

Nationalism and greatness: Russia under the Putin presidenciesⁱ

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ABSTRACT: In this chapter contemporary Russian nationalism is treated as sentiments of national identity diffused throughout Russian society and demonstrated in policies led by the incumbent president, Vladimir Putin. The chapter deals with the shapes nationalism has taken under Putin's authoritarian leadership and discusses what explains his apparent popularity at home. To provide context for the analysis, the historical background is briefly accounted for. What sentiments have been used to pave the way for Putin's ascent to power and what were the means used to bring him to this position? The central argument is that Vladimir Putin's popular appeal lies in the fact that he has managed to get across that he is uniquely suited to safeguard Russia's status as a great power – a core value of Russian national identity –, to preserve order and stability at home, and hold Russia's own against an outside world often depicted as hostile.

Keywords: Russia, Putin, nationalism, great power status, stability, popularity.

In 2017 the well-known Russian sociological institute Levada Center conducted a poll among 1600 Russians in 48 regions asking them to name the most outstanding persons in world history. Similar polls had since 1989 been undertaken roughly with five-year intervals by Levada (de Haldevang 2017). During those years the consistency was striking in some respects, but there were also interesting changes. In the 2017 poll, like in the previous ones, most respondents preferred to name persons from Russia or the Soviet Union. Topping the list was Josef Stalin with 38 per cent expressing their preference for him. The incumbent president, Vladimir Putin, came in second with the same percentage as the 19th century poet Alexander Pushkin (34 per cent). These were then followed by Vladimir Lenin (32 per cent) and Tsar Peter the Great (29 per cent). At first glance, the top five come across as a motley crew, but upon reflection it emerges that all of them have something in common, namely that they according to the respondents had contributed to making Russia great, feared, or both, in the eyes of the surrounding world.

It may seem surprising that Stalin, the brutal dictator ruling the Soviet Union between 1924 and 1953, is still considered the most outstanding person in world history by so many. Stalin has since the first poll in 1989 advanced steadily in popularity and ended up in the top position in both 2012 and in 2017 (de Haldevang 2017; Filipov 2017). An answer to the riddle presents itself through another set of polls by Levada, conducted eight times between 1999 and 2018. 1600 respondents across 52 regions were asked questions about national pride and shame. They were requested to mark the events in Russian history which they felt most proud or, on the other hand, most ashamed about. On all occasions, the unrivalled top position on the pride dimension was held by the victory in what in Russian parlance is referred to as the Great Patriotic War 1941–45 (Levada Center 2019). This is where the Stalin's favourable rating may get an explanation: despite all his crimes he was leading the Soviet Union during the war and is associated with the final victory. On the shame dimension the response pattern was not equally clear-cut, but in all polls between 1999 and 2018 the most frequent choice was the option 'We are a great people and a rich country, but we permanently live in poverty and disorder'. In other words, respondents perceived a mismatch between the rightful status of Russia and the actual one. Greatness and national

prestige seem to be highly significant for Russian national identity, and thus also for policies and ideational structures that aim to promote such identity, namely nationalism.

Like Laruelle (2009), I will in the following treat Russian nationalism not as a fringe phenomenon propounded by radical forces on the political periphery, but as sentiments diffused throughout society and manifested in contemporary policies of patriotic centrism spearheaded by the incumbent president, Vladimir Putin. This chapter deals with current manifestations of Russian state nationalism and the forms and shapes it has taken under Putin's leadership. To provide context for the analysis of contemporary state-run nationalism in Russia, the historical background is briefly accounted for. What sentiments have been used to pave the way for Putin's ascent to power and what were the means used to bring him to this position?

Post-Soviet predicaments

When the Soviet Union split up into 15 separate states in 1991 the Russian Federation comprised 89 so-called federative subjects, out of which 20 were defined on non-Russian, ethnic, grounds, albeit most frequently with the titular peoples in minority. Fears were often expressed in the public debate that the Russian Federation would go down the same path as the Soviet Union had done and that it was headed for dissolution since it was too diverse to keep united. The 1990s indeed saw tendencies in this regard as the regions tried to acquire as much autonomy as possible in relation to the center. The most drastic example was Chechnya which in the mid-1990s tried to break away from the Russian Federation and establish an independent state.

In comparison with the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation had lost about a quarter of the land mass and roughly half of the population. It had become obvious for all who could see that the inflated impressions about the Soviet Union being a superpower also in economic terms were off the mark. What remained according to a widespread saying was equivalent to 'Burkina Faso with missiles'. This loss of magnitude and power gave rise to a protracted period of post-imperial syndrome (Kasamara & Sorokina 2012). People found it difficult to accept the loss of territory as something lasting and wanted to see the great power restored. President Putin's oft-cited remark that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century was quite indicative here. However, other indications abounded already long before Putin's rise to preeminence. The expression 'Near Abroad' became part of the political vocabulary during the early 1990s and was used for referring to the former Soviet republics outside of the Russian Federation. The connotations were that this was not abroad after all, that the Near Abroad had a special relation to Russia, and that Russia retained the area as its special sphere of influence. The latter claim was supported by the existence of the new Russian diaspora where approximately 25 million ethnic Russians lived in the former Soviet republics of the Near Abroad (Melvin 1995, Kolstö 1996).

Today there are about 147 million inhabitants in the Russian Federation. These are, in turn, divided into approximately 200 different national or ethnic groups. Russians make up around

78 per cent of this ethnic mix, dwarfing the other national groups by comparison. The second largest group, the Tatars, make up only 3.7 per cent of the total population (Central Intelligence Agency 2019). The dominance of Russians is a contrast to the Soviet Union, where the proportion of ethnic Russians in the years of the breakup was around 50 per cent. Even so, around 31 million inhabitants of the Russian Federation are identified as something other than ethnic Russians, and it is a demanding task for the powers that be to engage all these people in the state-building process, not to say in nation-building. Approximately 20 million inhabitants are e.g. estimated to be actively practicing Muslims, which puts them in contrast with the predominant religion of Russian Christian Orthodoxy.

The opening lines of the preamble of the 1993 Constitution of the Russian Federation read: “We, the multinational people of the Russian Federation, united by a common fate on our land...”. So, what is this multinational people, and what unites it? During Boris Yeltsin’s presidencies in the 1990s it was widespread official practice to use the term *rossiyane* to refer to all citizens of the Federation, regardless of their ethnic origin. The term had civic connotations, and as a contrast, the term *russskie* denoted citizens of ethnic Russian origin only. In recent years the term *rossiyane* seems to have been largely abandoned in official discourse. Whereas he during his early years as president kept to the wording of the preceding Yeltsin administration, Vladimir Putin nowadays clearly seems to prefer the term *russskie* to the once so politically correct term (Kolstö 2016).

The difference between the nouns *russskie* and *rossiyane* has more than semantic significance. It signals important lines of division between different strands of nationalism in Russia. In the literature there is customarily a major dividing line between statist-oriented nationalism with a more inclusive and civic focus, and ethno-nationalism strongly oriented towards promoting and protecting the Russian people as ethnically defined, sometimes with xenophobic and racist overtones. As argued by Kolstö (2016b, 1), ‘these two groups distrust, even hate, each other in their pursuit of opposing political goals’. The ethno-nationalist strand is, among other things, characterized by its skeptical attitude to migrants and guest workers coming from Central Asia and the Caucasus into the European parts of Russia and takes an activist position in relation to the protection of compatriots abroad.

In relation to the two major strands of nationalism, Vladimir Putin has basically taken a centrist position. He has emphasized the great power status of the Russian state and its capacity as an inclusive project for its inhabitants – but his preference in recent years for using the noun ‘*russskie*’ signals a certain ambiguity. From Putin’s third presidential term in office, from 2012 onwards, there has been an increased pronunciation of Russian ethno-cultural traits but there has also, on the other hand, been marked restraint towards the most vociferous ethno-nationalist movements, not least in the wake of ethnically inspired riots in central Moscow in 2010 (Kolstö and Blakkisrud 2016). The complexity of the issues of Russian contemporary nationalism is profound, and one needs to venture back in time to grasp more of the context.

Distant past, old debates

From the late 15th century onwards, Imperial Russia continually expanded its territory. The subjugation of peoples other than ethnic Russians was that of a self-proclaimed superior people believing in its right to dominate over perceived inferiors. The conquests of Central Asia and the Caucasus during the second half of the 19th century were cases in point. In contrast with the other colonial powers in Europe, Russia had no ocean separating its imperial core from its colonies. Therefore, it became blurred what constituted the core and what was the periphery (Shaw 1999). In Western Europe the development of national identity during the late 18th and the early 19th century was never a smooth process, but in Russia it was extraordinarily complicated and indeed confused as it was so densely intertwined with the expansion of the territory of the empire on the Eurasian land mass.

In addition, there was during the 19th century a fierce debate whether Russia should align itself with cultural ways and mores of Western Europe or seek its partners in the East and venture to find its own path of development and orientation. This was the perennial clash between the Slavophiles and Westernizers. Indeed, the development of national identity in Russia was so troubled that it has been described as 'the accursed question' (Prizel 1998, pp. 153–179). Whereas the Westernizers, in the spirit of Tsar Peter the Great's opening a window on the West, tried to bring Russia closer to Western Europe, the Slavophiles held an opposite view. According to them, the main thing was to uphold a community and common destiny with Slavic peoples of the East and be true to the proclaimed unique Russian way of development.

The simultaneous processes of constructing collective identifications uniting the state, on the one hand, and the expanding physical size of the empire, on the other, blurred the distinctions between ethnic Russians and other subjects of Russian statehood. The main characteristics of the former were allegiance to the Russian imperial crown, belonging to Russian Orthodox faith and use of the Russian language. These characteristics served to alienate the fringes of the Russian Empire, and strained relations to other religions than Russian Orthodoxy. On the other hand, the dividing line between the *russkie* and those subjects who were Slavs but not Russians was thin and ambiguous, which can today still be seen in the conflicts over Ukraine.

With varying intensity and occasional geographic exceptions there was throughout the imperial period an apparent drive of Russification across the empire. The Communist takeover in October 1917 made a temporary difference due to the ideological insistence that only divisions of class, not those of ethnicity or religion, were significant as markers between people. The name of the Soviet Union itself contained no geographic or ethnic specifications, which in theory kept it open for the whole world to join as revolutions on a global scale progressed. The so-called *korenizatsiya* policies of the 1920s intended to demonstrate that all nationalities were equal and that ethnic differences had no significance in the Soviet Union. These policies were short-lived but had significant impact on the subsequent development of ethnic and national identities in the Soviet Union. Within the newly established union republics representatives of the titular nations as well as their minorities were provided positions within local government and bureaucracy. By institutionalizing and encouraging ethnic categories within the territorial homelands, hopes and aspirations for

later autonomy were nurtured. In this way the Soviet nationalities policies of the 1920s provided the framework from which non-Russian nationalist aspirations could later develop (Martin 2001).

This was, however, a process with delayed effects as the Soviet Union from the early 1930s on found its way back to the old pattern of ethnic Russian dominance. While the Soviet authorities still claimed that the Soviet people knew of no ethnic differentiations, reality was different. With the passing of time 'Soviet' and 'Russian' developed into synonyms, where the ethnic Russian component formed the core. This was symbolized by the change of the national anthem in 1944, from The International to a national hymn praising the 'unbreakable union of free republics', welded together by the Great Russia. In political practice repression was often the lot awarded to non-Russian entities. The most horrific examples were the Stalin-time deportations in the wake of World War II of whole peoples, such as Crimean Tatars, Chechens and Volga Germans, away from their ancestral homelands.

Ethnic tensions continued to fester in the Cold War era. When a combination of internal shortcomings and external pressure finally brought the Soviet Union down in 1991, the national question was one of the straws that broke the camel's back. Non-Russians were frustrated with decades of thwarting of their aspirations for greater autonomy. For their part, Russians (*russkie*) took issue with what they perceived as vast economic subventions going from the Russian metropolis in the direction of the poorer fringes. In the end nothing remained but the dissolution of the Soviet Union, with 15 new states emerging where there had previously been one.

Back to the contemporary stage: Putin's power basis

In 2019 Vladimir Putin has dominated the Russian political scene for 20 years, either as president or as prime minister. He has been elected to the office four times, in 2000, in 2004, in 2012 and in 2018, and according to the constitution he can, health permitting, go on serving as president until 2024. On all four occasions he has emerged victorious already in the first round of the elections, and in the monthly popularity polls undertaken by the Levada Center, his rates of approval have never dipped below 60 per cent. Rather, during lengthy periods they have stayed far above the 80 per cent threshold (Levada Center 2019). Even if it is advisable to interpret poll results in authoritarian contexts such as Russia soberly, the results are striking, and interesting trends and fluctuations can be extracted from the long time series that the Levada indices provide.

It has been argued that the reason why Putin has been able to build a stable foundation of power and legitimacy is that he has managed to find the least common denominator uniting all influential political camps (Chen 2016). To all groups, he has by default emerged as the most preferable. In Galeotti's (2019, p. 72) graphic description, Putin is 'a gut-level patriot who believes that Russia should be considered a great power not because of its military strength, its economy or for any other specific index, but because it is *Russia*'. Even if Galeotti (2019, p 76) also claims that Putin 'has no ideological commitment to anything', it could be argued that there is indeed one basic ideological stance, albeit vague at times, that

Putin clings to: a steadfast belief that Russia has a special mission, that it is a predestined great power, and that it has to be respected accordingly by other countries. These notions seem to be shared by a popular majority, and the idea of Russia as a preordained great power appears to be a central tenet of Russian national identity (Petersson 2001). It was consistent with these sentiments when Putin early on during his presidencies declared that 'either Russia is great, or it is not at all' (Shevtsova 2003, p. 175).

Moreover, Putin's popular success was from the outset facilitated by his predecessor's failures. Boris Yeltsin's presidencies 1991–99 were, admittedly, characterized by unsurpassed democratic freedoms by Russian standards, but on the other hand, also by an economy in free fall, dependence on the United States and other Western powers for loans and credits, unfettered influence by oligarchs, and social chaos and deprivation for the majority of Russians. The very epitome of the crisis was the first civil war with Chechnya in 1994–96. It ended with a humiliating defeat for the Russian central power, which in the agreement of Khasavyurt in 1996 had to recognize de facto Chechen independence. The Russian state was in deep crisis, and sentiments of national identity and pride seemed to be lethally hurt. All this was compounded by a crisis of leadership. Yeltsin's last years as president were marked by his ill health and high consumption of alcohol. Even if he had enjoyed substantial popularity and an aura of charisma during his heyday in the early 1990s, not least thanks to his decisive action to defeat a reactionary coup attempt to restore Soviet power in August 1991, this was all spent during the second half of his presidential tenure.

Yeltsin handpicked Putin as his successor by appointing him to the prime minister's office in the late summer of 1999. The hitherto relatively unknown Putin was a former KGB officer and earlier aide of the liberal mayor of St. Petersburg, the late Anatolii Sobchak. Several prime ministers had before him at breakneck speed been tried out by Yeltsin, only to be found too weak or too strong and then replaced with someone else. Putin was, however, there to stay. His first actions as prime minister in 1999 was to reopen the military campaign in Chechnya, and in a victorious and violent war revoke the Khasavyurt agreement and reinstate what was perceived as domestic order in Russia. When Yeltsin in the last days of 1999 in a last surprise move as president stepped down prematurely, Putin was elevated to interim president until regular elections could take place in March 2000. This gave him pole position, and he won a landslide victory in the elections.

From the very beginning there were two major themes in Putin's political platform: law, order and stability at home, and recognition as great power abroad. These two themes were clearly interrelated. Internal stability was a precondition for attaining great power status, whereas great power status is such a core value among the Russian populace that its attainment is crucial for the maintenance of internal stability. The two themes have during his presidencies been supplemented by a third one, namely recurrent warnings about actors in the world outside conspiring with sinister internal forces, such as Chechens or financial oligarchs, to deny Russia its birthright as a great power and ultimately bring it down. The most prominent external actor according to these narratives is the United States, the great power rival, as exemplified by the expansion of NATO and US pretenses after the Cold War to spread the norm of liberal democracy and human rights worldwide. At times minor post-

Soviet state actors have also figured, such as Estonia in 2007 and Georgia in 2008, as was seen during the so-called bronze soldier incident and the short Russo-Georgian war.

The argument about the hostile world outside is in conformity with the notion of Russia as the defender of traditional moral values against perceived liberal and Western degeneration. This idea goes well together with the traditional view, espoused by the Russian Orthodox church, of Moscow as the Third Rome with a messianic mission to promote spiritual and moral values worldwide (Østbø 2016). Resembling some elements from the writings of the eclectic but largely neo-fascist philosopher Aleksandr Dugin, official Russia has increasingly taken upon itself to be a bulwark against the dissolution of family values, denigration of religion and culture, and the international spread of homosexual propaganda and LGBT rights (Edenborg 2017). This self-assigned duty makes it necessary for Russia to take on a global mission, even if Putin and official Russia do not take it quite as far as Dugin (2017, p. 52) who argues in favour of a 'crusade' against the West.

According to the ideals of Euroasianism, with which Dugin's name is heavily associated, Russia occupies a middle position between Europe and Asia and has had its cultural features formed through an amalgamation of Slavic and Turko-Muslim influences. Russia should therefore not neglect its Asian roots. Eurasianists reject the view that Russia is a country on the periphery of Europe, perennially striving to catch up with the West. Rather it is a civilization of its own. Russia's geographic location makes it possible and credible to pursue a messianic fourth way, replacing the old ideologies of liberalism, socialism and fascism (Dugin 2017, 2018). According to this logic, Western standards of democracy and human rights do not fit Russian conditions and must be opposed. Putin and his administration have in recent years distanced themselves from Dugin as an individual, but several of the ideas presented above have found their way into the official rhetoric, including the president's own.

Peaks, slumps and future perspectives

During most of his first two presidencies, 2000–2004 and 2004–2008, Putin was helped along by the all-time high world market prices in oil and gas. As one of the world's leading exporters of petroleum products Russia could benefit vastly from the rich revenue that this brought. The recovery of Russia's global political and economic influence took place much quicker than had ever been anticipated. The economic upturn added to Putin's domestic reputation of being the strong leader that the country needed and helped to sustain his popular appeal.

In Putin's monthly approval ratings according to the Levada polls there have since been two major slumps: in 2011/2012 and in 2018, and one particularly remarkable and durable peak from early 2014 onwards (Levada Center 2019). The peak can be understood if analyzed through the prism of mobilization of nationalist sentiments, where the slumps indicate periods when other concerns have come to the fore and state nationalist policies have not been enough to maintain the popularity ratings at a high level (Hutcheson and Petersson 2016).

In 2011–12 Putin faced his deepest crisis yet. During the period 2008–12 his ally Dmitry Medvedev, in the literature referred to as ‘Putin’s gopher’ (Galeotti 2019, p. 10) or his ‘receptionist’ (Gel’man 2016, p. xiii), was the president as Putin due to constitutional rules was inhibited from serving for more than two consecutive periods. Instead Putin took up the position of prime minister during Medvedev’s presidency, from which platform he continued to exert decisive political influence. Then, in 2012, following the letter if not the spirit of the constitution, he ran again for the presidency after Medvedev had ceded his position as the incumbent candidate. In exchange, Medvedev agreed to serve as Putin’s prime minister. The arrangement was deeply unpopular, as the public perceived it as wheeling and dealing in neglect of popular will. Matters were made worse as massive fraud and malfeasance were detected in connection with the parliamentary elections in December 2011, and later also during the polls for the presidency in March 2012. A wave of demonstrations took place in the major Russian cities, and even if Putin won the presidential election already in the first round, his legitimacy seemed to be wearing thin. Well into the first two years of his third presidency, he appeared to have difficulties regaining the political initiative.

In February 2014 the Olympic Winter Games were arranged in Sochi, in the south of the Russian Federation. Amid fears that this mega-event would turn out to be too much of a security and economic challenge for the Russian authorities to carry, the event was made into a manifestation of Russia’s great power aspirations. Flying the flag proved to be an effective if hardly original recipe for gaining the attention of the domestic audience, but also for attaining the intensely sought recognition from abroad.

However, what really achieved a long-lasting effect on Putin’s popularity ratings were the assertive Russian actions in relation to neighbouring Ukraine. There the elected president Yanukovich had in the spring of 2014 been ousted following massive manifestations of popular discontent which had started already in the preceding fall. The Russian administration reacted strongly to protect what was argued to be Russian interests. Before the Olympic Games in Sochi had even been officially closed, Russian military forces implemented an annexation of the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine, using the need to protect the Russian-speaking population as a pretext. Similar arguments had been articulated some years before in conjunction with the short Russo-Georgian war in 2008.

The developments over Crimea and Ukraine were in conformity with Putin’s greater emphasis of the ethnic (*russkii*) element of Russian state nationalism and underlined that the trend had implications for Russia’s foreign and security policy. The annexation was severely criticized by the European Union and the United States and prompted a string of economic sanctions to protest the breach of international law, but it gained the liking of the Russian electorate. It was the annexation which made Putin’s approval ratings soar and stay far above the 80-per cent threshold for a period of more than four years.

The popularity of the slogan ‘Crimea is ours’ in Russian societal discourse should be seen in conjunction with the trauma experienced ever since the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Edenborg 2017, pp. 154–57). For many Russians it was the territorial loss of Ukraine that was by far the most difficult to digest. The city of Kyiv itself had traditionally been defined as the historical cradle of Russia or indeed its ‘mother’ (Hellberg Hirn 1998 [2019], p. 35), and

even to imagine that Russia and Ukraine were separate entities was almost impossible for many Russians. In his public appearances Vladimir Putin has often expressed himself in ways that indicate that to his mind Russians and Ukrainians are the same people. In a speech in April 2014, the president referred to the contested areas around Donbas and Lugansk in eastern Ukraine as 'Novorossiya' (New Russia), and commented that it was not until the 1920s that the regions had been transferred from Russia to Ukraine, and this for unclear reasons. However, Putin has since refrained from using the term 'Novorossiya', which has instead been used by nationalists with more far-reaching agendas (Laruelle 2016, p. 57).

Russia's incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation, after the arrangement of a referendum in March 2014 to determine which country the resident majority wished to belong to, were hailed by Russian radical nationalists. Putin was at that time depicted by nationalist quarters as the chosen one, indeed 'the supreme leader' or the 'Emperor', as it was put by the ultra-nationalist leader of the liberal democratic party, Vladimir Zhirinovskii (Kolstö 2016, p. 717). However, as Putin's Russia later refrained from fully backing the insurgents of Donbas and Lugansk to break loose from Ukraine and, contrary to what Dugin had hoped, failed to engage 'in a battle for Kiev and Eastern Ukraine' (Dugin 2017, p. 78), Russian nationalists became less impressed. From having praised Putin for his bold moves on Crimea, the radical nationalist fringe blamed the president for letting the separatists down. However, so far, the vocal nationalist opposition has done little to harm his position (Kolstö 2016). Rather, Putin has managed to keep state nationalism as a force strengthening the political establishment, thereby denying radical forces the possibility to use nationalism to seriously challenge the government.

So, if not the nationalists, what could rock Putin's foundation of power? In the summer of 2018, the president's approval ratings slumped for the first time since after the annexation of Crimea. The reason was the government initiative to raise the retirement age, from 55 to 60 years for women, and from 60 to 65 years for men. The latter figure happens to equal the average life expectancy of the Russian male population, which made the protests understandable. The proposal was prompted by economic strain as the golden years of the early 2000s were long gone and Western sanctions and Russians countersanctions after the annexation of Crimea were taking their toll. However, Putin appears to be intent on trying to balance absent economic success with more evidence of the Russian great power status and the respect that this brings Russia in the international community (Hutcheson and Petersson 2016). Russian military engagement in Syria from the fall of 2015 on should be seen in this light. The operations gave Russia an opportunity to show global great power presence, and Putin has often commented that the decisive Russian military action did something that the US-led intervention had long failed to do, namely, to defeat Islamic State forces in Syria. The question is if decisive great power action abroad can in the long run compensate for shortcomings in domestic politics.

Conclusion

The central argument of this chapter is that Vladimir Putin's popular appeal lies in the following factors: he has made it credible that he is singularly well put to safeguard Russia's status as a great power, to preserve order and stability at home, to hold Russia's own against an often hostile world, and to withstand an alleged economic, political, moral and potentially military siege by the West. In rhetoric and official communication, Putin emerges as the guarantor of domestic order and stability, as the protector of traditional values, and as a strong advocate of Russia's status and position as a great power. Four times over during a period of 18 years he has won presidential elections already in the first round, and throughout this time he has consistently been rated very highly in regular monthly opinion polls.

At the same time, the legitimation strategies are so tied to Putin's persona that it is hard to see who could fill his shoes and succeed him as strongman and president. At the time of writing there seems to be an evident dearth of potential successors, but regardless of who will eventually step forward with pretensions to lead, it is highly likely that this person will continue to capitalize on the popular appeal of the great power heritage and other nationalist bricolage.

Pointing towards malevolent scheming by ill-wishers abroad and their collaboration with devious actors at home could be appealing solutions for emerging leaders who are hoping to secure a popular mandate. Contemporary nationalism in Russia is the repository where such ideational building blocks are to be found. Despite the importance attributed to nationalist appeals under Putin, particularly at the time of the annexation of Crimea and during the intervention in the civil war in Ukraine, such appeals are likely to become even more significant in the future as Putin's potential successors endeavour to make it to center stage and stay there.

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