Class, Culture, and the Problem of Leadership

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> **The Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity**, by Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020, $99.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780197502938.

Gulnaz Sharafutdinova's book focuses, as a central problem, on the relationship between the political leadership and the people in Russia. It seeks to explain Putinism as a particular type of political regime, or, to be more precise, of regime legitimacy. By mapping out the existing literature and matching it with the results of her field research, she builds up a convincing explanation of Vladimir Putin's popularity as hinging on the emotional bond between the leader and the masses. She highlights the fact that most Russian people experienced the Soviet collapse and the hardships of the 1990s as a traumatic period. The memory of trauma was later reinforced by both the official discourse and the skillful propaganda, especially on TV. In addition to the negative foundation, the new collective identity relies on two legacies of the USSR: firstly, Soviet exceptionalism; and secondly, the image of the so-called hostile surrounding—the view of foreign states and the outside world in general as a source of permanent threat. One would probably not do any disservice to the author by summarizing her key argument through the prism of ontological security—a term that is not used in the book but could fit it very well. By raising the emotional stakes in identity politics, the regime has managed to provide the Russian people with a sense of certainty about the collective Self and the Other, friends and enemies, the past and the future—in other words, with a stable cognitive frame that the concept of ontological security brings to the fore (cf. Kazharski 2020).

Sharafutdinova rejects as essentialist the still popular conceptual frame that blames the failure of the "democratic transition" on *Homo Sovieticus*, with his presumably authoritarian predisposition (for other critical accounts, see Buchowski [2006]; Gabovich [2008]; Aronoff and Kubik [2013], 240–278]; and Sharafutdinova [2019]). Indeed, it is hard to accept the idea that, despite its obvious moral bankruptcy and subsequent political failure, the Soviet regime was so successful in molding "the new Soviet person" that this type of personality would then remain fixed, reproduce itself over generations, and significantly influence the political outcomes. In fact, *Homo Sovieticus* is best understood as an ideological construct defined by its antipode—the individualist *Homo Economicus*, fit for survival under neoliberal capitalism. Evidence is mounting that both are a myth, since no ideal "bourgeois personality" has ever existed anywhere, even in the West. As a model, it is based not on a universally applicable norm but on privilege: those at the top justify their unwillingness to share by discarding the less fortunate ones as "civilisationally incompetent" (Sztompka 1993), paternalistic, and outright lazy.

By sharpening Sharafutdinova's critique in this way, one arrives at two questions that the book invites but does not explicitly tackle. The first is about Russia's uniqueness, and the second is about potential alternatives to Putinist identity. As Klaus Segbers (2021) aptly notes, Putin's mode of rule in the name of ordinary Russians bears striking similarities with self-representations of more overtly populist leaders, not just in East Central Europe but also in the countries that have never

experienced Soviet socialism. These similarities are structural rather than contingent. Many of those leaders, including Donald Trump, Victor Orbán, and Putin himself, were brought to positions of power and wealth by the sweeping reforms during 1980s to 1990s—the dismantling of "really existing socialism" as well as the profound transformation of market democracy. Despite the drastically dissimilar historical circumstances, the reforms in the East and in the West had much in common. They involved a retrenchment of the welfare state (in whatever shape and form it might have existed) as well as privatization and marketization of public services, legitimized by the neoliberal belief in individual achievement and the magic power of the market (Crouch, Eder, and Tambini 2001; Jensen, Wenzelburger, and Zohlnhöfer 2019).

These reforms were bound to produce losers, on a massive scale, and made some form of grassroots resistance almost inevitable. Neutralizing this resistance everywhere involved varying combinations of depoliticization, destruction of economic and social preconditions for solidarity, and open attacks against trade unions and other forms of workers' movements (Kowalik 2011; Shields 2012). The elites in the countries of the former socialist bloc had a unique advantage in being able to position themselves as champions of national liberation and the return to civilization, mainly symbolized by the ambition to join the EU and, in most cases, NATO. The Europeanization logic never fully worked in Central Asia, but it is still extremely powerful in Georgia and Ukraine, and influential in Belarus, Moldova, and Armenia. In those countries that did eventually manage to join the EU, however, the combined push of nationalization and Europeanization was so strong that it postponed the consolidation of the populist opposition well into the new century. Still, as it became increasingly clear that European integration and globalization disproportionately benefited cosmopolitan urban centers at the expense of the periphery, right-wing populists were on the rise everywhere, from Hungary and Poland to Bulgaria and Estonia.

What is then unique about Putinism is not the (largely false) claim to embody "losers' *revanche*" (cf. Sharafutdinova 2020, 114) but rather the clear break with the first post-Soviet decade and its legacies, which was Putin's strategy from the outset. It is indeed true that such a strong othering of the 1990s does not happen in East Central Europe (Pyle 2021a; 2021b), although it is rather prominent in most former Soviet republics, with a partial exception of the Baltics. The audacity with which Putin distanced his presidency from the nation's immediate past (which, to repeat, was a time when he made a splendid career) did pay off, partly because he was lucky to lead the country into a decade of relative prosperity. The othering of the 1990s then solidified as a key discursive opposition underlying national identity, and it has, indeed, been carefully cultivated and enframed by a number of supporting myths, such as the one about the time of troubles in the early 17th century.

At some point, Sharafutdinova quotes Serguei Oushakine's observation that in the late 1990s many Russians found themselves lost between the "old Soviet" and the "new Russian" (Oushakine 2000, quoted in Sharafutdinova 2020, 99). A crucial point to bring home is that the identity that the regime crafted for the people was not a mirror image of the "old Soviet" one. Rather, it was a carefully selected mix of distinctly Soviet elements with traditionalist ones but was still glued together by the individualist rationality of neoliberal capitalism and supported by the economic power of the oligarchy (Matveev 2019). Neither exceptionalism nor the antagonization of the outside world have been distinctly Soviet phenomena: the pro-Trump and pro-Brexit discourses in the USA and the UK, respectively, offer direct parallels. Putinist ideology took on board some elements of Soviet nationalities policy, while carefully destroying any remnants of collectivism, including international solidarity. These were replaced by patriotism, understood as loyalty to the state rather than to the nation as a community of equals. It all but abandoned the idea of gender equality, instead bringing the so-called traditional family to the fore. As for apparent paternalism, while the official propaganda might indeed like to position the state and Putin personally as taking care of the common people, those people learned long ago to not trust any institutionalized social security provisions and to rely on their personal networks and initiative. In fact, dignity and independence are values embraced by a vast majority of Russians regardless of their social status

(Morris 2016). What Putinism does, rather than promoting any form of social parasitism, is link individual dignity and independence with national pride and sovereignty, thus partially compensating for the inequality and injustice that nearly everyone living in Russia is acutely aware of.

This, at last, brings me to my second question. Was this particular mixture of disparate identity elements the only one that could potentially unite the Russian nation after the "tumultuous 90s" and endow it with a sense of ontological security? To put it differently, had the Russians already been Putinist before the arrival of Putin, so that the only thing he had to do was tune in to "the people's soul" and pick the right building blocks for the new identity? Sharafutdinova seems to adopt a view, inherited by constructivists from positivism, of social groups as coherent entities consisting of individuals sharing the same preferences and attitudes. Hence, she describes Putin's supporters as

> the more socially conservative, parochial, and nationalist segments of the Russian public: those who saw themselves as the main losers of the Soviet collapse; those who made a living in struggling industrial cities and monotowns; those who held a grudge against oligarchs and the new Russians with their lavish, cosmopolitan, glamorized lifestyles; and finally, those who had sought a refuge in religion from the cynicism and material values of post-Soviet life. (Sharafutdinova 2020, 146–147)

While this portrait of Putin's typical voter is statistically true, it does not mean that each individual loyalist matches this description, nor that people sharing some or all of those experiences would be pro-Putin under any circumstances. Both this quote and my analysis above strongly suggest that class is at least as important as culture in shaping political preferences of the ordinary Russians. (See also Sharafutdinova [2021]). They see themselves as losers of the post-Soviet transition and Putin as their representative and protector against predatory oligarchs. They are socially conservative because they associate progressive movements with Western influence, which, in their view, destroyed the Soviet system and humiliated Russia. They might be religious and consumerist at the same time because in their view working hard to achieve a better life for one's family is compatible with their religion. All these disparate beliefs, however, are expressions of their deep-seated understanding that the post-Cold War globalization has been profoundly unjust and unfair to them.

Yet there is no necessary link between the experience of injustice and any particular discursive articulation that makes sense of such experience. Putin's success as a leader has been defined by combining some of the commonsensical truths that circulated in late 1990s Russia in a particularly convincing national identity discourse, which claimed to have opened a new chapter in the country's history. The credibility of this discourse was enhanced by the economic prosperity of the 2000s; it was carefully modified in response to challenges, boosted again by the so-called return of Crimea and safeguarded by the increasingly aggressive purging of any genuine opposition from the public space. Its hegemony has been facilitated by the dearth of credible alternatives, with the liberal opposition desperately clinging to its Eurocentric, elitist outlook that blames the "backward" masses for allegedly remaining Soviet in their craving for dignity, equality, and justice. (For an analysis of how the regime benefited from the elitist nature of the liberal discourse about the "two Russias" during and after the protests of 2011–2012, see Kalinin [2017].)

Some of the examples provided in Sharafutdinova's book hint at the possibility of alternative articulations of the same experience. Even in the post-Crimean epoch, Russian people were capable of embracing more open attitudes to the outside world during the 2018 World Cup and mobilizing to assert their dignity against the pension reform. The list can be expanded by adding protests against the rigged 2019 Moscow Duma elections, against the proliferating landfills, and in defense of popular leaders such as Alexey Navalny and the former Khabarovsk governor Sergei Furgal. It would be wrong to believe that the Russian population is divided between losers who support Putin and winners who protest to defend their freedom. The same people who rejoiced at the annexation of Crimea might have rallied to protect the unique landscapes in Kushtau, Bashkortostan, or a park in Yekaterinburg. In our study of the way mass culture reflects commonsense views, Elena Pavlova

and I find that authors of women's fiction often send opposing political messages through their texts, which does not prevent them from being popular with a wide audience (Morozov and Pavlova 2021). Presumably, while seeking entertainment, readers find ways to relate to those contradictory messages as somehow expressing the truth of their everyday experience, making the story more realistic.

   All these facts suggest that popular discontents and the search for dignity can be mobilized in more than one way, around different slogans that might be part of opposing political programs. Propaganda and repression make such mobilization incredibly difficult, but in the long run it seems almost inevitable, as the regime might indeed have reached the limit of what can be secured by conviction and started to resort to coercion. The good news is that a political transformation in Russia does not necessitate generational change: the "old" Russians do not have to be physically replaced to open the way for a new Russia (cf. Sharafutdinova 2021, 411). In this sense, the book's focus on leadership is pertinent in more than one way. Leaving Putinism behind requires a new type of political leadership, which would address the concerns of the so-called losers in a new discursive articulation, perhaps foregrounding justice and equality and thus paving the way for a more open national identity.

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