to the most vulnerable institutions, resulting in antiextremism laws.<sup>36</sup>

Putin and his KGB officials have tightened the reins on any semblance of freedom of speech or the press, which has led to retaliation through activism. Activists such as the Moscow-based Pussy Riot Group (known for their performance art, most notably inside the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour), performance artist Petr Pavlensky, and writers such as Vladimir Sorokin have retaliated against censorship through their various forms of art. While Putin and his administration will never explicitly admit to using any form of censorship, journalists and artists are speaking up and telling citizens the truth behind Putin.

## **Conclusion**

A post-Putin Russia is difficult to imagine with Putin having four presidencies and ruling for over 20 years. Will Putinism continue after succession takes place? This is the central question that historians and political scientists are wondering. The 2018 Russian presidential election was very telling for the future of Russia as even though the majority of the nation is aware of the communist suppressive regime, a change in leadership is unlikely. “There is no critical mass of people demanding radical change and, contrary to Western fantasies, Russians

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<sup>35</sup> Azhgikhina, 36.

<sup>36</sup> Laws designed to censor and control actions deemed extremist or against the state of Russia - including terrorism and radicalism.

under the age of 25 are among the most conservative and pro-Putin groups in society.”<sup>37</sup> The urge for a strong sanctified leader who upholds a true Russian national identity is more critical to some citizens than the reality of an authoritarian regime with strict censorship, corruption, and an unconstitutional relationship between Church and State.

Putin retains a strong following as “the true founder of the post-Soviet Russian state”<sup>38</sup> through his decisive victories over his decades-long presidency concerning the Second Chechen War, the annexation of Crimea, and his staunch policies against the West. The public view Putin as a historical leader; he is almost untouchable due to his revered status. Andrei Kolesnikov and Denis Volkov state that his legitimacy as President of Russia as “he is a constant, the portrait on the wall that no longer be taken down.”<sup>39</sup> The current reality of Putinism will most likely stay unchallenged as it has held the nation together even though it also breaks down civil liberties and democracy. This is because Russia has never had a genuine capitalist and democratic organization. The one time that Russia attempted to follow the West through Gorbachev and Yeltsin’s policies in the 90s led to economic and political disarray. It is no wonder that Putin is deemed a savior to many Russians still, and it is why his iron fist repression goes ignored by much of the public.

The post-Putin future is shaped, according to Krastev and Pavlovsky, by four factors: keeping Russia as an island of isolation to retain its control and power, keeping Russians believing that their nation needs nothing from the West,<sup>40</sup> a focus on technological innovation,

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<sup>37</sup> Ivan Krastev and Gleb Pavlovsky, “The Arrival of Post-Putin Russia,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2018, 2, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21643>.

<sup>38</sup> Krastev and Pavlovsky, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Krastev and Pavlovsky, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Krastev and Pavlovsky, 5.

and the continual belief that Russia “needs not a single successor... but a successor generation.”<sup>41</sup> This last point is arguably the most important to theorizing a post-Putin future.

Putinism and Putin himself are so entrenched in Russian society that he has formed a new generation of politicians who only know Russia under his authoritarian regime. This has created a network of influence and corruption that is passed down to the sons and daughters of prominent KGB officials and other relevant politicians. Putin has successfully given the appearance of change by inspiring a whole new generation of leaders. This successor generation is his legacy, and they will most likely keep his vision of Russia because it is the only system that has somewhat worked in a post-Soviet world. Rather than try and brave a new political system with new constitutions and rules, Putin has created a Russia that feels that it can only succeed with him or with his ideals. This is what Putinism truly is.

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<sup>41</sup> Krastev and Pavlovsky, 6.

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