



Triumphant memory of the perpetrators: Putin's politics of re-Stalinization



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ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore the interconnection between Putin's politics of re-Stalinization, historical memory, and a specific version of the post-Soviet neo-medievalism. I show that re-Stalinization is a mass movement that is grounded in the unprocessed memory of Soviet crimes and atrocities. The popular myth of the "Great Patriotic War" and the myth of Stalinism as the Golden Age exploited by Putin's memory politics became a gold mine for Putin's kleptocracy. I argue that re-Stalinization and the Kremlin-sponsored ideology of Eurasianism represents two interrelated trends of a complex ideological process. Eurasianism combines Soviet denial of individuality with the idea of a state-dependent patriarchal society and Russian historical messianism. It glorifies the reign of Ivan the Terrible and Stalin. The 'medievalist' discourse of Eurasian ideologists, which advocates a return to the medieval society of orders, on the one hand, and the Gothic monsters populating post-Soviet film and fiction, on the other, creates a political language that expresses new attitudes to people in post-Soviet Russia. They depict a new social contract that reconsiders the modern concept of citizenship, and creates a social basis for the criminalization and militarization of Russian society.

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The corpse of the Soviet Past has been reanimated.

This zombie is rising, and it looks disgusting (Sorokin, 2015).

1. Introduction

Targeted political terror against oppositional leaders and opinion makers, adoption of legislative and political measures that prevent citizens from expressing their political opinions, fraudulent elections and massive attacks on the freedom of press and media – these are the usual ways of oppression employed by dictators around the globe. They are also well-known realities of Vladimir Putin's Russia. In this article, it is argued that the specificity of the Russian's implementation of the above policies is undertaken through a double exploitation of historical memory. Putinism re-activates the historical memory of Stalinism and constructs the image of Russian medievalism as the foundation of positive national heritage and identity. I explore the interconnection between Russian historical memory, Putin's politics of re-Stalinization (also dealt with in Kuzio's article in this issue), and a specific post-Soviet version of neo-medievalism, or '*Novoye srednevekov'e*'. The role and place of re-Stalinization in Putin's anti-modern ideology cannot be accurately assessed without understanding its connection to neo-medievalism. I argue that re-Stalinization and Russian neo-medievalism has created a new ideology that has established a consensus between the authorities and the majority of post-Soviet society.

In the first part of the paper, I show that the analysis of re-Stalinization cannot be limited to Putin and the post-Soviet elites' personal preferences, strategic choices or political idiosyncrasies. Re-Stalinization is a mass movement that is

grounded in the unprocessed memory of Soviet crimes that promotes neo-medieval views and ideas about society, citizenship, and politics. In other words, re-Stalinization is not an ephemeral and insignificant occurrence of post-Soviet life: it reflects deep changes in post-Soviet culture and society.

Therefore, in the second part of the paper, I argue that re-Stalinization is related to the emerging ideology in Putin's Russia, '*Novoye srednevekov'e*', advocated mainly through Eurasianism and its political leaders. Viewed from this perspective, re-Stalinization and neo-medievalism represent a part of a complex ideological process that involves the reconsideration of the social contract in post-Soviet Russia. Gothic Society, as I term this new social contract, becomes widely supported by the majority of Russians.

2. Re-Stalinization: Russia's base for social consensus?

2.1. Russian neo-medievalism

Existing studies of post-Soviet Russia provide a wide range of economic, social or geopolitical explanations of Putinism. Before the occupation of Crimea in spring 2014 and the war against Ukraine, post-Soviet transformations in general and Putinism in particular, have been presented by scholars as: a political system that acts in Russia's national interests, which it defends against American imperialism (Sakwa, 2014)¹; the triumph of the market economy combined with a failure of political democracy; "cowboy capitalism" or oligarchic corruption (Åslund, 2007); a conservative revolution engineered by the former Soviet elites (Kotz and Weir, 2007); a manifestation of neo-liberalism (Kagarlitsky, 2002) and finally, an expression of post-modernism (Petr Pomerantsev, 2014).

I argue that these models do not fully appreciate the effect of the Soviet totalitarian tradition on post-Soviet society and underestimate the role of historical memory in the criminalization of post-Soviet society that underpins Putinism as the new social contract. Putinism cannot be reduced to a manifestation of neo-liberal autocracy: it is a centralized system, which rejects liberalism in its all manifestations. It cannot be presented as the triumph of market reforms, because there is no free competition or unrestricted enjoyment of private property in Russia. On the contrary, the post-Soviet economy is described as an anti-modern regime, a new feudalism (Erikson, 1999) or as a pseudo-medieval "conditional property," provided as an appendage under the control of the FSB.

The interpretations of post-Soviet society discussed above overlook important esthetic and ideological components of Putinism, which I propose to understand as a cultural system. However, before turning to this interpretation of Putinism, the term *neo-medievalism* and its usage in this article require some clarifications. Since mid-1970s, medievalism has become an important way of understanding the present day reality. Umberto Eco was the first to point out the rapidly growing interest in a fictional Middle Ages especially in relation to the escalating popularity of fantasy as a genre. In 1973, he introduced the notion of neo-medievalism in his essay "Dreaming the Middle Ages". Linking together certain social practices emerging in European society, Eco stresses the role that the image of the Middle Ages performs in contemporary culture. According to Eco, the resemblance among certain social practices of the contemporary Western society with quasi-medieval practices and customs, and attentiveness to pre-modern ideas and values, permits this historical analogy to demonstrate the disavowal of democratic institutions. Although Eco did not specify what set of values neo-medievalism promotes in contemporary culture, and paid surprisingly little attention to its esthetic component, he pointed out that the Middle Ages are characterized by massacres and intolerance, and warned against idealization of this epoch, which he felt was in the air. In addition, a historian by training, he was well aware of the pitfalls of historical analogy and consistently emphasized the danger of drawing direct parallels between the Middle Ages and contemporary world.

However, shortly after the publication of Eco's article, this analogy was turned into an analytical tool. In 1977, an English political scientist, Hedley Bull, introduced a notion of *new medievalism* and offered a political theory predicting that the radiant future awaits us in the new Middle Ages (Bull, 1977). He argued that the contemporary state would be replaced by a system similar to the medieval governance. Political power would cease to be a privilege of a state and would be shared by a number of nongovernmental institutions. He contemplated new medievalism as an alternative to the state monopoly on power. Bull's approach soon became a powerful trend in political science, which was enthusiastically supported by his numerous followers. The success of his new term could be also attributed to the popularity of neo-medievalism as cultural trend. While believing that they offer an analytical model for predicting the political process of European society, political scientists acknowledged, to the same extent as Eco did, the fact that their analogy with the Middle Ages was inspired by contemporary fantasy and science fiction.

Bull's attempt to apply this intuition to political theory results in an interesting paradox. This 'scientific theory' is based on the assumption that the international political system is heading "towards a new medievalism", namely towards a historical past. "Back to the future" as one of the founders of this theory, Steven Kobrin, summarizes this view (Kobrin, 1998, 361–386). Historical past and not future is presented, in this scientific doctrine, as the most plausible scenario of political development. This does not only challenge the idea of progress, which implicitly remains, despite all criticism addressed to it, one of the most important logical presuppositions of the social sciences. More alarmingly, this theory tacitly presupposes a reversibility

¹ This view remains highly popular among American intellectual fellow-travelers of Putinism \ (Koposov, 2014).

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