
THE RUSSIAN PSYCHE: HISTORICAL INFLUENCES ON CURRENT POLITICAL THINKING

Past and present: Collectivism, individualism and the Russian soul

Russia has a very long history of peasant servitude, which was abolished only in 1861. Most peasants were organised in social units called mir. These units had a certain degree of independence from the state and the aristocracy, who formally owned the serfs, in managing joint agricultural and administrative activities. The Bolsheviks carried on a similar system of managing and controlling the peasantry in units, this time called kolhoz (collective household). Urban dwellers were organised in cells and generally the life of a Soviet citizen was controlled and organised by the state. The term vsem mirom, derived from mir, is still very much in use today and refers to a collective decision-making process and the system of thinking where individualistic stands are not welcome.

In contrast, the transitional period of the 1990s and its accompanying free market reforms introduced a completely different mentality, where an individual was seen responsible for his own personal success in life and, in many cases, his economic survival. As a result of this radical shift, a new generation, usually those born in the 1980s-1990s, express individual thinking and leadership skills and abilities and can thus outplay their older colleagues. They also have a much better education, more language skills and a higher income. Representatives of the previous generation tend to demonstrate slower reactions to events and lack even rudimentary foreign language skills. For example, Vladimir Putin has just given an English language textbook to Vitaly Mutko, the minister of sport, as a birthday gift, openly referring to the minister's famously poor level of English.

One should also acknowledge that there have been a small number of very capable state officials born in the 1960s, such as Vladislav Surkov, who served as personal adviser to Vladimir Putin and authored the concept of 'sovereign democracy', as well as Jahan Pollyeva, the leader of the presidential speechwriting team. However, neither of these two individuals is currently in the president's inner circle.

The main theme of classic Russian literature by such authors as Gogol, Pushkin, Dostoevsky and Chekhov, has been a search for spirituality. Despite the Bolsheviks' 80-year anti-religion campaign, Russians managed to remain their zeal for matters spiritual. The 'Russian soul', often described as 'great' and 'mystical', is a vaguely defined concept that is used by Russians to describe themselves. It is often characterised by extreme patience, almost passivity, leading to the development of the ability to embrace and overcome extreme deprivation. This deprivation could mean a shortage of basic goods as well the curtailment of personal and political freedoms under soviet dictatorship and contemporary authoritarian rule. These traits of the Russian national character are widely

accepted by historians to explain how the Russians survived such a long history of serfdom, the horrors of the Second World War and Stalinism in particular. Another unique Russian concept is avos, which describes a lack of planning and ungrounded expectations that events can and will settle down on their own. It is not fatalism, but it is rather a lack of preparedness and absence of a clear plan to address a possible event. In its turn, this could lead to unpredictable actions and reactions, another trait which Russians themselves admit to.

Pre-Soviet Russia and the Soviet Union were empires and carried significant weight in the international arena. An expansive foreign policy and industrial progress once fed the national pride of the Russian people. The collapse of the Soviet Union and a further loss of international influence by the Russian state have led the Russian people to generally feel nostalgic about old times. Interestingly, it is a trans-generational trend. The annexation of Crimea was partly made possible by the existence of many young Russian speaking residents of the region who hoped for some manner of renaissance of the Soviet life, which had more stability and where national pride was commonplace: these same feelings explain why Russian citizens approve of the annexation of Crimea.

Putin's character

Vladimir Putin is his parents' only surviving child and was born while they were relatively old. His mother, Maria Ivanovna, almost died from starvation during the Second World War and lost her other son. Putin's father, Vladimir Putin Senior, took part in the battle for Leningrad and was severely injured. This explains why Vladimir Putin has always spoken about his parents and the Second World War with much filial piety.

The average Russian family has lost one or more relatives in the war and this subject remains very sensitive to this day. Any attempt to reconsider the role of the Soviet army in the victory over Germany and to downplay the Russian contribution to freeing Europe from the Nazi regime creates much irritation and resentment.

Putin started his career in the KGB, the Soviet Secret Services, and was based for a number of years in East Germany. The job required constant cautiousness and secrecy. Arguably, Putin has retained this habit of hiding details of his private life and being publicly reserved. After his return to Leningrad, at the end of the Cold War, Putin joined the Leningrad City Council under Anatoly Sobchuk who had chosen him as his assistant mayor. The exact nature of the relationship between Putin and Sobchuk, who arguably acted as his first political benefactor, is still being debated by historians and Putin's political opponents. Most of them concede that Putin covered up Sobchuk's criminal activities, but used this as leverage and outplayed his boss, eventually leaving his team to embark upon a judiciously timed high-flying political career. Some, such as Marina Salie, even allude to Sobchuk's death

“““

The collapse of the Soviet Union and a further loss of international influence by the Russian state have led the Russian people to generally feel nostalgic about old times

as having taken place under suspicious circumstances of coercion.

Putin is also known for a lack of trust and as a result is known to frequently rotate people in and out of his inner circle. There are very few people whom he truly trusts. This explains why Sergey Shoigu, the minister famous for a series of extraordinary political gaffes and catastrophes, has recently been appointed to the crucial post of Russian defence ministry. Similarly, a number of events indicate that Putin does not fully trust Dmitry Medvedev. For example, in 2012 he was sent abroad while Putin took care of the crucial business of nominating members of the government.

Unlike his predecessors, Putin fully understands the role of the media in creating and supporting his public image. For example, the Russian media depicts him as living a simple and self-disciplined – almost ascetic – life, masking the reality of vast personal wealth and property. Direct contact with the Russian people is another feature that he values greatly. Twice a year, Putin's team organises the opportunity for citizens to ask questions and submit direct complaints to the President. While some citizens ask Putin a question out of curiosity, many use this opportunity to solve their problems, especially if they are caught up in the corrupt and inefficient bureaucracy. These presidential 'bridging' events are believed to bring results to all submitted requests. In many of his interviews and a recent film dedicated to the events surrounding the annexation of Crimea, Putin refers to his love for his motherland and the desire to

raise up Russia to prosperity, sentiments which appeal to the majority of the Russian population. Opinion polls concerning Putin's effectiveness are frequently organised and they usually report that Russians approve of their president and his personal ratings remain extremely high.

At the beginning of his presidential career Putin seemed to be quite open with his Western partners. He had several things in common with then British prime minister Tony Blair, such as a legal background and birth date and in the past Putin claimed to like Blair. However, in his populist documentary *President* (released in 2015), Putin spoke of how he gradually lost his "romanticism" and lost his trust in the Western partners, including Blair. Putin's only real Western friend appears to be Silvio Berlusconi, the billionaire former prime minister of Italy, although Victor Orban, the authoritarian prime minister of Hungary has made admiring comments referring to the Russian president's policies and actions. Putin has, however, publicly acknowledged Berlusconi as his close personal friend and the two have organised several private visits to one another's properties. With his recent trip to the Crimea, Berlusconi is the only senior western leader or political figure to recognise the Russian reunification with Crimea. Italian media has even cited rumours that Berlusconi could move to Russia and be given a post in the government. In contrast, Putin maintains distance in his relations with the leaders of the post-Soviet states. While he often uses the term 'friends' in relation to the Ukrainian and Belorussian partners, this is done in an obviously sarcastic way.



Picture: Vagant