



‘Putin’s brain’ an echo of absolute tyrants

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These days, the progressive Left’s ubiquitous use of the words “fascist” and “imperialist” to describe a multitude of political enemies threatens to render those words meaningless. Yet, for those who retain a fondness for the traditional interpretations of the words, a new exemplar has appeared. That man is Vladislav Surkov, the high-powered confidante of Russian President Vladimir Putin who is widely viewed as the mastermind behind Russia’s ongoing aggression against Ukraine.

Those reluctant to label Surkov fascist or imperialist would do well to read his latest article in the February 2nd edition of Russia’s influential *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* newspaper (see English translation). In it, Surkov – who has been described as “Putin’s brain” – lays out some animating principles behind the doctrine of “Putinism” which help to explain Russia’s current, deeply antagonistic role on the world stage.

Russia, he writes, has “regained its innate status of a great power: it is growing in size and assembling land inhabited by people linked by a common heritage... This starring role... was assigned to our country by world history” In other words, as Surkov and his boss see it, Russian expansionism and imperial activity – previously seen in parts of the “post-Soviet space” – is a matter of historical destiny. Indeed, back in 2001, Russia’s government passed a law laying the legal groundwork for expanding the Russian Federation, and Moscow’s policies since then in Georgia, Ukraine and other places have followed this template. Such a stance has inevitably propelled the Kremlin into conflict with other states whose sovereignty it violates.

Surkov also sees Russia’s authoritarian, repressive ruling style as worthy of emulation. “It is necessary to comprehend and describe Putin’s system of government as a whole complex of ideas and the dimensions of Putinism as an ideology of the future... It clearly has export potential,” he writes. That’s a radical statement, because it suggests that the Kremlin sees a global appetite for Putin’s established mode of government, in which Russian elites enrich themselves while keeping power through ever-increasing internal repression, and proclaim their right to use force to obtain additional territory at the expense of other sovereign states.

In this calculus, military and political power is paramount. “...constant involvement in the thick of geopolitical struggles requires the exercise of the government’s military-police powers to be most vital and decisive,” Surkov contends. This goes a long way toward explaining why, despite a lackluster economy and meager foreign investment, Russia’s government has prioritized a massive program of military modernization, even as the health and prosperity of its citizens has plummeted. In the same vein, Surkov mocks both the merchant class which has historically “deemed military affairs inferior to trade,” and liberals who “built their philosophy on the denial of anything that has to do with ‘policing.’”

Nor is there any divorcing Putin from this vision of the state. In a modern day Russian analogue to Louis XIV’s famous statement, “l’etat, c’est moi,” Russia’s president and his cronies are convinced that everything in Russia must be subordinated to the state – and that the state is personified by Putin. Or, as Surkov puts it, “...the various branches of power are linked to the personality of the leader. Jointly or severally they have no value in and of themselves, but only to the extent that they are connected to the leader.”

Surkov sees Putinism “as assuring the survival and the elevation of the Russian nation not just for the next few years, but for decades, and, most likely, centuries to come.” This means not only expansionism, but also interference in the internal affairs of other nations in a manner far more serious than simply monkeying with elections. Surkov brags that “Russia interferes with (foreign) brains, and they do not know what to do with their own altered consciousness.”

Of course, none of this should be new to those who have read major works on fascism and totalitarianism by scholars such as Hannah Arendt and Herman Rauschnig. The echoes of yesterday’s absolute tyrants are present in Surkov’s words – and, indeed, in the fabric of Putin’s unrepresentative, kleptocratic state itself. The sooner Western powers accept this fact, and adjust their policies accordingly, the better.

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(The article below is the English translation of the article appearing in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* newspaper referenced in Herman Pirschner’s opinion editorial ‘Putin’s brain’ an echo of absolute tyrants.)

Vladislav Surkov: Putin's Persistent Nation-State

Here's what's happening.

"It only seems that we have a choice." This remarkably profound quote dated one-and-a-half decades ago is all but forgotten today. However, according to the science of psychology, we are affected much stronger by what we have forgotten than by what we remember. This quote transcended far beyond the original context, and became the first axiom of the new Russian nation-state, effectively anchoring the entire theory and practice of its current policies.

The illusion of having a choice is the most important of illusions -- it is the main stunt behind the Western way of life in general and the Western style of democracy in particular, and it has more to do with P. T. Barnum than with Cleisthenes. After rejecting this illusion in favor of pre-determined reality, Russia's public started reflecting on its own authentic and sovereign way of democratic evolution, but then it entirely lost all interest to debating what democracy should be and whether it should be there at all.

Then, new paths opened toward a free exercise of nation-building, steered not by some imported chimera, but by the logic derived from history, through the "art of the possible". The process of unfeasible, unnatural, and counter-historical disintegration of Russia has been stopped forcefully, albeit belatedly. After collapsing within the USSR down to the level of the Russian Federation, Russia reversed its fall, recovered, and regained its innate status of a great power; it is growing in size and assembling lands inhabited by people linked by common heritage. The starring role which was assigned to our country by world history would not allow it to leave the stage or silently stay in the background with the extras; the complex nature of this nation-state is preordained by such a demanding role.

Thus, the nation-state of Russia continues, and it's of a new type that the world has never seen before. It emerged in mid-2000s, there's still a lot to learn about it, but it has two obvious qualities -- it is unique and it is viable. It went through multiple stress tests, which revealed that this organic model of government system will serve to assure the survival and the elevation of the Russian nation not just for the next few years, but for decades, and, most likely, for centuries to come.

There have been four different government systems in Russia, which can be associated with the names of their authors: Ivan the Third (Grand Duchy / Kingdom of Moscow and all of Russia, 15th-- 17th century); Peter the Great (Russian Empire, 18th -- 19th centuries); Vladimir Lenin (Soviet Union, 20th century); and Vladimir Putin (Russian Federation, 21st century). They were Lev Gumilev's "persons of persistent will," who built extensive government apparatuses, succeeding each other through repairs and adaptation century after century. They ensured persistent upward mobility for the Russian World.

Putin's extensive government machine is only gaining momentum and gearing up for a challenging long haul. It will reach its full capacity in the distant future; thus, for years to come Russia will remain Putin's Russia. Just like modern France still identifies with the Fifth Republic of de Gaulle. Turkey still relies on Atatürk's Six Arrows ideology, despite the fact that the power is controlled by anti-Kemalists. The United States still invokes the virtues and values ??of its semi-fictional founding fathers.

It is a matter of necessity to comprehend and describe Putin's system of government as a whole complex of ideas and dimensions of Putinism as an ideology of the future. It's because the real-life Putin is hardly a Putinist. Just like Marx was not a Marxist; and it is not given that he would have agreed to become one if he knew what it meant. This, however, needs to be done for everyone who is not Putin, but would like to be like him, in order to make it possible to translate his methods and approaches in the future.

Such a description must be free of our style and their style of propaganda, and it has to be rendered in a language that both the Russian official establishment and the anti-Russian establishment would find slightly blasphemous. Such a language can become acceptable for a fairly wide audience, and that's exactly what is needed, because the government system established in Russia has not only domestic prospects, it clearly has significant export potential. There's already a demand for some of its individual components; its practical aspects are studied, partially adopted, and imitated by parties in power and by the opposition in many countries.

Foreign politicians allege Russian interference with elections and referenda across the globe. In fact, the matter is even more serious -- Russia interferes with their brain, and they do not know what to do with their own altered consciousness. After the disastrous 1990s, our country abandoned ideological borrowing, started figuring out things on its own, and launched its informational counteroffensive against the West, causing European and American forecasting experts to be in the wrong more frequently. They are surprised and enraged by the paranormal preferences of the electorate. Out of confusion, they called it an invasion of populism. Okay, if you say so.

Meanwhile, it is clear what draws foreigners to the Russian political algorithm -- there is no prophet in their own land, while everything that's happening with them today has been prophesied by Russia.

When they were still crazy about globalization and made noise about the world being flat and without borders, Moscow made it clear that sovereignty and national interests do matter. At that time, we were blamed for having a "naive" attachment to these old things, which supposedly were long gone out of fashion. We were lectured not to hold on to 19th century values, but, instead, to step boldly into the 21st century, where there would be no sovereign nations and nation-states. However, 21st century, proved us right. English Brexit, the American "#greatagain", and anti-immigration fencing of Europe are only the first items on the extensive list of ubiquitous de-globalization, pro-sovereignty and nationalist movements.

When the Internet was praised at every street corner as an inviolable space of unrestricted freedom, where supposedly anyone can do anything and everyone is equal, Russia posed a sobering question to the bamboozled human race: are you a spider or a fly in this world-wide web? Today everyone is rushing to untangle the web, including the most freedom-loving bureaucracies. They accuse Facebook of complicity with foreign invaders. Yesterday's free virtual space, billed as a prototype of the upcoming paradise, is seized and demarcated by cyber-police, cyber-criminals, cyber-troops and cyber-spies, cyber-terrorists and cyber-moralists.

While the hegemony of the "hegemon" remained unchallenged and the great American dream of world domination was nearly implemented, the end of this story with "people staying silent" was anticipated by many. The ensuing silence was abruptly broken by the speech in Munich. Back then it was perceived as a dissident's rant, but today the entire premise of the speech is perceived as a given -- everyone is dissatisfied with America, including Americans.

Recently, the little-known Turkish political term "derin devlet" was propagated in American media and translated into English as "deep state"; it was then circulated by Russian media. The Russian translation of deep is "glubokoe" or "glubinnoe". The meaning: a rigid and absolutely undemocratic hierarchical system of power controlled by the military and police, while obscured by the façade of democratic institutions. It operates through use of force, graft and manipulation and it is hidden deep beneath the surface of civil society, while hypocritically accusing dissenters of manipulation, graft and the use of force.

After the unpleasant discovery of "deep state" at home, Americans were not particularly surprised, because they've been suspecting it all along. There is a deepnet and the darknet, so why not a "deep state" or even a "dark state?" In the depths and in the darkness of such non-public and non-advertised government system, the bright mirage of democracy is manufactured for the masses -- the illusion of choice, the sense of freedom, and the feeling of superiority, etc.

In a democracy, mistrust and envy are utilized as primary sources of social energy, resulting in the "absolutization" of critical views and an increased level of anxiety. Haters, trolls, and like-minded evil bots have formed a shrill majority, displacing the civil-mannered middle class from its dominant position.

People no longer believe in politicians' good intentions, they envy them and think of them as wicked and cunning scoundrels. The acclaimed "politicographic" TV shows like "Boss" and "House of Cards" picture naturalistic scenes of the shadowy life of the political establishment, conforming to this view.

A scoundrel cannot be allowed to run amok. Presumably, if scoundrels are all you've got, you have to use them to deter other scoundrels. It's fighting fire with fire. There is a wide variety of scoundrels and intricate rules designed to boil their in-fighting down to a draw. So here you get the virtuous system of checks and balances -- a dynamic equilibrium of vile, greed, and harmonious trickery. Anyone who steps out of line and misbehaves gets dealt with by the vigilant deep state, its invisible helping hand pulling the apostate down to the bottom.

There is nothing terrifying in this painting of Western style democracy, once you shift your perspective slightly, just so, until the fear is gone. However, the aftertaste lingers, so people in the West are looking around for different ways of existence. And they see Russia.

Our system, with all its vestiges, though not so elegant as theirs, appears to be more honest. While, "more honest" is not synonymous with "better," it certainly has some appeal.

We have a state, which is not divided into deep and superficial components; it is structured as a whole and all of its parts and features are visible. The most brutal elements of its power frame are placed across the facade, and not concealed behind superfluous architectural adornments. Its bureaucracy does not resort to pretense; it assumes that "everyone knows how it is, anyway."

The high internal tension associated with retaining vast and diverse lands, plus the constant involvement in the thick of the geopolitical struggles, requires the exercise of the government's military and police powers to be most vital and decisive. Traditionally these powers are not concealed; they are displayed, because Russia was never ruled by the merchant class, except for a few months in 1917 and for a few years in the 1990s. (The merchant class deemed military affairs inferior to trade, while their fellow liberals built their philosophy on the denial of anything that has to do with "policing".) There was no one to window-dress the truth with illusions, to push it to the background and to hide somewhere deep down the immanent power of any nation-state -- to defend and to attack.

Russia has no deep state, it has deep populace.

The glittering elites on a glossy surface should be given some credit for centuries of involving the populace in their activities -- party conferences, wars, elections, and economic experiments. However, this participation occurs in a somewhat detached manner; the populace does not show its face on the surface, but stays deep, surrounded by very different life circumstances. There are two distinct ways of national life -- the superficial one and the deep one; they may go in the same or in opposite directions, but they never merge.

Deep populace is ever so shrewd; it's not accessible through public surveys, political campaigning, threats, and other methods of direct study and influence. The knowledge of what it is and what it wants often comes suddenly and late, and it comes to those who can't do anything about it.

Few scholars would attempt to determine whether to equate deep populace with the population, or with a particular segment of population, and if so, exactly how big a segment. At different eras this attribution was given to the peasants, the proletariat, to nonaffiliated voters, to hipsters, and to state employees. Deep populace has been sought out and probed. It has been characterized as God-sent, and as the exact opposite. Those who disregarded deep populace as a work of fiction not rooted in reality ahead of the launch of galloping reforms, ended up banging their head against it and acknowledging that "there is something there after all." Deep populace was in retreat a few times under the pressure of domestic and foreign invaders, but it always came back.

By virtue of its gigantic mass, deep populace generates an insurmountable force of cultural gravity, which binds this nation, pulls down the elites and holds them down to the ground of their native lands, curbing their sporadic attempts to soar to the heights of cosmopolitanism.

National identity, regardless of its true meaning, always precedes the nation-state, pre-determines its shape, and curtails the imagination of theorists and forces practitioners to do certain things. It is a powerful attractor, and all political trajectories inevitably lead to it. Russia can try anything -- conservatism, socialism, liberalism, but it would have to end up pretty much where it is right now.

The ability to listen and to understand people, to see through them at full depth and to act accordingly - is the unique key advantage of Putin's nation-state, which levels with the people and proceeds in the same direction as them. Therefore, it would not face an overload and destruction from countercurrents of history. It's going to be efficient and enduring.

In this new system, all institutions are subordinated to the main objective of trusted communications and interactions between the supreme ruler and the citizenry. The various branches of power are linked in to the personality of the leader. Jointly or severally they have no value, it is derived from their capacity to link in with the leader. Additionally, an informal communications system is in operation, bypassing the official channels and the elites. Should incompetence, backwardness or corruption cause interference in the communications with the people, vigorous measures are taken to restore clarity.

The multi-level government institutions borrowed from the West are there mostly for appearances's sake, to look "like everywhere else," so that that Russia's neighbors would not be irked or frightened by cultural differences. These institutions are like a dress uniform to greet strangers; everyone knows that you don't wear that at home,.

Essentially, the public trusts only their number one person. Whether it's a matter of pride for people who have never been subdued or it's a desire to take a shortcut to the truth, or something else, it is hard to tell. But that's how it is and it's not a new phenomenon. What's new is that the government chooses not to ignore it, but to reckon with it prior to initiating its undertakings.

It would be an oversimplification to categorize it as a manifestation of "faith in the good tsar." The deep populace is not all that naive to list "goodness" among tsar-worthy qualities. It would prefer the ruler endowed with God-like qualities per Albert Einstein -- "sophisticated, but not malicious."

The modern model of the Russian nation-state begins with trust and it's held together by trust. It is how it's fundamentally different from the Western mode of promoting mistrust and criticism. Trust is the source of its strength.

Our new nation-state will have a long and glorious history throughout the new era. It will not break. It will act on its own; it will take and retain prized positions in the major league of geopolitical struggle. Sooner or later, all those who demand "behavior change" from Russia will have to reckon with it. After all, it only seems that they have a choice.