From KGB to Reactionary Nostalgia for Imperial Russia. Who is Vladimir Putin?

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I spent over half of my forty-year diplomatic career as a so-called sovietologist, including during four years at the Italian embassy in Moscow in the second half of the 1970s. Even after my subject-matter, the Soviet Union, disappeared, I continued being interested in Russia, in spite of being busy, professionally, with other areas of the world, and in spite of my absorbing experiences as ambassador to Iran and to India. What I saw, however, is that, starting from the last decade of the XX century, interest in Russia, attention to Russia, study of Russia, have sharply dropped in the West, and especially in this country. It was as if the Russian file had been moved from the desk to the archives. Today it seems to me that we are realizing that doing that was not a good idea, and that the file is back on our desk. The reason has to do mainly with the actions and the personality of one leader, Vladimir Putin.

The man

One should not exaggerate, of course, in attributing historical events and trends to single individuals, and yet individuals are important, and are never the passive instrument of objective historical forces. They do make a difference.

Who is then Vladimir Putin? In brief: born in 1952 in what was then called Leningrad in a modest family (father, a factory worker, mother a cleaning lady and later shop attendant) - a family that had survived the terrible siege of the city, while the father fought in a special fighting unit of the NKVD (later renamed KGB: in a way, there was a tradition in the family...).

He grew up in a tough neighborhood, and had to fend for himself. It is interesting to listen to what he says in his autobiography: “I realized that in every situation – whether I was right or wrong – I had to be strong (…) I learned that I always had to be ready to respond to an offense or insult instantly! (….) I just understood that if you want to win, then you have to fight to the finish in every fight, as if it was the last and decisive battle, you need to assume there is no retreat and that you’ll have to fight to the end. In principle, that’s a well-known rule that they later taught me in the KGB, but I

learned it much earlier in those fights as a kid".

These tough, underprivileged origins explain not only what has been called his "survivalist" character, but also the popular, often crude language he speaks (to the delight of the Russian common man, while the intellectuals are not always thrilled), and his posturing – based on his authentic roots and instincts but consciously employed in a demagogic, populist mode – in his exhibitionist "macho" image: Putin the judo master, the marksman, the outdoorsman, the skier, the member of a fire brigade, and even Putin as a sort of Russian Hell's Angel. (He was once photographed in a leather outfit astride a powerful motorcycle in the company of a rather disturbing fraternity of supernationalistic Russian bikers – some of whom, incidentally, were among the volunteers who went to Crimea to support its incorporation into Russia.)

Tough guy, undoubtedly, but also patient and cunning, able to build the right connections in order to move up. First in the KGB, that he joined at 23 in 1975, and where he reached the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, serving for several year as an operative in Dresden, GDR. Being a Soviet agent in a East Germany played, it seems, an important part in his worldview, insofar as on one hand he saw the weaknesses of the Communist system (even in what was then considered the most efficient country in the Eastern bloc), and on the other was involved – though it is not known in what kind of operations – in the fight against the attempts of the West to take advantage of those weaknesses. Again, a lesson on the need to be strong and effective in order to survive in a merciless world full of enemies.

We don't know the exact date when he stopped being a KGB officer, but in a way one could say that he never stopped being one in terms of priorities, mentality, *modus operandi*. As the Romans would say, *semel abbas semper abbas*. For instance, when in 1990 he moved from Dresden to become Assistant Dean of the University of Leningrad it is reasonable to think that his tasks were not really academic. Incidentally, his academic credentials are at least unclear: his 1997 graduate degree in Economics – *kandidat ekonomicheskikh nauk*, half-way between an MA and a PhD – bears the forbidding title: "Strategic Planning of the Reproduction of the Mineral Resource Base of a Region under Conditions of the Formation of Market Relations", and is difficult to relate it to Putin's previous experience and studies as well as to the fact that during the years when he was supposed to be working on it he was busy as Deputy Mayor of Leningrad as a Deputy to his political mentor, the powerful local boss Anatoly Sobchak.

From then on the ascent of this basically unknown former KGB officer was rather quick. He moved to Moscow in 1996, where he was given a job that was apparently that of an economist within a federal fiscal inspectorate (a

kind of IRS branch), but was in reality suited to the skills acquired in his KGB career: that of keeping an eye on the oligarchs that not only systematically forgot to pay taxes, in those first chaotic years of post-Communist de-regulation and privatization, disregarded the role of the State.

In 1998 he went back also formally to his lifetime vocation, being appointed head of the FSB, the Russian successor of the Soviet KGB. At the beginning of the new century and the new Millenium Vladimir Putin reaches real power, becoming first Prime Minister in August 1999, Acting President of the Russian Federation on December 31 (with the resignation of President Yeltsin), being finally elected President on March 26, 2000.

The mission

Apart from his personal ambition and the peculiar aspects of his character, what defines Putin in terms of ideology, of vision, of political goals?

The first thing one must say is that the goal is not the restoration of Communism and of the Soviet Union. This is what he said on December 30, 1999 – at the eve of being appointed interim President of the country – in a major policy statement titled "Russia at the Turn of the Century"; "For almost three-fourths of the outgoing century Russia lived under the sign of the implementation of the Communist doctrine. It would be a mistake not to see and, even more so, to deny the unquestionable achievements of those times. But it would be an even bigger mistake not to realize the outrageous price our country and its people had to pay for that Bolshevist experiment. [Joke here…] What is more, it would be a mistake not to understand its historic futility. Communism and the power of the Soviets did not make Russia a prosperous country with a dynamically developing society and a free people. Communism vividly demonstrated the inaptitude for sound self-development, dooming our country to a steady lag behind economically advanced countries. It was a road to a blind alley, which is far away from the mainstream of civilization".

When, in a 2005 speech, Putin famously defined the demise of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the XX century", he was not being nostalgic for the Communist system, but regretful for the end of the Russian state, its collapse, its disintegration, its splitting into a number of countries: to use the powerful assonance of the Russian terms, *razpad, razval, raskol*. In the same speech, Putin made this very clear when he said: "And what is the Soviet Union? It is Russia, only it had a different name".

In the West it was long thought that Communist ideology had used the Russian state as a vehicle for turning Marxism-leninism from theory to reality.

For Putin it is the other way around: the Russian state adopted Communism as a tool for the pursuit of its historical goals in terms of power and values. But it was just a phase. Taking stock of the failure of Communism (and not only failure: as it is clear from Putin's Millenium speech, Communism had become not only unsuccessful, but dysfunctional) the Russian state has moved on to another stage, to other political and institutional formulas. Communism ended, Russia remains.

The main focus of Putin's plan when he ascended to the top of the new Russia was to reverse the humiliation of the Russian state during the decadence of the "Years of stagnation" - the Brezhnev years, those that saw the hollowing out of a system that apparently was still powerful, but which was economically losing ground while being ideologically bankrupt. But there was another humiliation to be reversed: the near anarchy of the free-for-all of the 1990s, when – to draw a parallel with Russian XVII- century history, the Time of the Troubles, what the Russians call *Smutnoye Vremya* – the boyars (in this case the oligarchs), paid no heed to a weak czar (in this case the erratic, alcoholic Eltsin), and when foreign powers took advantage of the country's weakness.

This feeling was not limited to Putin, but was widely shared within the country's elites. I remember visiting Moscow in 2000 for a consultation with policy planners at the Russian MFA as well as with international experts, and being struck at the virulence of the resentment for this loss of power and prestige, for what was considered the humiliating subservience to the West, and in particular to the US, on the part of Eltsin and Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev.

In an article published in *The Guardian* in 2012 Gleb Pavlovsky, former presidential advisor, wrote: " Putin was one of the people who until the end of the 1990s was passively waiting for the moment for *revanche*. By *revanche* I mean the resurrection of the great state, in which we lived, which we had become used to. Not a totalitarian one, of course, but a state that could be respected. And the state of the 1990s was impossible to respect."

And disappointment and humiliation was not exclusively felt by elites, but also by the common people, suffering apocalyptic economic upheavals entailing huge social costs especially for those (government employees, retired people) who could not float in the chaotic current of wild, robber-baron nascent capitalism. (A Russian joke of the 1990s: "You know, Ivan, all they were telling us about socialism was just a bunch of lies. But what they were telling us about capitalism was true!").

From the point of view of ideology, from the very start of his power what was important, for Vladimir Putin, was to re-establish the historical, even spiritual

continuity of the Russian state – a continuity that was broken by the Bolsheviks' pretense to build a new system, one that would not only move beyond the past, but would de-legitimate, denigrate and try to eradicate it.

Thus Putin, once a Communist, is now not only post-Communist, but also pre-Communist in its openly *retro* revivalist ideology.

Values here are important, and Putin never made a mystery of his deep conviction that universal values (those that were often mentioned as a point of reference by Mikhail Gorbachev, in his failed attempt to renew the Soviet system) are perhaps nice, but they are not Russian and therefore are not adapted to Russian identity and to the needs of Russian society and state. Which are Russian values according to Putin?

- Patriotism
- Social solidarity (Putin: " It is a fact that in Russia a striving for corporative forms of activity has always prevailed over individualism. Paternalistic sentiments have struck deep roots in Russian society.")
- *Derzhavnost'*, a term that can be translated as a focus on the recognition of, and allegiance to the state as a power (*derzhava*) (implied: big power)
- *Gosudarstvennost'*, "statism", meaning the centrality of the state (*gosudarstvo*) and – it is implied – its hegemony over civil society. (In one of Putin's speeches one finds the following sentence:" For Russians a strong state is not an anomaly which should be got rid of".).

One is reminded of a XIX-century definition of what being Russian means. In 1833 Sergei Uvarov, Minister of Education at the time of czar Nicholas I, invented what was called "the Uvarov doctrine":*pravoslavie* (the Orthodox religion), *samoderzhavie* (autocracy), *narodnost* (closeness to the spirit of the people not as citizens, but as what the Germans would call *Volk)*. A doctrine that was significantly revived in Russian intellectual debates in the late 1990s.

Indeed Putin did not have to invent a new ideology for Russia, but found it ready-made in the intellectual history of the country. It is an ideology that combines the yearning for modernity that inspired XIX-century "Westernist" reformers with the spiritual "Russianness" of their ideological opponents, the Slavophiles.

From the point of view of ideology and values, Putin's New Russia resembles a lot to the Old Russia, and not only for the revival of the two-headed eagle and the pre-Soviet flag.

In his attempt to connect to Russian tradition, Putin has pushed for a revival of anti-Communist emigré thinkers, such as Nikolay Berdyaev, and to his

"Russkaya Idea". Writing in 1948 shortly before his death in Paris, Berdyaev, a deeply Christian and conservative thinker, focused especially on the continuity of "Russian-ness" through the dramatic phases of the history of the country:" There is Kievan Russia, the Russia of the times of the Tatar yoke, Moscovite Russia, Petersburg Russia and Soviet Russia. And it is possible that one day there will be another, new Russia".

Religion, meaning the Orthodox religion, is an essential component of this revival of the past. A revival that goes well beyond the ostentatious piety of the Russian leader, holding a candle during Easter ceremonies at a Moscow church, but includes explicit references to religiously inspired thinkers in many of Putin's speeches.

In 2009 Putin ordered the transfer to a Moscow cemetery (from Switzerland, where he had died in exile in 1954) of the remains of a religious philosopher, Ivan Ilyin. A strong anti-Communist, but definitely not a democrat, insofar as in his books he wrote that the only viable option for Russia were an iron hand and a implacable authoritarian system, and was even "soft on Hitler" to the point that in his 1933 book *National Socialism: the New Spirit* he stressed that one had to understand and support his function as a bulwark against Communism.

On that same year, with another very meaningful gesture, Putin kneeled down in front of the tomb of a White General, Denikin, whose remains he had also repatriated (from the US) and on that occasion recalled - now we can say, ominously - the words of the general warning against the danger of dismemberment of Great Russia and of a loss of "Little Russia", i.e. the Ukraine, defining this possibility as "criminal".

Continuing in this sort of necro-politics, Putin paid homage, in the same cemetery, to the burial site of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the most influential anti-Communist intellectual of the second half of the XX-century, and at the same time a religious believer and a convinced partisan of Russian greatness. The thinker who, in his 1973 "Letter to the leaders of the Soviet Union" exhorted them to abandon Communist ideology but not authoritarianism (Solzhenitsyn doubted that Russians were fit for a democratic, parliamentary system). The weakness of Soviet authoritarianism, he wrote, depended on its being founded on violence and lies, made inevitable by its artificial foundation in alien theories (Marxism), instead of Russian ideas and values, the only possible foundation for a powerful state, strong both internally and internationally. Significantly, in his letter Solzhenitsyn invited Soviet leaders to remember the beginning of World War II when, at the moment of the German attack on Russia, Stalin made a dramatic radio appeal to the Russian people addressing them not, as would have been normal, as "Comrades", but

with the “Brothers and sisters” typical of Orthodox religious language.

Solzhenitsyn’s goal, like Putin’s was the greatness of the Russian state. In a way Putin is replying to Solzhenitsyn’s 1973 letter.

The Russian Orthodox church has always been, historically, on the side of power, for opportunism but also for the theological conviction that – as Saint Paul wrote in his *Epistle to the Romans* , “all power comes from God (*nulla potestas nisi a Deo*)”. This “basic instinct” was put to a difficult test during the years of Communism, at first because of a systematic and violent atheist campaign, but then because of the regime’s suspicion toward any form of civil society. Those years were, for the Orthodox church, a mix of persecution and compromises with the regime, with several high religious officials working notoriously for the KGB. Now the church has found in Putin a long-awaited ideal interlocutor, someone who not only respects the church, but also values its contribution to the strengthening of the state.

A member of the high clergy of the Moscow Patriarchate wrote in a 2007 (not 1807!) article: “In Heaven, a single God and an angelic hierarchy. Human society must be regulated in the same way. It is not coincidental that in the Orthodox world both the Church and the State have normally had a strong supreme power, centralized and usually personified: the power of the Emperor and the Patriarch. The absence of such powers has been an anomaly”.

What is interesting is that this newfound harmony not only touches upon the obvious themes of the Russian state and the Russian nation, but includes a general conservative approach in terms of values and even lifestyles.

When Putin speaks of relativism, he sounds like Pope Benedict XVI. This is what he said in his 2013 Message to the Federal Assembly: “In many countries, today, norms in terms of ethics and behavior are being revised, while national traditions and national and cultural differences are being erased. What is demanded from society is not only a healthy recognition of the rights of each to freedom of conscience, political views and private life, but the obligatory recognition of the equal status, strange as it may sound, between good and evil, concepts that are logically opposed. Such destruction of traditional values “from above” not only produces negative consequences for society, but is radically antidemocratic, insofar as it starts from abstract ideas in contrast with the will of the majority of the people, rejecting such changes and such revision. We know that in the world there are more and more people who support our position on the defense of traditional values – values that for thousands of years formed the spiritual and ethical foundations of the civilization of each people: the values of the traditional family, of an authentic human life, including a religious life, of a life that is not only

material but also spiritual, the values of humanism and the diversity of the world. Of course this is a conservative position. But, to use the words of Nikolay Berdyaev, the essence of conservatism is not that it prevents going forward and higher, but that it prevents going backwards and lower, toward the darkness of chaos, toward a primitive condition."

It is impossible not to note the strong coincidence with a text approved in 2006 by the World Russian People's Council, headed by the Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow:

"There are values that are at a level that is not inferior to that of human rights. They are values such as faith, morality, the sacred, Fatherland (…) One cannot accept situations in which the implementation of human rights subordinates faith and moral traditions, leads to the offense of religious and national feelings and of what is sacred and revered and threatens the existence of the Fatherland."

The system

Although, given the substantially authoritarian nature of Putin's rule, one should be tempted to use the word "regime", it is fair to refrain from the term. For a very simple reason: Putin has been freely, repeatedly chosen by Russian voters in elections that are basically free and fair.

So, is Putin's Russia a democracy? The problem here is one of definitions, specifically the definition of what is a democracy.

Democracy is today an unbeatable brand name, but maybe it would be wise to look into the claims of so many "democrats". In the West we say "democracy" but we subsume under the term many different aspects that go beyond the mere holding of elections, such as the rule of law, respect for minorities, a free press. So, if Putin's Russia is a democracy, it is what we now call "an illiberal democracy", such as the one that is taking shape in Turkey, where Prime Minister and now President Erdogan does win elections, but has a conception and a practice of power that is neither pluralistic nor tolerant, and definitely not respectful of a free press.

The theoretical underpinning of this "illiberal democracy" has been supplied by a concept elaborated by one of Putin's advisors, Vladimir Surkov: the concept of "sovereign democracy", where the adjective, sovereign, has the same function (that of weakening and distorting the substantive) that under Communism was performed by "people's democracy". Sovereign democracy is democracy within the limits and under the restrictions imposed by the State on the basis of its needs and policies..

In short, it can be defined, quoting a very perceptive Russian political scientist, Dmitrii Furmanov, as “imitation democracy”.

From the beginning, Putin’s power has been handled in an autocratic mode, but relying, politically, on an indispensable alliance with two powerful elites: the security elite and the economic elite. For Putin, as he himself made repeatedly clear, the KGB is not only a professional past, but a basic reference and a fundamental tool to maintain the stability and security of the country. Putin is certainly decided to strengthen the military, but he is clearly much closer to FSB than to the armed forces, and it is former members of the KGB, rather than former military officers, that he prefers to recruit for jobs as governors or in the central government apparatus. The reason is the primacy of control, and in particular control over the top managers of the Russian economy.

Putin’s option in favor of capitalism cannot be doubted. His criticism of the failure of Communism, the main reason for its weakness, which turned into a weakness of the Russian state, is very much centered on its economic inefficiency and waste.

He has never reversed the massive privatizations of the Eltsin years. Besides, though definitely not an economist, Putin has always been attracted by modern management (his dissertation is more on management - with quotes from American textbooks – rather than economics) and by the results of a capitalist economy. He has repeatedly stated that a planned economy is less effective than a market economy. Yet, as is always the case for non-democratic forms of capitalism, his is a capitalism without a truly free market. Rather than a “socially oriented market economy”, as Putin likes to define it, what we see today in Russia is a corporatist, crony capitalism where private business flourishes only with the consent and the support of the state.

In Putin’s view, and practice, capitalism, indispensable for creating a modern economy that can ensure the strength of the state, must be controlled in order to prevent it from negatively affecting the power and the unity of the state. The danger is that the oligarchs that have emerged from the ruins of the Soviet Union acquiring astronomical wealth (usually out of the ransacking and private exploitation of natural resources) might start thinking of a political role of their own. This is why Khodorkovsky was cut down and spent over ten years in a Siberian prison, and why, more recently, another Russian tycoon, Evtushenkov, ended up in jail.

Again, echoes of Russian history and of the ferocious, protracted battle between the czars and the boyars. Putin’s control over the economic elite,

however, is not only of a repressive kind. Repression is reserved only to the few who dare to deviate from the basic pact ("you are in business, I am in politics"), whereas normally the system works by cooptation and also by condoned corruption.

The idea, once a conventional wisdom, that non-democratic regimes cut down on corruption by merciless repression should have long been put to rest by the examples not only of individual dictators (including the quintessential free marketer, General Pinochet, who stashed away public funds at Riggs Bank in DC), but of entire systems , such as that of present-day China, where corruption has reached systemic, colossal magnitudes.

In Putin's Russia corruption is repressed only if it becomes a tool for an oligarch's political ambitions or if it becomes dysfunctional to the working of the system. Actually corruption offers a very handy tool for the control of the system insofar as it guarantees a sort of universal exposure to blackmail (ricattabilità) that power can use selectively whenever needed.

Another aspect of Putin's political profile is his interest in having a pulse of popular feelings. In 2006 he once boasted: "I can get a feel for what's happening, get a feel for what is on people's minds". Also in this he is true to his KGB origins. Indeed throughout the Soviet years the KGB was the only part of the regime that knew – beyond all propaganda and rhetoric – the real state of the economy and also the political mood of the country, and it is not coincidental that the (belated) attempt to exit from the devastating years of stagnation, the Brezhnev years, was initiated, before Gorbachev, by Yuri Andropov, another former head of the KGB.

Again, nothing new for Russia, a country where historically public opinion has rarely found avenues of free expression, thus rendering it dangerously opaque for the rulers. In the 1820s the head of the czar's secret police, the Okhrana, said that among its first tasks was "to study what the people have in mind".

Just like economic failure was the decisive criterion to abandon and criticize communism, economic success is, for Putin, the basis on which he intends to validate his stature, and even his historical standing, as a ruler.

Until 2008 there were some substantial facts that could support such a claim. Reversing the economic collapse of the 1990s, Russia under Putin moved, in terms of economic ranking, from the 23rd to the 9th place, growing at a pace that was double that of China.

It was indeed a success, but a very fragile one, especially since it depended -

and still depends - to a very large extent from the price of oil. Post-Soviet Russia has not significantly developed from the point of view of advanced industrial production or of a modern service industry. Someone has said that it is Saudi Arabia without the sheikhs. Paradoxically it can be said that Russia, from an industrial point of view, still relies on plants built in the Soviet times, i.e. relies on a material industrial base that was already obsolete at the beginning of the Millenium, and is now rapidly crumbling.

Russia and the world

If we had not stopped looking at Russia, listening to Russia, the shock of the annexation of the Crimea and the quasi-invasion of Eastern Ukraine (which Putin ominously calls with the Russian XVIII century imperial term "Novorossiya") would not have been such a big surprise.

It is true that, as Putin claims, it was not Russia that altered the status quo in Kiev, and it is also true that the Maidan protest was encouraged and supported by both the US and the EU. But there is little doubt that Putin welcomed that crisis and that destabilization to start implementing a policy that is an intrinsic component of what he perceives as his mission: reconstituting a Russian empire. In some cases annexing territory de facto or de jure (see the cases of Transnistria, Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia), in others through an exercise of threats and pressures to reconstitute around Russia's border an area of control or at least neutrality.

We can of course debate on the wisdom of a policy that provokes a problematic interlocutor giving him pretexts for his bad, aggressive behavior. I am referring, for example, to the 2008 suggestion that Ukraine might join NATO and to the ill-advised announcement of the post-Maidan Ukrainian government that the Russian language would lose its official status in the Eastern part of the country) for his aggressive design. Provoking the Russian bear without knowing how to confront its rage has never been a good idea.

Russia's relations with the West have sharply deteriorated since Putin ascended to power, but his role, though central, does not explain why today his provocative, revisionist, challenging attitude towards the US and Europe are so overwhelmingly popular. A personal experience: when I visited Moscow in June of last year I was struck by the generalized, bitter anti-Americanism also on the part of what were considered liberal, pro-Western intellectuals and international experts. Paradoxically, an anti-Americanism that, in spite of the official propaganda, I did not find in the second half of the 1970s, when I lived for four years in Russia.
[Student room: Hemingway picture; babysitter's apartment: Kennedy picture].
Somebody has written that vis-à-vis the US what we see in Vladimir Putin is a

potent cocktail of grievance and paranoia. Definitely not necessarily alternative, since, as Woody Allen has famously said, also paranoids have real enemies. What is true is that the mood in Moscow is not only neo-imperialist and revanchist, but also – for Russians who had really hoped that the end of Communism would mean the full inclusion in the modern, free, developed world - the product of a regret and a humiliation for not having been included, for not having been respected, in particular by ignoring its security and economic interests in the area of the former Soviet Union.

In 2008 Lila Shevtsova, a vocally anti-Putin political analyst and commentator, wrote: " The first round of NATO enlargments was a sign that the West had made the integration of Eastern and Central Europe its goal, even at the expense of its relationship with Russia".

With the annexation of Crimea and the military pressure on the Ukraine Putin has intended to draw a "Russian space" in geopolitical terms, and at the same time to state that he does not recognize the rules of the international game that are defined by the United States. It is a twofold goal of a revanchist nature, but there is a third one: that of preventing an internal contagion.

The revolt of Maidan square has certainly sent shivers down his spine. That was something much more threatening than the 2012 protest in Bolotnaya Square, a limited protest basically of middle-class, educated, young Moscow citizens against authoritarianism and corruption. It was a re-edition of the sort-lived color revolutions, but with a more threatening potential.

What now? Putin, in his characteristic macho style, shows arrogant confidence not only that sanctions will not really affect Russia, but that the West, and in particular Europe, cannot really afford to alienate Russia, the source of vital energy supplies.

He is not totally wrong, but he underestimates – as some Russians are beginning to say and write – the seriousness of Russia's economic situation, a situation that is characterized by a series of real problems:

1.A sharp slowdown in growth, that in 2014 will be flat

2.A fall of 50% in foreign investment

3.A drop in world oil prices, due not only to the present global economic slump, but also to the effect of the new sources of energy, in particular the shale oil and gas which are making the US self-sufficient in terms of energy, and soon a net exporter

4.A drop in the value of the ruble

5.Capital flight from Russia (75 billion dollars in the first semester of the year)

6.Inflation over 8%

7.Demographic slump, with consequent problems in terms of aging population versus fewer workers.

One measurable effect of these economic difficulties is reflected in the rumors about a possible postponement of the beginning of the implementation of a 770 billion dollar rearmament plan due to start in 2015.

In more general terms, it will be difficult for Putin, because of this economic situation, to preserve the two unspoken but obvious pacts that have brought him to power and have kept him there for 15 years.

With the population at large: " Leave the politics to me, and you will be better off". With the economic circles:" Thrive, prosper, even by cutting some corners, but don't even think of exerting a political role".

If the people realize that they are becoming worse off, and the oligarchs see a reversal of fortunes, it is not sure that the pact will hold. Sooner or later, Czar Vladimir – now apparently popular and unchallenged – might be in for a rough ride.

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