

Vladimir Putin: Making of the National Hero

Written by Elena Chebankova

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/04/23/vladimir-putin-making-of-the-national-hero/>

ELENA CHEBANKOVA, APR 23 2015

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Isaiah Berlin (2006, p. 17), in his essay titled 'Politics as a Descriptive Science,' argues that the central issue of political philosophy is the question of 'why should any man obey any other man or a body of men?' Bearing this in mind, any attempts to account for the public support of a particular political leader could be approached from this broad philosophical standpoint. Why are some politicians admired and why do people submit to them freely? Why some are not? How do popular politicians become so popular? Why are some occasionally treated as national heroes and thereby enjoy the compliance and support of their compatriots? How can we account for these developments in the Russian case, in which Vladimir Putin almost achieved the status of 'national hero' and a public approval rating unthinkable for many of his counterparts in the West? To what extent has the Ukrainian crisis contributed to these developments?

Some analysts may indeed feel tempted to reduce their explanations of Putin's 'national hero' status to the pressure of events in Crimea and Ukraine. Some may relate his success to Russia's impressive economic performance that, within a decade, pulled the country out of poverty and created a stable and resilient economic structure with a healthy trading balance, impressive gold reserves, and the virtual absence of state debt. Some others may look even deeper and hope to find answers in the emergent political stability that, although looking to many liberals like political stagnation, gave Russians a welcome breathing space much required in the wake of the turbulent era of the 1990s. While we should not dismiss such empirical factors entirely, mere economic and political stability, as well as Russia's geopolitical successes in Crimea, cannot provide satisfactory answers to the question that we are trying to deal with. Crimea indeed contributed to the surge of national consolidation, while economic and political stability initially led to the shifting away from issues of mere survival to a host of existential questions, such as 'who are we?', 'how should we live?', and 'who is responsible?' (see similar theoretical critiques in the Western context by Habermas, 1981, p. 36; Edwards, 2004, p. 115; Ingelhart, 1989; Giddens, 1990). At the same time, we must continue our search on deeper existential levels rather than empirical ones for the answer to the question of a leader's political popularity is unavoidably philosophical. Such explanations belong to the discursive, and not the economic, military, or political, realm. This article will argue that the secret of Putin's 'national hero' status can be found in the way that he has presided over a fundamental paradigmatic shift from a liberal to a traditionalist episteme that took place in the discursive sphere of Russian society.

From a theoretical point of view, it is important that the birth of the post-modern world has seriously elevated the significance of the discursive realm. It is discursive practice that shapes much of today's politics and it is dominant interpretations of historic events and socio-cultural structures of society that define the redistribution of power, form the 'regime of truth', and compel one group of people to obey another. Discursive mapping of human history now challenges the universalist, rationalist, and positivist accounts that aspired empirically to explain the development of societal relationships. The central question becomes: how can a dominant discourse be identified and what factors

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and actions are responsible for its criticism, change, and transition? Truth, therefore, becomes particular and contingent on idiosyncratic interpretations that are firmly embedded in the spatial and chronological context. Quentin Skinner (2002, p. 53), following Barry Barnes and David Bloor, observes that 'the only possible judge of the truth of our beliefs must be whatever consensus over norms and standards may happen to prevail in our local culture'. Hence, we can narrow our search by asking whether one or another 'regime of truth' accurately reflects the 'needs of society under which it had originated' (Taylor, 1998, p. 223; Skinner, 2002, p. 28; Mouffe, 1988, p. 37; Gray, 2000, p. 14; Kymlicka, 2004, pp. 117-9). Within these conditions, the role of political ideas, words, and statements becomes consequential. In many ways, we could depend on them for explaining social change, shifts in the redistribution of power, and the rise of influential political figures.

Foucault, Skinner, and Wittgenstein share this explanatory approach of social change emphasising, each at their theoretical level, the importance of discursive, linguistic events and treat the language of politics as a 'tool' responsible for political action, which is subject to manipulation, criticism, modification, and change (Tully, 1988, pp. 5-8). Foucault (1989) in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* introduces the idea of a 'discursive event' that represents a 'basic unit of communication... unique as event and repeatable as thing' (Flynn, 2005, p. 53). A radically new statement, a book, a work of an author, a political idea – all feature in such discursive historic events. These events are 'epistemic' for they have the power to alter the entire paradigm of social self-perceptions, the web of socio-political relationships, and the redistribution of political power (Foucault, 1989, p. 172). Hence, these events work as 'epistemological acts and thresholds' for they 'suspend the continuous accumulation of knowledge, interrupt its slow development, and force it to enter a new time, cut it of its imaginary complicities' (Foucault, 1989, p. 4). The emergence of an epistemic event results in the relevant commentary and in the gradual accumulation of a pool of similar discursive statements. These statements, as Skinner (1978) notes, incrementally manipulate the established political, moral, and ideological conventions of the age until such manipulations enter into insurmountable contradictions with the dominant use of hegemonic ideology. This dynamic steadily changes society's self-perceptions, appreciation of the outside world, and its attitudes to historic events. It prompts this society to redefine moral conventions and create a new regime of power and truth. Hence, we witness a certain 'paradigmatic shift' that changes 'speech-act potentials of normative terms' and significantly redefines society morally (Tully, 1988, p. 13; Skinner, p. xi). Those politicians who manage to ride the wave of discursive change often become 'national heroes' for they manage accurately to reflect the subtle and innermost changes of their societies and preside over the ineluctable paradigmatic change.

Another question of importance is: how can we historically demarcate the emergence of a discursive event that achieves a change of a paradigm? What induces the change of conventional discourse in the first place? It could be argued that discursive events do not spring up out of the blue. Their surfacing always reflects the needs of the society under which they had originated. As Skinner (1978, p. xi) notes, 'political life itself sets the main problems for the political theorist, causing a certain range of issues to appear problematic, and a corresponding range of questions to become the leading subject of debates'. Thus, political problems of the age get their initial reflection in the discursive realm before proceeding to become a formed political action. On the one hand, socio-political changes within a society must be sufficient enough to produce new demands and expectations. On the other hand, an appropriate discursive event must surface and start to provide gradual but steady shifts within the socio-political and socio-cultural structure. This situation does not necessarily or immediately lead to a radical transformation of the dominant political paradigm, but it may well change the way in which such a paradigm is narrated.

This explanation invokes Berlin's (2002, pp. 28-9) argument that knowledge plays a leading role in the legitimation of certain regimes of compliance in which knowledge satisfies 'ignorance, curiosity, doubt' and responds to the question of 'why should I obey?' Such knowledge must tend to the compelling desire of humans to resolve existential issues such as the nature of 'truth, happiness, reality... for this is what they [humans] mean by "good"' (Berlin, 2002, pp. 32-3). Due to the particular nature of truth, such knowledge often comes in the shape of new historic and political myths, as well as new interpretations of old conventions. These myths, which constitute the projection of the culture's unconscious values, form the basis of paradigmatic and structural narratives (Giddens, 1979, p. 21; Harkin, 2009, pp. 45-6; Hroch, 1985; Breuilly, 1985; Sorel, 1999; Casirer, 1946). From this follows that historic and political myths, as well as epistemic 'discursive events', are created to match our expectations (Skinner, 2002, p. 28). Therefore, we may treat discursive events as a new form of knowledge that strives to address the most pressing political problems

Vladimir Putin: Making of the National Hero

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of the age and reflects slow but unavoidable paradigmatic shift. Here again, the ability of a political leader to satisfy 'curiosity and ignorance' by appealing to an appropriate *type* of knowledge and the ability to operate a particular *type* of discursive statement – which reflect the longing for unconventional interpretations of existing ideology and the production of new myths – contribute decisively to his/her standings.

To reflect these theoretical stipulations in the Russian case, we must divide the analysis between two distinct but interconnected spheres: political structural and discursive. In the first case, we must select some problematic areas of the political age that generated expectations and societal requests for the creation of new myths and narratives. In the discursive realm, we must distinguish those epistemic, historical events that led to a change in the paradigmatic narrative and contributed significantly to the formation of new myths. In this light, to account for Putin's public success is to map out the point in history at which ideological transition had begun and to ascertain the way in which he led such a change.

One stable feature of Russian political life is seen in a permanent struggle between two competing paradigms: liberal and traditional. These two paradigmatic views, explaining the politics of an age and trajectories of a country's development, compete and replace each other over the course of Russia's history (Kara-Murza, 2008; Filatov, 2006). Both paradigms have different tasks, priorities, and objectives, and tend to differing needs generated by Russian society. The traditionalist (statist) paradigm is concerned with the preservation of the country's territorial integrity, security, refuting the external threat and consolidating domestic political and economic stability. The liberal paradigm challenges the traditionalist perspectives at the existential level. It is geared towards the issues of social justice, fairness, transparency of government, and keeping the state's authoritarian tendencies in check (Yanov, 2003; Shevtsova, 2008). The duality and struggle between these two radically different paradigms constitutes the essence of Russian political life. These two competing paradigms are narrated differently at different historic periods, each time depending on a particular historic context. It is important that each paradigm creates different historic myths that tend to different needs and requirements of Russian society, and hence uses different modes of societal and political interpretation. The rupture of the previous paradigm and its subsequent change takes place through the accumulation of discursive events that somehow reflect the growing cultural and economic needs of Russian society.

These two cardinal paradigms of Russian political life have been redefined in a variety of different ways during the past hundred years. The first serious redefinition of Russia's existential narrative took place in the aftermath of the October 1917 Revolution. Then the previously liberal tendencies of the age seen in the quest for social justice spawned by the Russian Revolution were replaced by statist traditionalist interpretations disguised in the form of Soviet Communism. It created a watershed in Russian history and necessitated the formation of qualitatively new Russian myths. Those myths, though existentially and, above all, unconsciously, repeated the general socio-psychological pattern of the Russian Empire, still rested on a qualitatively different discourse. Soviet ideological and mythical constructs have been met by practical historical necessities of Russia's industrialisation and the building of military potential capable of fighting the Nazi invasion and subsequently responding to the challenges of a bipolar world, of which Russia was a central part. This was an invariably traditionalist discourse that was skilfully embedded within Soviet rhetoric.

The collapse of the Soviet Union provoked a serious existential crisis through the radical destruction of previously established epistemic myths. It was important that the dissolution of the Soviet narrative did not coincide chronologically with the actual collapse of the Soviet state. The liberal counter-myth emerged as early as in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Byzov, 2006; English, 2000. Some historians date it back to the 1940s; see Lukin, 2009, p. 71; Kharkhordin, 2005, pp. 83-7; Timashev, 1946) and had become gradually entrenched in the Soviet societal landscape. The need to recast the Soviet system to account for unsatisfied consumer demand contributed to the emergence of a new public political ideal based on hedonistic tendencies and demands for higher living standards. Towards the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, the transition to the liberal paradigm was complete. However, this was an epistemic shift of formidable magnitude. Hence, the final and irretrievable loss of the traditionalist Soviet epistemic foundation resulted in the profound loss of a sense of direction and paradigmatic uncertainty. It destroyed the coherent narrative that linked Russian Imperial and Soviet history into a single comprehensive unit. This atmosphere of epistemological uncertainty fuelled the quest for a new knowledge and narrative. True to form, those narratives had to have a traditionalist flavour.

Vladimir Putin: Making of the National Hero

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A difficult web of Russia's societal relationships was formed towards the end of the 1990s and pointed in the direction of an emerging consensus over the need to reinvent the structural narrative in a way which would be embedded in a sense of national self-awareness, tradition, statism, and dignity. Some subtle messages on Russia's new particular self-consciousness began to appear within the commercial advertising sphere – an area that is exceptionally sensitive to the innermost needs of society. They have also emerged in the cinematic art. A prime example is the nationalist film *Brother*, which struck a chord with the absolute majority of Russians. In the realm of international relations, this subtle shift has been visible through the replacement of liberal and pro-Western Russian foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev with the more pragmatic and traditionalist Yevgeniy Primakov. Russia's questioning and distinct stance on the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia has reflected that change well.

In the domestic political sphere, discursive events have been seen during the second Chechen campaign, when Putin declared his determination to tackle the problem in the most decisive and radical manner. His statements on the need to pacify the region and his practical support of the army elicited a response among many Russian military personnel, thus creating an avalanche of patriotic commentary and discussion (Troshev, 2001; Medvedev, 2001). All these events signified the rupture of Russia's previous liberal narrative that had dominated the discourse, formally and informally, most probably from the *détente* period, when the need for structural reform of the Russian political system became apparent.

The subsequent growth of similar discursive events – seen in the calls to revise Russian history (Putin's 2013 Valdai speech), to find an appropriate place for the country within the international arena (Putin's 2007 Munich speech), to reinvent Russia's anthropology on some traditionalist perceptions of stable identities – gave birth to profound epistemic shifts and transformations that became clearly visible within a decade. The general change of Russia's discourse, an epistemic shift from the liberal to traditionalist myth created a new atmosphere, a new regime of truth, a new ideological environment, which, though not fully formed, had an air of great expectations and a sense of a return to the Russian traditionalist mission.

It could be argued that the explanations of Putin's popularity may be found in the fact that he was rightly attuned to the gradual change of the paradigmatic narrative that was taking place, moving from liberalism to traditionalism at the time of his arrival to the presidency. Putin, through an attempt to create a new coherent socio-historic narrative, came close to a situation in which his ideas became 'true to the needs' of Russia's society. He was well-attuned to the requirements of the new traditionalist paradigm that could provide new answers to existential questions, that could meet the challenge of contextualising concrete Russian peoples within the historical, political, and international scene. From this point of view, an extremely positive response from Russians to Putin's actions during the Ukrainian crisis has been entirely logical. Ukraine and Crimea represented, using Foucault's terminology, a 'population of events in the space of discourse in general' (Flynn 2005, p. 51). It was an instance, or perhaps the apex, of the decade-long process of Russia's epistemic shift – a shift that involved the creation of a new leader and the formation of radically new historic and contemporary social narratives. The secret of Putin's success, in the view of the author, is his attempt to recreate a narrative of the Russian structure in a new form. His attempted myths resonated well with the majority of the Russian public. The Ukrainian crisis unmasked those hidden passions of Russian society and became the focal point for this long search for self-rediscovery within the broader context of Russia's history.

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Vladimir Putin: Making of the National Hero

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Vladimir Putin: Making of the National Hero

Written by Elena Chebankova

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