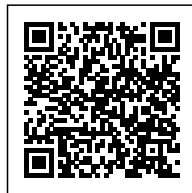


# THE PHILOSOPHICAL SOURCES OF PUTIN'S THINKING

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In his inauguration speech, the President of the Russian Federation promised to "preserve the sovereignty and independence of Russia." This phrase sums up, in many respects, Vladimir Putin's policy and, more generally, his philosophy. A pragmatic man, he refuses to position himself as a defender of a single political doctrine but proposes an ideological synthesis whose slogans could be: patriotism, Orthodoxy, Eurasianism.

On March 25, 2017, *Le Monde* ran the headline: *Putinism, The Specter that Terrifies Europe*: "Vladimir Putin continues his policy of destabilizing the continental order that has guaranteed peace in Western Europe since 1945;" "a very authoritarian regime, which murders its opponents; the violation of international rules with the annexation of Crimea; support for the Syrian regime of Bashar Al-Assad, whose crimes have fueled jihadist terrorism to a greater extent than it has fought them; ethno-religious retrenchment with white Christianity, which would embody the true Europe in the face of a decadent West."

Such have been the phrases circulating in the media to describe Vladimir Putin and Russia.

Born in 1952 in Leningrad, city of Peter the Great and the heart of Tsarist Russia, Putin has been a KGB agent, an official close to Anatoly Sobchak, the liberal mayor of St. Petersburg; then Prime Minister in 1999; acting President after the departure of Boris Yeltsin; and, finally, President in March 2000. If Vladimir Putin appears, according to media and political circles, as an enemy of the West and as a head of state with authoritarian tendencies, it is important to understand that he is, above all, a Russian and a patriot. Marked by the history of his country and fascinated by the heroes that illuminate his past, he has known Soviet totalitarianism, the fall of the Wall, the anarchy of the 1990s and, today, a confrontation, in many respects, with the West. History will undoubtedly remember that his terms of office were those of transition, of the passage from totalitarianism to democracy; or, at least, to a regime that resembles it, and of Russia's return to the concert of nations. Since his re-election in 2012, he affirms and assumes, with confidence, the philosophy that guides his political action.

Vladimir Putin's philopolitical thought seems to rest on three pillars: patriotism, orthodoxy and Eurasianism. This triptych combines history and geography, the temporal and spiritual, the economic and social. In several areas, what the collective memory will preserve as Putinism has profoundly changed Russia by placing it, nevertheless, back in its natural history. Therein lies the paradox: Putinism, if it looks like a break with Russia's near past, repositions an entire people in its original substratum, an

element that we will unpack in this article.

In January 2014, Vladimir Putin distributed three works to senior officials: Nicolai Berdyaev's *The Philosophy of Inequality*, Vladimir Solovyov's *The Justification of the Good*, and *Our Tasks* by Ivan Ilyin. These books characterize the president's thinking and explain, in many ways, his policies. As if to reactivate a forgotten glorious past, Putinism reaffirms the triptych proclaimed by Count Uvarov, Minister of Education under Nicholas I: "autocracy, orthodoxy, national life (*narodnost*)." This is how Uvarov described the foundations of the tsarist regime, in fundamental opposition to the motto of the French Revolution "liberty, equality, fraternity."

### **Love for the Fatherland as a Means of Uniting the People around their President**

Patriotism and unity: two complementary terms in Russia. On this point, Putinism seems to be based in Ilyin's thought, which prioritizes concepts, such as unity, authority and freedom. His philosophy promotes, to begin with, the unity of the social body which should be the work of the head of state, as Plato already recommended. As reflected in the very words of the majority party "United Russia" and the popularity of the President, this principle remains central to the political doctrine expressed by the Kremlin. Through patriotism, the state should unite citizens around it, in the manner of a social contract binding the people to their supreme representative. As illustrated by the education advocated by the Kremlin, this patriotic Russian anthropology is supported and assumed by Vladimir Putin himself. As the heir of the Soviet Union, and as was Yuri Andropov, often compared to Putin, the President manifests his attachment to the "land of the fathers" which, as Ilyin put it: "Russia needs a firm, national-patriotic dictatorship inspired by the liberal idea. Its head must be guided by the idea of the Whole and not by particular, personal or partisan motives... He strikes the enemy instead of wasting time, he leads the people instead of being in the pay of foreigners." This phrase illustrates many aspects of Putinism: love for the land of the fathers, authority and the common good. Three elements inherent in Vladimir Putin's policy.

Surkov, close to the head of state, follows this thesis by developing the uniquely Russian concept of "sovereign democracy," a corollary of the "vertical power." This notion is linked to the doctrine of Eurasianism, which considers that Russia has a political, economic and social specificity that is truly its own. The need for a strong and unique power as opposed to liberal democracy "in the Western style" is the only regime that can allow the common good in Russia since, as Catherine II recalled in her time, "a country of such vastness cannot be governed in any other way than authoritarian." Alongside this notion

of authority and, as Solovyov explains, the notion of hierarchy is inherent to the proper functioning of the City. Dear to common sense and the natural order of things, hierarchy allows the correct development of politics, understood as the organization of the life of the City, and the implementation of projects for the future—the translation of Russian politics over the last twenty years.

A new example of this visibility of patriotism is the army. This institution allows, in fact, to convey the values of almost spiritual rootedness to the land of the ancestors and the inclination to discipline and obedience. Ilyin, again, seems to inspire this ideal when he states that "the soldier represents the national unity of the people, the will of the Russian state, strength and honor."

In his book, Ilyin proposes a real political program that Vladimir Putin seems to concretize more than any other, since his reelection in 2012. To summarize, one sentence expresses his philosophy and marks Vladimir Putin as a spiritual son of the thinker: "We know what is the main task of salvation and Russian national reconstruction: the ascension to the top of the best, men committed to Russia, who feel their nation, who think about their State, voluntary, creative, who offer the people not revenge and decadence, but the spirit of liberation, justice and union between all classes. If the election of these new Russian men is a success and is achieved quickly, Russia will rise and be reborn in a few years. If this is not the case, Russia will fall into revolutionary chaos in a long period of post-revolutionary demoralization, decadence and dependence on the outside."

### **Orthodoxy: A Means of Affirming Conservatism and an Object of Opposition to the West**

The fall of the USSR allowed for a true religious renewal which, today, places the patriarch in the place closest to political power. Conservatism, understood above all as the preservation and promotion of traditional spiritual and political values, is a vector of the revival of Orthodoxy in Russia. This is where Berdyaev comes in when he defends conservatism as a "forward movement." Based on a glorious and respectful view of History, Putinism is linked to the past and uses it to better understand the present. Berdyaev also puts forward the notion of freedom, a Christian value par excellence, and makes a frontal attack on egalitarianism and socialist ideology. He writes that "Western culture is a culture of progress. The Russian people, however, are the people of the end." Although it may not seem so and, contrary to all forms of imperialism, Putinism is based on a corpus of values with a religious and conservative accent.

Solovyov may be seen as the second source of Putinism. Solovyov confronts utilitarianism, which is

based only on the accumulation of goods and material pleasures, and certifies that the good must be based on honor, charity and piety. Human freedom, understood here in its Christian sense, is the "primordial and central principle in the person." Solovyov refers to Ilyin when he states: "Whoever loves Russia must desire her freedom; first of all, freedom for Russia herself, for her international independence and autonomy; freedom for Russia as a unity of Russians and all other national cultures. And, finally, freedom for Russians, freedom for all of us, freedom of faith, of the search for the truth of creation, of work and property." In Russia, freedom is thus conceived as a means of orienting oneself towards the good, of rejecting unambiguously whatever opposes it and, in a more practical way, of keeping away from Russia any form of foreign influence.

As stated by Solovyov and Putin today, the Revolution only created servile men and led, by that fact, to nothingness. However, the West is the daughter of the Revolution and the Enlightenment, which confuse good and evil, truth and lies. Conservatism, which links the future to the past, is understood, contrary to the revolutionary spirit of the *tabula rasa*, as a means of maintaining traditions and transmitting non-rational knowledge, wisdom and customs through history, which forge civilizations. Let us quote Vladimir Putin (Federation Council, December 12, 2013): "Today, in many countries, the norms of morality and customs are re-examined, national traditions are erased, as well as the distinction between nations and cultures. Society no longer demands not only the direct recognition of the right of everyone to freedom of conscience, political opinions and private life, but the obligatory recognition of the equivalence, however strange it may seem, of good and evil, which are opposed in their essence."

The head of the Kremlin also refers to Konstantin Leontiev who, in the image of Carl Schmitt in Germany, defended the "conservative revolution." Critical of democracy, liberalism, equality and secularization, Leontiev promoted a Russia which, returning to the values that had driven it, is and remains properly Russian. He thus developed the idea of a state impervious to any form of outside influence. Vladimir Putin takes up these considerations on numerous occasions, recalling that the Russian conservative doctrine makes it possible to contain Western thought. In short, he proposes a new philosophy that does not necessarily respond to the standards of a new liberal, globalized world, standardized under the tutelage of a deadly Atlanticist ideology, if one listens to the most radical aides of the head of state. As an illiberal conservative, Leontiev states that "freedom, equality, prosperity are accepted as dogmas, considered rational and scientific. But who can tell us that these are truths?"

It is also in the field of morality that Vladimir Putin increases the distance that separates him from his

European neighbors. During a meeting at the Valdai Club on September 19, 2013, he stated that the "Euro-Atlantic countries reject ethical principles and traditional identity: national, cultural, religious or even sexual. They pursue a policy that puts on the same level a large family and a same-sex couple, faith in God and faith in Satan. The excesses of political correctness lead to serious consideration being given to authorizing a party that aims to propagandize pedophilia. People in many European countries are ashamed and afraid to talk about their religious affiliation." Wanting to be the herald of a conservative and traditional Russia, Putinism manifests itself as a besieged citadel or as the last bastion against Western "decadence." As opposed to individualistic Westerners, Putinism here reflects the philosophy of Gleb Yakunin who understood to unite the temporal with the spiritual in order to favor the establishment of a Christian politics. Without seeking to build a form of sacerdotalism at the heart of power, Putinism proposes a moral and religious renaissance in Russia. Is this caesaropapism on the part of Vladimir Putin, who would use the Church for political ends? Is this the true alliance of the Throne and the Altar with the aim of reviving Holy Russia?

### **Eurasianism: Between Russia's Return to the International Scene and the Awakening of Imperial Ambitions**

In his work *Russia and Europe* (1871), Danilevsky states that "the struggle against the West is the only saving means for the healing of our Russian culture." In this ideological conflict that opposes Russia to the Atlanticist camp, Eurasianism and Pan-Slavism are promoted to build a space of resistance against all forms of Western hegemony.

Khomyakov, Kireyevsky and Danilevsky claimed that the Slavs form a "unique people" with their own "cultural codes;" and, based on them, Vladimir Putin defends Eurasianism, a geopolitical translation of Slavophilia. These two notions correspond to the concept of unification and reunification of the Slavs, destined to regroup in a common economic or political space, because of their cultural, religious, linguistic and historical similarities. In a 2013 speech, the head of state stated that "Russia, as the philosopher Leontiev so clearly put it, has always developed as a flourishing complexity, as a state-civilization based on the Russian people, the Russian language, Russian culture, the Russian Orthodox Church and the other traditional religions of Russia." The Eurasian Economic Union, created in 2015 and extending today to Serbia, is a concretization of all this.

Alexander Dugin, close to the President, takes up this idea when he promotes the creation of a continent between Europe and Asia, a bridge between the West and the East, as Berdyaev said: "Russia

is at the center of the West and the East; it unites the two worlds." As Putin stated during the Council for culture and art on November 25, 2003: "Russia, as a Eurasian country, is a unique example where the dialogue of cultures and civilizations has practically become a tradition in the life of the state and society." Putinism thus wants to be at the head of a new space that will counterbalance Western culture, but also and above all, bring together peoples destined to live in harmony. A large part of the Russian strategy in Ukraine is based on this idea.

Gumiliov's philosophy also contains this doctrine: geography creates human groups different from each other. The Slavs have a "vital energy" due to their harsh climate, a temperament which gives them a singular cultural specificity and, by that fact, their own path of development. On this consideration is Putinism based, which moves on the borderline between liberalism and authoritarianism (although one term necessarily excludes the other). The Russian political regime would thus be specific and singular and, therefore, indefinable. For the defenders of liberalism, it is a fatally harmful form of government.

Eurasia is, for Moscow, as its "foreign nearby," a space of privileged interests in which any external intervention will be fought. This is why Russia has always feared the dismantling of the State and the destabilization of its borders. It is in this perspective that Vladimir Putin is keen to preserve the integrity of his country and the space around it, a matter that the West finds difficult to understand. The "humanitarian war" in Kosovo in 1999, in which the Russians were indignant, saying "today Belgrade, tomorrow Moscow," is an emblematic illustration of this spirit which is summed up in this phrase: the union of the Slavs in the face of Atlanticism. This geopolitical doctrine is also affirmed in the Munich speech of 2007, where Vladimir Putin refuted "the unipolarity of the world" and American hegemony. Russia is on the way to becoming a superpower and must "reunite the Russian lands," an expression that takes up the Eurasianist doctrine.

## Conclusion

In short, Vladimir Putin intends to put into practice the expression of Peter Stolypin, the last Prime Minister of Nicholas II, who said "they want a big mess; we want a great Russia." Unfathomable in many respects, Putinism is quite understandable and intelligible in some of its concreteness. Claiming that "liberalism is an obsolete idea," Vladimir Putin defends a properly Russian philosophy against the tide of any form of specifically Western postulates.

Through patriotism, orthodoxy and Eurasianism, Moscow seems determined to regain its label of the

Third Rome. Following Dostoevsky, who was indignant against modern decadence in his works, Putinism is understood to be the precursor of a new conservative philosophy. But it is above all, after Solzhenitsyn and his speech, "A Decline in Courage," delivered at Harvard in 1978, that Vladimir Putin sees himself as anti-totalitarian by rejecting any form of ideology that interprets reality according to preconceived ideas. Indeed, Putinism is pragmatic; but above all it is determined to return Russia to its original historical and cultural substratum. Solzhenitsyn sums up what Putinism opposes: a Western society where "the notion of freedom has been diverted into an unbridled unrestraint of the passions on the side of evil. Human rights have been placed in such a lofty place that they crush the rights of society and destroy them. The reigning ideology that puts above all else the accumulation of material goods and the pursuit of comfort, leads the West to the softening of human character, to the massive decline of courage and the will to defend oneself."

Are we heading towards an official state doctrine in Russia? In a certain sense, and in view of the President's popularity, Putinism has indeed become the new philosophy in Russia. But there is not really a forced civil consensus, even if some media criticize the Russian policy that it is based on propaganda and repression which are, on the other hand, the carriers of the very totalitarianism that Vladimir Putin indisputably rejects. By inscribing its action in the long term and by seeing itself as the representative of a form of divine mission, Putinism will remain the mark of its current custodian; but it will be the doctrine that participates in the return of the new Russia, placing it on a traditional philosophical substratum and clearly directed towards the common good.

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*Etienne de Floirac is a French journalist. This article appears through the kind courtesy of [EL Manifesto](#).*

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***Featured image:** "Passage de la Oka," by Leon Gaspard; painted in 1915.*



