

The Putin Doctrine

An Interview with Michel Eltchaninoff

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Putin is anti-modern, conservative and expansionist. He is convinced that the Western world in general and Europe in particular are decadent, and advocates a “Russian way”, which he views as an alternative political and social model. Michel Eltchaninoff has analysed this doctrine for us.

Michel Eltchaninoff holds an *agrégation* [advanced teaching certificate] and a doctorate in philosophy. As a specialist in phenomenology and Russian philosophy, he recently published *Dostoïevski. Le Roman du corps* [Dostoevsky: The Novel of the Body] (Éditions Jérôme Millon, 2013) and *Dans la tête de Vladimir Poutine* [Inside Vladimir Putin’s Mind] (Actes Sud, 2015), a book in which he explores the intellectual origins of the Kremlin’s ideology. He is currently deputy editor in chief of the monthly *Philosophie Magazine*.

Books and Ideas: Putin is often presented as an autocrat who is both nostalgic for the USSR and determined to regain the power that Russia has lost since the end of the Soviet bloc. But isn’t this view somewhat simplistic? Can we not identify a “Putin doctrine” that goes beyond mere longing for a past glory?

Michel Eltchaninoff: Putin is an heir of Sovietism. He spent the first forty years of his life in the USSR. This led to him being powerfully influenced by certain values – patriotism, militarism, and the superiority complex of a major power. He served in what he viewed as the elite corps of the nation: the KGB, which became the FSB after 1991. However, he does not seem to have ever believed in the Communist model of a state economy or a classless society. He therefore did not intend, when he came to power in 1999, to rehabilitate Sovietism. He did however state that he wanted to reconcile the country’s Tsarist and Communist legacies. Other strata have accumulated on top of this Soviet foundation. During his first presidential mandate, from 2000 to 2004, he adopted a liberal position. He liked to quote Emmanuel Kant, and would stress that Russia was part of Europe, as defined by democracy and the rule of law. He wanted Russia to live up to Western “standards”. He presented himself as the leader who would bring back stability and even prosperity at a domestic level, and restore Russia’s lost prestige at the international level. But we must qualify this liberal stratum. Putin did not make exactly the same speeches to Europeans and

to representatives of Asian powers, for example to the Chinese, to whom he almost apologised for having a portrait of Peter the Great in his office in Saint Petersburg, and in front of whom he criticised the Western-style “right to intervene”. Furthermore, his version of democracy is an extremely rigid one. Finally, the way in which he muzzled the press as soon as he took over the presidency, and the ways in which he managed the war in Chechnya and brought the oligarchs to heel, should have been enough to set off alarm bells among democrats.

From 2004, a series of events started to impact on this modernisation-friendly discourse. Putin was shaken by the tragedy of Beslan, where hostages were taken in a school in the Russian Caucasus, leading to the death of 346 people (including many children) following a chaotic operation carried out by special forces. He seemed to lose his confidence in democratic institutions. Two weeks after Beslan, he announced that regional governors would now be appointed, and no longer elected. He relied more and more openly on Moscow’s Orthodox patriarchate to “disensavage” the nation. He gave a very frosty reception to the Colour revolutions (Georgia in late 2003, Ukraine in late 2004) and to the Baltic countries joining NATO and the European Union. He convinced himself that Russia was the target of active hostility on behalf of the West. This marked a first shift towards conservatism. Following the period of Medvedev’s presidency, from 2008 to 2012, and his own return to the presidency, Vladimir Putin intensified some trends that had already been visible throughout his first two mandates: open conservatism in the face of a Western world that he perceived as decadent and cut off from its Christian roots; the affirmation of a specific “Russian way” that must be defended at all costs against the hostility of the West; the acceleration of the project for a Eurasian Union (which has been effective since the start of 2015 with Belarus, Kazakhstan and Armenia, pending further new memberships). These three strata are fed into by quotes that Putin reserves for his most solemn speeches.

From 2005 through to December 2014, Putin regularly made references to Ivan Ilyin (1883-1954), a Russian philosopher who emigrated to Europe, who was as violently anti-communist as he was anti-democratic, and a great admirer of Franco and Salazar. He likes to borrow quotes from Nicolai Berdyaev (1874-1948) or Konstantin Leontiev (1831-1891) to support his conservatism. He is fond of Lev Gumilev (1912-1992), who defended Eurasianist theories during the Soviet period. To his original Sovietism and smattering of liberalism, we thus have to add conservatism, a neo-Slavophilia with scientific pretensions, and Eurasianism. The result is a multiform ideology, whose sole common threads are the idea of empire and hostility to the West. All of this is very useful for a president who is attempting to rally his people without locking himself up within too constraining an ideology.

Books and Ideas: Putin seems to be obsessed with the idea of the unity of the Russian nation and Russian society, which he contrasts with the supposed disintegration of Western democratic states. Is it not this obsession that very largely determines his foreign policy?

Michel Eltchaninoff: The question of the relationship between unity and diversity has been one of the major political and cultural issues in Russia for centuries. Having built itself up as an empire, this country brings together a wide variety of populations. Nowadays, alongside “ethnic Russians”, Tatars, Chuvash, Bashkirs and Buryats among others, the Federation of Russia is home to over 130 “nationalities”. How can the country maintain its political unity without repressing national demands? It is no accident that Leibniz’ philosophy, which offers a model for

the cohabitation of individual substances within a harmonious system, was so popular with Russian philosophers at the end of the 19th century. As for the religious thinkers known as sophiologists (Vladimir Solovyov, Pavel Florensky or Sergei Bulgakov...), they developed complex conceptual structures that aimed at capturing the connection that exists between God and the universe, meaning the unity of the divine and the multiplicity of creation within a “unitotality”.

But Vladimir Putin is not behaving like a student of these metaphysicians. In practical terms, he opted for a tough guy approach as soon as he came to power: he tried to set an example with Chechnya, which was “pacified” using the most extreme violence. Acting against any desires for autonomy or local government, he reinstated the “vertical of power”. In theoretical terms, he has alternated between exalting the Orthodox Russianness of the country and celebrating its multi-ethnic and multi-confessional essence. He praises the harmony that reigns between the country’s Orthodox populations and its 15 million Muslims. We should recall here that the theoreticians of Eurasianism have tried to argue that there is a “third continent” between Europe and Asia, a Eurasia that is a coherent unit in terms of its climate, vegetation, languages and geography, and which brings together Orthodox Slavs, Muslim Turkophones and Buddhists. However, according to the Russian president, this internal diversity may only thrive within the framework of a strong state preventing centrifugal trends.

In these conditions, Russia can even be a model for the world. As he put it as early as 2003, “Russia, as a Eurasian country, is a unique example where the dialogue of cultural civilisations has become a centuries-old tradition of state and public life” (speech made during the Culture and Art Council, 25 November 2003, Moscow). As a symbol of harmony between differences, Russia is a legitimate candidate, in the eyes of the Russian president, for taking on the leadership of the Eurasian Union, which would do nothing more than expand this model into a future superpower, a “land empire” that would respect differences and be able to oppose the Euro-Atlantic “sea empire”, which homogenises all the cultures it conquers. But given that, in the Russian president’s mind, the condition for this model of coexistence is allegiance to Moscow, which must act as the guarantor of unity, we can safely assume that the Eurasian Union has not got off to a very good start, and that the separatist inclinations of certain Russian regions will only grow stronger in the coming years.

While he glorifies his Eurasianist model of coexistence held by an iron hand, Vladimir Putin and some of his close advisers believe that Western Europe has long been subject to forces pulling it towards disunion. In their view, the European Union is already a failure, unable to outline perspectives for the future, to impose itself on the international level and to guarantee general prosperity. According to them, the European states are open to all migrations and are unable to put up any resistance to the poison of Islamism, or to what they view as a Muslim invasion. As for their citizens, they are seen as brainless and superficial consumers who have lost their sense of patriotism and of aspiration to grand ideals.

Books and Ideas: Putin has positioned himself resolutely against modernity. What are the foundations for his conservatism?

Michel Eltchaninoff: Ever since he returned to the presidency in 2012, Putin has stopped mincing his words when it comes to the West. He bemoans the fact that “many of the Euro-

Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilisation.” According to him, these countries “are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan. The excesses of political correctness have reached the point where people are seriously talking about registering political parties whose aim is to promote paedophilia. People in many European countries are embarrassed or afraid to talk about their religious affiliations” – a situation which is sure to lead to a “demographic and moral crisis” (Speech to the Valdai Club, 19 September 2013, Novgorod Region).

A few weeks later, speaking to all the representatives of the nation, he addressed the issue again: “Today, many nations are revising their moral values and ethical norms, eroding ethnic traditions and differences between peoples and cultures. Society is now required not only to recognise everyone’s right to freedom of consciousness, political views and privacy, but also to accept without question the equality of good and evil, strange as it seems, even though these concepts are opposite in meaning” (Address to the Federal Assembly, 12 December 2013). In opposition to relativism, cultural decline, the invasion of the Internet, political correctness, amnesia, democratic masochism and weakness in the face of minorities, Vladimir Putin promotes a moral education based on Christian values, classical and bookish culture, patriotism, militarism and the respect of hierarchy.

According to him, in essence, Europe has entered a phase of decadence, while Russia is in an ascending phase of its history. He relies on the pseudo-scientific model of Konstantin Leontiev, one of whose most famous concepts Vladimir Putin is fond of quoting: that of “flourishing complexity”. According to the Russian philosopher, who took a fervently anti-European and anti-bourgeois position, any civilisation, after a period of original simplicity, reaches its apex in an era of flourishing complexity, before declining into a period of simplification and confusion. For Leontiev, ever since the Renaissance, Europe has ceased to give birth to saints and geniuses, and only engenders engineers, parliamentarians and ethics professors. It makes everything uniform, through its mode of development and its conformism. But it is also confused. Its inhabitants are lost, and no longer know how to give meaning to their lives. They show themselves to be incapable of perceiving an inspiring superior principle. One can imagine how this picture of Europe must have seemed accurate to Vladimir Putin’s advisers. But for Putin himself, flourishing and complexity can only be possible under the attentive direction of a state that mobilises and unifies these powerful forces.

Books and Ideas: Who influences Putin? How has the Putin doctrine been constructed?

Michel Eltchaninoff: Putin himself is not an intellectual. But, as someone who is faithful to the Russian and Soviet tradition, he likes to intersperse his statements with references to culture and philosophy. Aside from the advisers who write his speeches, he has a few people in his entourage who could claim the title of ideologists. The one who is most committed to Russian philosophy and to an ultra-conservative vision of the world is Vladimir Yakunin. He holds a doctorate in political science, is the president of the Russian Railways company, is very close to the president, and organises - at great expense – intellectual conferences on the theme of the “Dialogue of Civilisations”. He puts forward violently anti-Western views. He cultivates an image as being extremely religious, and goes to Jerusalem every year for the Easter service, in order to bring

back the flame of the “sacred fire” that is meant to appear there miraculously at this time. He finances and organises “tours” of relics in Russia. He thus aims at spearheading a religious and moral renaissance in Russia. Finally, while they are not politicians, two other men influence the thinking of the Russian president. Nikita Mikhalkov, the famous film director, has been claiming for two decades to embody the renewal of a “white Russia” following the fall of communism. He tirelessly explores the figure of the “white” philosopher Ivan Ilyin.

Finally, Putin supposedly has a confessor, Father Tikhon Shevkunov. This former student of the Moscow Film School is now the Superior of the Monastery of the Meeting of the Icon of Our Lady of Vladimir in the centre of Moscow. He is powerful and feared. He is supposed to command real influence¹.

Other than this circle of close advisers, we should note that ideas circulate between the Kremlin and society. Many political and media figures like to make references to the thinkers quoted by Vladimir Putin. A website like “The Russian Idea”, which is run by a philosopher from Moscow University, Boris Mezhuev, who is also the deputy editor in chief of *Izvestia*, a daily newspaper that is close to the government, conveys the president’s conservative message. The philosopher Ivan Ilyin frequently makes an appearance on exam syllabuses. But this dynamic also works the other way round. The discourse of ultra-reactionary ideologists is taken up by the Kremlin. Take this one example: a few years ago, an ideologist who combined a Eurasianist heritage with extreme right-wing references, the controversial Alexander Dugin, who is close to the French right-wing and to Alain Soral, was viewed as an oddball. Nowadays, even if he is not close to Putin, we observe that his ideas are being taken up at the highest level. Did he not, as early as 2009, write in one of his books: “We cannot rule out needing to fight a battle for Crimea and for Eastern Ukraine” (*The Fourth Political Theory*, trans. Arktos Media, 2012)? He is now viewed as a prophet...

Books and Ideas: How has this doctrine been received by Russian society? Has it gained unanimous support?

Michel Eltchaninoff: Vladimir Putin returned to the presidency under difficult circumstances, following demonstrations against fraud committed during the legislative elections of December 2011. If he wants to be re-elected in 2018, remain in power until 2024 and choose a docile successor to lead the country up to 2030, he needs to rally his people. He is therefore trying to awaken two emotions in his fellow citizens: pride in a return to the great Russia that can annex Crimea in the face of international law; and the feeling of living in a fortress under siege.

He combined these two themes during a speech where he celebrated the annexation of Crimea, on 18 March 2014: “the infamous policy of containment [of Russia], led in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, continues today. They are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position, because we maintain it and because we call things like they are and do not engage in hypocrisy. But there is a limit to everything. And with Ukraine, our western partners have crossed the line, playing the bear and acting irresponsibly and unprofessionally.” Is this policy of “disciplined enthusiasm”, to use a concept formulated by Nicolay Danilevsky

¹ See in particular an article published in the *FT Magazine*, [“Putin and the monk”](#), by Charles Clover, 25 January 2013.

(1822-1875), a Slavophile and pan-Slavist philosopher and author of *Russia and Europe*, a book that is popular in the circles of Russian power, finally bearing fruit? If we are to believe the polls carried out by Levada, an independent agency, this does seem to be the case, but the trend is fragile. At the end of January 2015, 81% of respondents had a poor or very poor opinion of the United States. Three years earlier, this figure stood at less than 40%. 71% had a poor opinion of the European Union. At the same time, 84% of respondents supported the annexation of Crimea by Russia. This was just slightly less than the 88% of March 2014. As for Vladimir Putin's actions, still at the end of January 2015, they were approved by 85% of respondents – compared to 62% in January 2013.

A vast majority seems to approve of the president's anti-Western and expansionist discourse. However, in times of instability, public opinion is volatile. Other polls carried out by Levada thus raise some questions. When respondents were asked, in December 2014, if they would be prepared to accept a substantial decrease in their family's standard of living due to Western sanctions, 30% responded positively, but 62% responded negatively. Finally, 64% of respondents supported the idea of an independent Ukraine with good neighbourly relations to Russia, while 22% wanted Ukraine to be under the economic and political control of Russia. We can thus see that public opinion remains influenced by the anti-Western propaganda that is massively broadcast by Russian television – and which presents the situation in Eastern and Southern Ukraine as a massacre, or even a genocide, of the Russian-speaking population by the “fascist junta in Kiev”. The question is how long Vladimir Putin's belligerent discourse will seduce the Russian people, who, in 2015, will suffer the harsh effects of the crisis caused by the fall in oil prices and, to a lesser extent, by Western sanctions.

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