

## Soviet nostalgia: Return of the repressed

Written by Eric Walberg

---

Recent elections were either a triumph of the will or a confirmation that Russia has found itself, writes Eric Walberg 6/12/7 -- If *Time* magazine had a "country of the year", in 2007 it would surely have been Russia, despite its colourful competition, Iran and Venezuela. All three dominated headlines, tripping up the United States in its 21st century drive for world hegemony. Venezuela held a referendum 2 December which failed by a whisker, while Russia held parliamentary elections the same day confirming its transformation from a weak kleptocracy, servile to US wishes, into a vigorous and confident opponent of the US.

The triumph of President Vladimir Putin's United Russia -- winning over 60 per cent to the Communists' 12, the Liberal Democratic Party's nine and Just Russia's eight per cent -- paves the way for the consolidation of what has been described by Ivan Krastev as "sovereign democracy", a combination of directed democracy and nationalism, and an antidote to the dangerous combination of populist pressure from below and international pressure from above that destroyed the post-Communist Ukrainian, Georgian and Kyrgyz regimes in so-called colour revolutions over the past few years.

In the regime of directed democracy that Putin inherited from Boris Yeltsin, the newly formed post-Communist elites managed to control the electoral process without the usual governing party of directed democracies, such as, say, in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Egypt and many other similar regimes. Their moral authority derived solely from their allegiance to the liberal democracy of the US and the international community, through various aid programmes and pretences to "democracy building". They managed to distract the teeming masses, feeding them "Bush legs" (the ubiquitous cheap US chicken imports) and Western-style commercial pap. Of the ex-Soviet countries, only Belarus managed to escape this scenario with the election of its quirky, charismatic socialist leader Alexandr Lukashenko.

But this could hardly last forever, certainly not for a country that inherited the heavy mantle of the Soviet Union. The backlash to the crony capitalism and phony democracy of Yeltsin gave his appointed successor a chance to wrest control from the powerful oligarchs, restore the power of the state as the engine of economic and social development, effectively nationalising the remaining elite power centres. Boris Berezovsky, Putin's *bête noire* fuming in London, is a good example of the marginalisation of the "offshore elite". Another is Mikhail Khodorkosky, in his unfashionable striped uniform, learning to sew in a Russian jail.

Yes, windfall oil revenues have been key to Russia's rise from the ashes. And the tragedy of Chechnya continues to haunt the Kremlin. The consolidation of the new order is due partly to luck and the road has been rocky. But more important than oil is a powerful mass psychological force at work. Putin's Russians -- and not only Russians, for this applies to Tatars, Uzbeks, Georgians and dozens of other nationalities -- soon tired of being lectured by the US as it

## Soviet nostalgia: Return of the repressed

Written by Eric Walberg

---

proceeded to ignore Russia, and as NATO swallowed up Russia's neighbours and former allies.

Putin's genius was to be able to articulate the resurgence of national pride, the return of the repressed, as people rallied to the Soviet-style anti-imperialist standard which he hoisted. Unlike the boorish, dipsomaniac Yeltsin, who welcomed US advisers to help him dismantle the once powerful Soviet Union, Putin sent them packing and tapped into the subliminal desire of the people to re-identify with a powerful state which advocated law and order both at home and abroad.

The Soviet national anthem was reinstated and people began to take pride in their history. Putin decried the collapse of the Soviet Union at the 60th anniversary of the victory over fascism in 2005 as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century". History books hastily written with American advisers in the 1990s were rewritten to provide a less damning view of the Soviet past. At United Russia's eighth party congress 1 October, Putin said a big victory for it would give him the "moral authority" to hold the government and parliament accountable.

Western liberals have reacted with feigned horror at the elections, pointing at government control of the media, pre-election intimidation of the liberal opposition and Soviet-style rallying around Putin and United Russia (founded in 2001 as a merger of Fatherland -- all Russia and the Unity Party of Russia). The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights announced it would boycott the elections, citing visa delays. However, its Parliamentary Assembly (PA) got all the visas it asked for (40) without any problem and sent an observer team which issued a rather negative report 3 December, citing "merging of the state and a political party", media bias in favour of Putin, difficulties "for new and smaller parties to develop and compete effectively", and reports of pre-election harassment of political parties. So the PA managed to give the party line, so to speak.

There is some truth and a certain irony to the argument that the return of the repressed has brought with it Soviet-style repression for those who continue to embrace Western-style liberalism. But the 1990s experienced much worse intimidation and violence during the reign of the robber barons. The difference was that it was private and mostly went unpunished. It's much easier to point the finger now, but no one in their right mind would go back to the crimes of the Yeltsin years. While the anti-Kremlin journalist Anna Politovskaya was indeed murdered in 2006, her killers were hunted down and prosecuted. What is important is that there are laws now which function. And there is arguably more free thinking in Russia these days than in the West.

## Soviet nostalgia: Return of the repressed

Written by Eric Walberg

---

However, after the painful and unpredictable upheavals resulting from the 1917 Russian revolution, the 1991 counter-revolution, and the flirtation with Western-style liberalism in the 1990s, post-Yeltsin Russia has developed a strong anti-revolutionism along with a fundamental mistrust towards the two core concepts of liberal democracy -- the idea of representation as the expression of the pluralist nature of the modern society and the idea of popular sovereignty as the rule of the popular will.

A referendum in, say, Chechnya would no doubt advocate independence, but it would also lead the way to the break-up of the Russian Federation, and it is just not going to happen. A noisy parliament exacerbating regional and ideological differences was tried and failed spectacularly under Yeltsin. Hence creating a new political party is difficult and parliamentary representation requires a seven per cent threshold vote. Anti-populism and anti-pluralism characterise Russia today. "I voted for Putin because Russia has become a strong country. I lived through that nightmare of the Yeltsin era. It's like night and day," said Sergei Troshin after voting for United Russia.

Putin seems to thrive on populism, but it is a top-down populism. People are sovereign here in as much as they identify with the sovereign and vice versa, and in as much as the ruling elite in league with him is perceived as embodying reason and the national welfare. Putin's enormously popular phone-in meetings with citizens through live-hookup, telephone, e-mail and text messaging are clearly a way to make sure the people have a chance to actively identify with their sovereign.

Elections are not so much an instrument for expressing conflicting interests as for demonstrating the identity of the governors and the governed; not so much a mechanism for representing people but for representing and legitimating power in the eyes of the people. The concept of sovereign democracy embodies Russia's ideological ambition to be "the other Europe" -- an alternative to the European Union, just as the Soviet Union was in its day, and just as Fidel Castro and Chavez's state socialism embodies "the other Latin America" today.

As enchantment with the model of liberal democracy erodes -- just look at the farce of the current US presidential campaign -- the attractiveness of these alternatives grows. A strong sovereign representing the interests of the nation, backed by a loyal elite, smacks of feudalism, but is beginning to look good in the 21st century.

"My view is simply that the modus operandi of Russia is enlightened conservatism," said

## Soviet nostalgia: Return of the repressed

Written by Eric Walberg

---

eminent film director Viktor Mikhailov, an ardent supporter of Putin. "Why are people frightened of patriotism? There's a lot of worrying among the intelligentsia about teaching the basics of Orthodox culture. It's a hysteria. Russia needs authority. Maybe for the so-called civilised world this sounds like nonsense. But chaos in Russia is a catastrophe for everyone."

In reply to Mikhailov, Alexandr Gelman, a playwright who rose to prominence during perestroika, says, "In the Soviet era there was only one party but there were plays and books that supported the idea of democracy. The less democracy, the more cultural figures matter. If the tendency against democracy continues, cultural figures will gain more influence."

"Today we are successful in politics, economics, arts, sciences, sports," trumpets the announcer in one advertisement, accompanied by a brass band and images of Putin and other smiling Russians. "We have reasons for pride. We enjoy respect and deference. We are citizens of a great country, and we have great victories ahead. Putin's plan is a victory for Russia!" Hokey maybe, but true.

The problem, of course, is how power changes hands. So far Putin has refused to pursue a constitutional amendment to allow him a third term though there is pressure for him to do so. His push to make United Russia the establishment party intends to guarantee stability.

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2007/874/in3.htm>