

END NOTE

EXPOSING THE PUTIN MYTH

By Taras Kuzio

The new myth being created surrounding Russian President Vladimir Putin continues a long tradition of mythologizing earlier Soviet and Russian leaders. The Putin myth has highlighted two distinct trends.

First, there are sharp differences in the way U.S. and Western European countries view Russia and myths surrounding Soviet and Russian leaders. The U.S. administration and media tend toward a literal view of Russian politics, focusing on formal processes while downplaying the informal, and critically examining Russia's claims that it is implementing reforms.

Some EU countries, however, take the opposite approach and are more willing to go along with a mythical view of domestic progress in the former USSR and Russia in the interests of a strategic partnership.

Second, a mythical positive transition record in Russia is contrasted with a negative one in Ukraine when in reality the opposite is true. Contrast the mythical Western favorable impression of Putin with that of the highly negative view of Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma. Freedom House's 2003 "Nations in Transit" study gives Ukraine a better score than Russia in democratization. Ukraine also receives a better score than Russia in the 2002 Reporters Without Frontiers Index of Media Freedom and the 2002 Heritage Foundation's Index of Economic Freedom (yet only Russia, not Ukraine, has been granted market economic status by the EU in 2002). The June 2003 Pew Global Attitudes Project gives Ukraine a better score than Russia in democratization, freedom of the press, fair judiciary, freedom of speech, free elections, and safety from crime and violence.

Mythologizing of Soviet leaders goes as far back as the 1930s. Its most recent manifestations began under Yurii Andropov, who came to power in 1992 and was welcomed as a sigh of relief over Leonid Brezhnev's "era of stagnation."

Some Western commentators inferred from rumors that Andropov drank whiskey and played tennis that he was a closet liberal Westernizer (despite the role he played in suppressing the Hungarian uprising in 1956 and jailing dissidents). Mikhail Gorbachev was widely seen as a new type of Soviet leader who was "like us," ready to halt the arms race, willing to withdraw Soviet troops from Eastern Europe, and spoke of a "common European home." Gorbachev has remained popular in Europe even after the collapse of the USSR, even though in the post-Soviet states his popularity had already plummeted by 1989-90.

The early post-Soviet era was characterized by myths surrounding Boris Yeltsin, the Russian leader who dared to stand on a tank and defy the August 1991 putschists. Yeltsin launched radical economic reform in 1992 under the Yegor Gaidar government and his anticommunism stance complemented his image as a liberal reformer.

The Yeltsin myth was showing serious signs of damage by the late 1990s, and the March 2000 election of Putin to succeed him was therefore hailed as another wind of change. Like Andropov, the sportsman Putin, both of whom were from KGB backgrounds, was contrasted to Yeltsin (just as Gorbachev had been to his predecessors Konstantin Chernenko and Brezhnev).

The extent of Europe's fascination with Putin can be judged by the hyperbole of some of the press commentaries on the recent summit to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the founding of St. Petersburg on 30-31 May. The Swiss daily "Neue Zuercher Zeitung," for example, characterized Putin as Russia's new "Peter the Great," while London's "The Independent" profiled Putin as "the modern-day tsar who would make Russia great again." The U.S. media largely ignored the myth of Putin the "modernizer" in favor of focusing on his poor record on human rights and democratization. Adrian Karatnycky, a senior scholar at Freedom House, described Russia in a "The Wall Street Journal" article as a "militocracy." He wrote that under Putin, former military and KGB officers -- who seek to revive Russia as a superpower, make a fetish of the state, disrespect human rights, and promote anti-Western sentiments -- are increasingly in control of the country.

As noted above, West European media and academia are for the most part more enamored of Putin than their equivalents in North America. There are two main reasons for this divergence. First, Russophilism is still deeply influential in Western Europe and might well grow under Italian President Silvio Berlusconi when Italy takes over the EU Presidency in July.

The EU, unlike the United States, gave priority to a strategic partnership with Russia over human rights and democratization issues at the recent St. Petersburg summit. Dov Lynch, a research fellow at the EU's Institute for Security Studies, points out in "Russia Faces Europe" (Paris: ISS-EU, May 2003) that Russia and the EU have "radically different" strategic agendas because Russia is disinterested in the pursuit of "shared values" with the EU. Knowing this, some leading EU states might be willing to prioritize a strategic partnership with Russia (rather than "shared values"). Russia is essential to the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy for those EU states who see it as a counterweight to U.S. "unilateralism."

Second, as the world's new "hyper power" the United States has less need of Russia as a "strategic partner" than the EU. The U.S.-Russian partnership remains mired in difficulties since the Iraqi conflict, especially over Russia's continued support for Iran's nuclear-power program.

Finally, it should be noted that these differing attitudes to the Putin myth influence, in turn, contrasting attitudes toward Russia and Ukraine. NATO and the EU approach Ukraine and Russia in different ways. The EU has had little choice but to prioritize

strategic issues with Russia because of its disinterest in "shared values," whereas it calls on Ukraine to deepen reforms in the absence of membership prospects. Russia is strategically important to the EU while Ukraine is only strategically important to the United States and NATO. These attitudes go some way toward influencing positive views of Putin and negative views of Kuchma.

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