

## Putin as Renaissance Ruler

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The study of Putin’s Russia should be placed in a broad historiographical context, prevailing in the West. While in the beginning of the post-Soviet era, most observers believed that Russia would reach a Fukuyamian “end of history,” the situation is quite different now. At present, Western observers see Putin’s Russia as the manifestation of authoritarianism. While this assumption is undoubtedly true, it does not provide much insight into the regime’s operational model. Here, a comparison with Renaissance and early modern Europe might provide a clue to the operational model of the regime. Similar to early modern European rulers, Putin limits the use of direct and wide use of force, preferring manipulation, corruption, and the targeted killing of his most important enemies. In foreign policy, Putin has tried to avoid wholesale conflicts and broadly uses mercenaries, whose relationships with the Kremlin are downplayed. The similarities between Putin’s regime and early modern European regimes do not mean that their destinies will be the same. In Europe, the Renaissance led to centralized states, whereas in Russia, the “Renaissance” could well lead to the country’s disintegration.

**Key words:** Putin, Renaissance, prigozhin, mercenaries, contemporary Russia

## The Image of Putin's Russia in Broad Historiographic Context

A review of the historiography of certain important subjects is an arduous job. Hundreds if not thousands of books and articles are published on the subject every year. Consequently, one could assume that finding the intellectual mainstream would be a hard, almost impossible, task, not just because of the sheer number of works, but also for other reasons. It is assumed that Western, especially American, intellectuals, are absolutely free to present their views. Thus thousands of different ideological frameworks exist, and the idiosyncratic individuality of each author prevents any generalization. One could assume that to generalize here is as fruitless an endeavor as an attempt to find the common denominator among millions of Americans. This is, however, not the case. Quite a few foreign observers, from Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville to Russian Alexander Herzen – both lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – and such luminaries as Carl Jung (1875-1961), who visited the USA in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, asserted that true individuals, or at least intellectually independent minds, were hard to find. According to them, everyone, or at least those with whom some of these individuals met, spoke and thought in basically the same way. The same could be said about American scholarship. And since it continued to dominate Western scholarship, the views of American scholars were shared by quite a few of those who engaged in academic writing throughout most of the Western world. And their writing on post-Soviet Russia could be framed in the context of general trends in American intellectual views on post-Soviet Russia. The beginning of the post-Soviet/post-Cold War era was marked by a sense of Western triumphalism. It was well represented by Francis Fukuyama's famous essay on "the end of history."<sup>1</sup>

The author of the essay, later enlarged into a book, stated clearly that history shows that Western capitalism, especially in its American modification, is the ultimate goal of humanity. Its arrival is as inevitable as the ultimate triumph of socialism and later communism, in the view of Soviet ideologists. And if some civilization or country follows a different path, it is due to elite ignorance and/or a peculiar ideological hubris, for the members of these elites want to create an ideal society, a kingdom of God on Earth. These attempts to create a celestial Jerusalem by human hands can only lead to disaster, as the example of socialist teaching, mostly Marxism, demonstrated clearly: instead of paradise, the proponents of this utopian paradigm bring society to a hell of despotism and terror. Many Russian/Soviet dissidents elaborated on this view. Alexander Solzhenitsyn's could be here a good example. As a Nobel laureate, and a man of enormous prestige among many Russian intellectuals, even those who did not

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

share his views in their entirety, he noted that Soviet leaders committed unspeakable crimes not because they were brutal, ambitious thugs – institutionalized criminals – but because they were driven by the idea of creating the ideal society. Indeed, Solzhenitsyn noted, if they were people merely driven by the lust for power, such as the protagonist in many Shakespearian plays, they would have killed just a few people, those who would have prevented them from taking power.<sup>2</sup> And if they engaged in killing millions, it was due to their insane millenarian dreams of creating the ideal society. And this noble dream provided them with the justification for their horrible actions.

Some prominent American historians shared these views. Martin Malia (1924–2004), a historian at the prestigious University of California, Berkeley, was among them.<sup>3</sup> It was also implied in this narrative that the delusion is over, and as American and most other Western observers believed, this or that form of Western capitalism would finally triumph. It is clear that most Western, especially American, observers were Fukuyamian in this or that way. Still, a few years after Fukuyama's essay, it became clear that a good part of the global community, including Russia, was not going to follow the Fukuyamian path. Consequently, the Fukuyamian model became increasingly replaced by the Huntingtonian model later. Samuel Huntington, a professor at Harvard University, developed the theory of “clashes of civilization,” which implies that each civilization has enjoyed its peculiar cultural code.<sup>4</sup> The theory was clearly similar to those espoused by Oswald Spengler<sup>5</sup> and Arnold Toynbee<sup>6</sup> in the West and Nikolai Ia. Danilevsky in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russia.<sup>7</sup> As a matter of fact, these views could well be traced to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to the Romantic reaction to the universalism of the Enlightenment. The peculiarity of Huntington's theory was the assumption that civilizations are not only different, but that they cannot live in peace, and are destined to clash. The Huntingtonian theory did not discard Fukuyamism completely: it implied that Western, mostly American, would not compel Western civilization to follow the path of the West in the same way as British guns brought capitalism to India and China; and both Huntington and Karl Marx would have regarded this as a progressive phenomenon. Niall Ferguson, the well-known British economist and historian, supported these views and he was among those who restored historical progressivism in the Western,

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<sup>2</sup> Aleksandr Isaevich Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment In Literary Investigation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974-78).

<sup>3</sup> Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917–1991* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1928).

<sup>6</sup> Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946).

<sup>7</sup> Nikolai Danilevsky, *Rossija i Yevropa* (Moscow: Kniga, 1990 [1885]).

especially Anglo-Saxon, imperial experience. These views were also telescoped into the distant past. Victor Davis Hanson, a historian of Greco-Roman antiquity and a fellow at the Hoover Institution, demonstrated how tough and enlightened Greeks and Romans spread their benign influence in the backwardly despotic Orient, which was not a match for Western military prowess.<sup>8</sup> Huntingtonianism, with other ideological ingredients, was a framework for the actions of “neo-cons“ who dominated the Bush administration. It was assumed here that under U.S. military pressure, non-Western civilizations would be transformed into Fukuyamian societies, regional specificity notwithstanding. This philosophy was the framework for the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Ideological framework shall explain the general views on post-Soviet Russia, at that time led by Putin. It was assumed in this context that Russia could not move along to capitalist democracy of its own will. Thus, at least indirect prodding – full-fledged war would be out of the question due to Russia’s nuclear arsenal – would finally push it towards the “end of history.” After the Ukrainian crisis and increasing problems in the Middle East, where the majority of the population stubbornly resisted the transformation along the USA’s template, the views of a considerable segment of the U.S. elite changed once again. It was assumed that some of these countries were so drenched in their anti-Western cultural traditions that they could not be changed into “normal“ Western-style societies. They became a sort of career criminal who plainly could not be rehabilitated into normal life. Russia, together of course with Red China and Iran, fell into this category. The point here was that the Russian tradition of authoritarian/totalitarian rule had such deep roots that Russia’s transformation into a “normal“ society would be impossible. This vision of Russian political culture was widespread among Russian émigrés during the Soviet era. In this context, there is no conflict between the brutal regime and freedom-loving people who want their liberation, but a perfect symphony between rulers and the ruled. Alexander Zinoviev, mathematician and dissident writer, became known in the West for his book *Yawning Heights*, in which he presented average Russians as disgusting zombies called *ebantsy* (literally, those who are fucked up), who lived in perfect harmony with their rulers. Zinoviev was the proponent of these views already in the Soviet era.<sup>9</sup>

The intelligentsia in this context are hardly spiritually noble sufferers, craving freedom – the view of quite a few Western observers<sup>10</sup> – but disgusting, lecherous

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<sup>8</sup> Victor Davis Hanson, *Makers of Ancient Strategy: From the Persian Wars to the Fall of Rome* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> See Alexander Zinoviev. *The Yawning Heights*. Trans. Gordon Clough (New York: Random House, 1979).

<sup>10</sup> For example, see Peter Reddaway, *The Dissidents: a Memoir of Working with the Resistance in Russia, 1960-90* (Washington D.C.: Brookings, 2020). Some Russian intellectuals who now live in the West also propagated such views. See, for example, Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago’s Children: the last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge:

creatures who are easily managed by totalitarian powers, who bought their loyalty with a few material benefits. This view, that Russian authoritarian/ totalitarian tradition shaped Russia's present, became increasingly popular. Already at the beginning of Putin's tenure, this view started to spread among specialists in Russian studies. Bea T. Kerner, a contributor to the *East European Quarterly*, noted that "Putin's leadership and personality" is a "reflection of Russian political culture" and the voters look for "party preferences that reflect their political culture."<sup>11</sup> He also noted that "early expectations for a full-fledged democracy in Russia were ill-founded and premature and ignored the fact that Russia during the Soviet and tsarist periods never experienced any lengthy democratic period."<sup>12</sup>

This assumption that Russia was doomed to authoritarian rule became increasingly popular as time progressed. Observers noted here that Russia is not in the process of "transition" to democratic "normality" and the very notion of "post-Soviet" Russia as an intermediary state to the Western Fukuyamian model is plainly meaningless.<sup>13</sup> Russian authoritarianism was mostly explained by its appeal to the country's distant and recent past,<sup>14</sup> Russia's vast spaces,<sup>15</sup> and, of course, skillful propaganda.<sup>16</sup>

While propaganda technique varies, and includes a variety of dishes on the menu – from displaying images of Putin as a physically strong, macho leader<sup>17</sup> to evoking Russians' memories of their great past – playing the nationalistic card was noted as the

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Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Beat Kerner, "Putin and the Parliamentary Election in Russia: the Confluence (*Sljaniè*) of Russian Political Culture and Leadership," *East European Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2004).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>13</sup> Vladimir Gel'man, "Post-Soviet Transitions and Democratization: Towards Theory Building," *Democratization* 10, no. 2 (Summer 2003); Alexander Etking, "Post-Soviet Russia: The Land of the Oil Curse, Pussy Riot, and Magical Historicism," *Boundary* 2 41, no. 1 (2014).

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Libman and Anastassia V. Obydenkova, "CPSU Legacies and Regional Democracy in Contemporary Russia," *Political Studies* 63 (April 2015); Shaun Walker, *The Long Hangover: Putin's New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> Nina L. Khrushcheva and Jeffrey Tayler, *In Putin's Footsteps: Searching for the Soul of an Empire Across Russia's Eleven Time Zones* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2019). Here, the book's authors instinctively follow Montesquieu, who asserted that political arrangements are predicated on geography and that large states need monarchies.

<sup>16</sup> Vitalii Gorokhov, "Forward Russia! Sports Mega-Events as a Venue for Building National Identity," *Nationalities Papers* 47, no. 2 (March 2015); Matthew Luxmoore, "'Orange Plague': World War II and the Symbolic Politics of Pro-state Mobilization in Putin's Russia," *Nationalities Papers* 47, no. 5 (September 2019); Nelli Babayan, "Putting 'Traditional Values' into Practice: the Rise and Contestation of Anti-homosexual Propaganda Laws in Russia," *Journal of Human Rights* 13, no. 3 (July-September 2014); Samuel A. Greene and Graeme B. Robertson, *Putin v. the People: the Perilous Politics of a Divided Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> Adam G. Goodwin, *Putin: a Man's Manual of Manliness* (Hoddesdon, U.K.: Portico, 2019).

favorite dish.<sup>18</sup> Those who pointed to Putin's use of the nationalistic card, including grass-roots nationalism, also noted that Putin was quite cautious in dealing with this phenomenon. Indeed, grass-roots nationalism could easily get out of control, and therefore the Kremlin usually dealt harshly with those who tried to act independently from the Kremlin.<sup>19</sup> Thus it is emphasized that Russia is doomed to be authoritarian, due to many factors, mostly historical tradition, which is exploited by cynical and artful leaders. Russia could exist only in its "overpresent," the historical developments just lead to changes in its external political or ideological entourage, not its internal cultural kernel. Thus, all discussion about the country's "transition" should be put on hold. In this narrative, Russia emerges as absolutely different from the democratic West, especially the USA.

Whereas Russia had been populated by slavish *ebantsy*, if one remembers Zinoviev's definition, the USA is populated by citizens who deeply internalize democratic principles. It is also implied in this reading that a good part of the globe, especially Europe, is fully embracing these principles. Russia, with its totalitarian/authoritarian tradition, has emerged as a pariah among nations. Here, Russia shares the same rank in the pecking order as Islamist Iran, Red China, and North Korea. In a more benign interpretation, it means that Russia belongs to the Orient as a peculiar civilization. This view also has a long history; the Orient here, of course, has also a pejorative meaning. Still, as time progresses, the views on Russia have continued to be modified. The rise of "populism" in the West was a major factor. While the literature on "populism" is growing, the authors are not always able or willing to elaborate on the difference between populism and democracy, and alternatively created such oxymorons as "illiberal democracies."<sup>20</sup> Indeed, this combination implies that the "people's will" – so recently seen as the embodiment of all virtue and final legitimization of the government's actions – became questioned. The people's will, which in its ultimate, real-life application, benefits the present-day socio-economic elite, is the manifestation of "democracy" – a benign phenomenon. At the same time, the same "people's will" became the malignant "populism" if it, once again in its real-life implications, violates the economic and political interests of the elite. In a more general reading, the notion of "populism" implies that people might well

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<sup>18</sup> Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud, *Russia Before and After Crimea: Nation and Identity, 2010-17* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019); Suzanne Loftus, *Insecurity & the Rise of Nationalism in Putin's Russia* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Robert Horvath: "Russkii O obraz and the Politics of 'Managed Nationalism,'" *Nationalities Papers* 42, no. 3 (2014).

<sup>20</sup> David White and Marc Herzog, "Examining State Capacity in the Context of Electoral Authoritarianism, Regime Formation and Consolidation in Russia and Turkey," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 553.

want to be ruled by a dictator, and this attitude need not be directly connected with an authoritarian or totalitarian tradition. Indeed, in this narrative, the Russian authoritarian virus could affect even the West, including the USA. Thus the benign “discourse” of democracy – one shall be reminded that the emergence of Russian authoritarianism was mostly related to harmful ideology or traditions, its “discursive aspect” – could be replaced, even in the West, by the malignant “discourse” of authoritarianism. And thus, the way that Russian autocrats rule spreads its influence.<sup>21</sup> Russia’s alleged malicious influence – a considerable segment of American society believed that Trump’s victory was due to Russian influence – led to some extraordinary conclusions; at least that they would have been seen as extraordinary a few decades ago. Indeed, some American political scientists came to the conclusion that democracy as it is usually understood – e.g. the system in which the people elect their officials – should be either abolished or dramatically changed. Not all people, most of whom are “deplorable” – if one would use Secretary of State and presidential contender Hillary Clinton’s expression – should engage in the election. Only the educated and responsible few should be granted the right to vote. Jason Brennan elaborated on this in his book, *Against Democracy*, published with a new preface by the author, by Princeton University Press, 2017.<sup>22</sup> There are no revelations in the book. Even those who have a rather perfunctory knowledge of the history of philosophy and political doctrines know that such a notion had circulated widely in ancient Greece (Plato) and the Orient (Confucius). The importance of the book is not thus in the novelty of his ideas, but in the fact that it was published by one of the leading university presses, and that the manuscript presumably got through a rigorous peer review. It seems that quite a few top scholars approved of the author’s findings. And one assumes that a few decades ago, the same reviewers would not have read even a few pages of the manuscript before sending quite a negative report to the press. Thus the West, in this narrative, is also sliding into authoritarian “populism” unless the educated elite — the only protectors of true “democracy” — could guard it from the “deplorables.” And the reason why the “deplorables” have discarded “democracy” and have slid into “populism” is usually not elaborated upon. It is implied that wrong values and harmful propaganda made them follow the wrong road.

What is Russia’s place in this context? It is clear that it is firmly entrenched in the authoritarian model due to its authoritarian cultural genes and harmful “discourse” of the elite; Moscow also spread the ideological germs of authoritarianism globally, and the USA is one of the victims. Masha Gessen elaborated on these ideas in several of her

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<sup>21</sup> Nelli Babayan, “The Return of the Empire? Russia’s Counteraction to Transatlantic Democracy Promotion in its Near Abroad,” *Democratization* 22, no. 3 (May 2015).

<sup>22</sup> Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

books and articles. On one hand, she notes that Russian history doomed the country to authoritarianism. The Russian masses, pathetic “deplorables,” are quite happy to be slaves of autocratic brutes. Still, the USA is not much better. Trump, the representative of the USA’s “deplorables,” is Putin’s ideological bedfellow, and the current coronavirus epidemic actually encourages his authoritarian instincts.<sup>23</sup> Bernie Sanders, his opponent, is not much better in her view. He recognizes the positive aspects of Castro’s Cuba, such as the introduction of free universal medical services. Those who praise Cuba, she states, overlook the brutality of the regime. Praising Cuba or the USSR for some of their achievements would be the same as praising Nazi Germany for its successful cancer prevention progress. It was clear that she views Sanders’ supporters as not very different from Trump’s. They are the same disgusting “deplorables,” craving dictators, but plainly on the left. Thus, both in Russia and the USA and, implicitly, in other parts of the world, the minority, those who truly cherish liberties and related true “democracy” are surrounded by a sea of authoritarian-minded “deplorables.”<sup>24</sup>

Thus, increasing numbers of Western observers see the world in the context of new interpretations of the “end of history” and it is quite different from what Fukuyama envisaged a few decades ago; and their numbers will undoubtedly increase as economic woes worsen. Indeed, openly authoritarian or even totalitarian views could emerge if the economic crisis were to parallel the Great Depression. The comparative study of authoritarianism is even less developed than the comparative study of totalitarianism. This is mostly because authoritarianism was seen, especially in the beginning of the post-Cold War era, as just the transition to the “end of history.” Authoritarian regimes, seen in the context of “discursive” framework, were not usually regarded in their detailed specificities and how they operate. Exceptions are few,<sup>25</sup> and most analyses, especially those of journalists, are often quite simplistic.<sup>26</sup> There are also not many works that provide a template for understanding the nature of authoritarian foreign policies. And the explanation often places them in the context of discursive terms. It is assumed here that authoritarians are usually more aggressive than democratic rulers, reflecting their penchant for using violence in dealing with domestic challenges. For example, Michael W. Doyle noted, “The best statistical evidence indicates that “libertarian” or

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<sup>23</sup> Masha Gessen, “How the Coronavirus Pandemic Fueled Trump’s Autocratic Instinct,” *The New Yorker*, March 13, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> On the application of this theory to Russia, see: Ilya Mateev, “The ‘Two Russia’s Culture War: Construction of the ‘People’ during 2011-2013 protests,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 113, no. 1 (Winter 2014).

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, David White and Marc Herzog, “Examining State Capacity in the Context of Electoral Authoritarianism, Regime Formation and Consolidation in Russia and Turkey,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Ryan Cooper, “Tyranny is Fueling the Coronavirus Pandemic,” *The Week*, February 24, 2020.



“democratic” states appear to be more war-prone. War-proneness is not, however, a measure of imprudent aggression, since many wars are defensive.”<sup>27</sup> The USA’s increasing aggressiveness by the beginning of the post-Cold War era was because of the country’s internal evolution. The USA’s foreign policy became more aggressive because of an increasing authoritarian streak in the USA’s domestic policy.<sup>28</sup>

As in the case with authoritarian internal domestic policy, international relationships are often placed in the context of values, acquired ideologies, the command of *realpolitik* and similar matters. The author of this paper certainly does not disregard all of the variables in shaping foreign policies of the great powers. Still, he believes that the major variables should be in internal domestic policy, related resources for achieving foreign policy goals, and elite understanding of the limits of these resources. The entire socio-economic and political body should be seen in its unity. Thus, the dissection of authoritarian bodies should be holistic to understand how the mechanism truly works, and here, a historical analogy could be quite useful.

Historical examples can elucidate the nature of entire organisms and show what is accidental for these particular socio-political species, and what is common to similar societies, regardless of their placement in different historical periods and different countries. I believe that Putin’s Russia has great similarities with the Renaissance and early modern Europe. Similar to the leaders from those periods, Putin has no charisma, traditional authority, and other attributes of stable power, at least in the context of the well-known Weberian paradigm. Similar to many rulers of early modern Europe, Putin’s power is limited, and he has become instinctively Machiavellian in both domestic and foreign policy. He has no metaphysical goals or grand plans, either for Russia’s internal or foreign policy. Consequently, Russian foreign policy has become fluid and uncertain, and mercenaries without formal affiliation with the Kremlin have become quite important in the Kremlin’s foreign policy design. And here Putin is also quite similar to early modern rulers.

### **The Role of Historical Analogy: Importance and Limits**

The political player often appeals to the past, not so much to be “taught by history” as to justify their actions. Bolsheviks, for example, engaged in a reign of terror not because they had read about the French Revolution, but because of the situation on the ground:

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<sup>27</sup> Michael W. Doyle, “Liberalism and Foreign Policy” in *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*, edited by Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield and Tim Dunne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 54.

<sup>28</sup> Mark J. Hetherington and Jonathan D. Weiler, *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

they were being severely pressed by their rivals and the general chaos. The French Revolution provided them with a convenient argument as to why the revolutionaries should deal mercilessly with their enemies. External similarities between events in the past and the present do not always imply similarities in the future. The Red Terror of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Civil War, and similarities between Soviet Russia in the 1920s and France under Thermidor induced many observers to believe that the Russian Jacobins (Bolsheviks) would end the same way as the French Jacobins, and that the capitalist society would be restored. Instead of this happening, Stalin eliminated any trace of private property in the “means of production” and made the USSR quite similar to Oriental despotic societies of the past. This ossification of the USSR induced many Soviet intellectuals to believe that, similar to ancient Egypt or the late Roman empire, the Soviet regime would survive for centuries, if not for millennia, without any substantial change. Still, it collapsed after a few decades.

Historical analogies should not necessarily be connected with native history. Indeed, some Russian intellectuals compared the Russian Revolution(s) and Civil War with the Time of Trouble, Russian events at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Still, most intellectuals find more appropriate analogies in French history, especially the French Revolution.

It is clear that historical analogies have their limits, and that historical events never repeat themselves to a tee. One must also be cautious in attempting to predict the future on the basis of the past and remember that events could be described in the context of several historical models and that each of them could address particular aspects of a present-day phenomenon. For example, the socio-economic system of the Stalinist USSR could well be described in the context of Oriental despotism, whereas ideological vigilance and campaigns against people with unorthodox views could be compared with the Spanish Inquisition. Still, with all its limitations, one can assume that some periods from the past are more appropriate than others as explanatory models. Historical models can elucidate some aspects of a phenomenon, at least at a given moment in time, and help in understanding the work of social and political machinery. Historical analogy also helps one to see a phenomenon in a holistic sense, elucidating its attributes through its connections and interdependence. The past can reveal what is peculiar in a given phenomenon and what belongs to other species. Taking these considerations into account, I suggest that Putin’s regime, at least in its present form, is quite similar to those in Renaissance and early modern Europe. Like the rulers of that time, the present regime is not all-powerful, and makes wide use of political manipulation. Instead of open and mass repression, it prefers artfully arranged murders and, while not foreign to direct application of force in solving its problems, it often prefers the use of mercenaries,

who lack direct connections with the Kremlin. If one applies the Machiavellian idea that rulers should combine the characteristics of the fox and the lion to deal with a problem (Vilfredo Pareto also developed this idea), Putin would, in most cases, act more like a fox than a lion.<sup>29</sup> While our article deals with several characteristics of Putin's regime, which make it similar to those of Renaissance rulers, the major focus will be on the use of mercenaries in dealing with the Middle East and African challenges.

### **Putin's Russia and Renaissance Europe**

History has never repeated itself to a tee. Still, some historical analogies might be useful in understanding modern societies and their evolution. Soviet society, in which the central government was in control of all "means of production," was quite similar to Oriental despotism, and this was noted by Karl Wittfogel (1896-1988) some time ago.<sup>30</sup> Another analogy could explain the trajectory of Gorbachev's and Yeltsin's reforms. They could well be compared to the development of feudalism, when local barons tried to "privatize" their land, which required a weak king. Their desire to protect their "liberties" was quite similar to the desire of post-Soviet oligarchs, who also rally to fight "despotism" and praise "freedom." One can also find historical analogies to Putin's regime. Indeed, Putin's role can be compared to early modern rulers, especially Renaissance rulers in Italy. These rulers' power could not fully be described in the context of the well-known Weberian definition of power. Renaissance rulers were definitely not "traditional authorities." They were also not "rational authority," which, in the modern West, implies election and, implicitly, the free choice of individuals to install authority over them. They were also not, in most cases, "charismatic authorities." They were not the founders of religions or quasi-religions, as was the case with Soviet and Chinese leaders. Putin and similar rulers are quite similar to early modern European rulers, especially Italian, from other perspectives as well. Not only were quite a few of them of humble origin, but many other members of the local elite did not recognize them as being superior. They were equal to other members of the elite by all characteristics, and certain individuals became rulers, in their view, only because of luck and, thus, could easily be replaced. The relationship to the ruler was thus purely "anomic," to use Emil Durkheim's term, had no internal restraints, and was based on the simple and,

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<sup>29</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *The Mind and Society*, edited by Arthur Livingston (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935).

<sup>30</sup> Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press 1957).

one may state, animal-type instincts, such as fear, greed, etc.<sup>31</sup> And if neither fear nor benefits were present, the societal structure crumbled. This animal-type, anomic type of behavior, the “*bellum omnium contra omnes*,” or war of all against all, as Hobbes put it, was widespread.<sup>32</sup> In order to control these “anomies,” the state should be Hobbesian, as in his *Leviathan*. Still, in most European states, this *Leviathan*, these absolutist states with often “pro-totalitarian” features, were only in the process of creation. Thus their ability to use overwhelming force in dealing with potentially treacherous elite and the general masses was limited. Due to the anomic nature of the society and weakness of the social bonds among the people, the state could not ask the masses to serve in the army for some abstract patriotic goal. This was the case even in Renaissance Italy, where the residents of the cities were not just free, but from a legal point of view not very different from one another. One might state that a sense of patriotic pride and peculiar patriotism emerged. Still, it was not strong enough to inspire citizens to fight and die for their city-state. They could fight only as mercenaries, those who are paid for work and related risk. One might also add that these mercenaries were often foreigners, and it was only payment which induced them to fight. At the same time, most Italian city-states, even rich ones such as Florence, had limited resources to build strong military machines. This was not only due to the still comparatively small size of the state and limited revenues, but also because they were already bourgeois states, and often could not squeeze taxpayers, as would be done by totalitarian states in the future, when tiny North Korea could muster a huge army and nuclear arsenal by starving quite a few of its citizens. Thus, Renaissance leaders were limited in the application of force, both in internal and foreign policy, and could rule only through a variety of manipulations. They could rule only, or at least predominantly, as Machiavellian. It was not accidental that Niccolò Machiavelli, author of the famous *The Prince*, worked in Renaissance Italy.<sup>33</sup> The inherited weakness of most Renaissance rulers explains how they dealt with their enemies, both internal and external. For example, they loved assassinations.

They were masters of the craft, and used not just simple murder but often dispatched enemies with a variety of poisons. These assassinations were of much use both in dealing with internal and external enemies and also implied a well-developed espionage web, to acquire good information about the situation on the ground. Renaissance rulers also loved to “outsource” the work of dealing with their enemies to somebody else by using skillful diplomacy. This was, of course, not just characteristic of Renaissance rulers, and has been in use for many powers in the past. Still, the popularity of this way

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<sup>31</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press (1897) [1951]).

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Hobbes. 1588-1679. *Leviathan* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968).

<sup>33</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, 1469-1527. *The Prince* (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1981).

of dealing with one's enemies depends on the culture and particular period in history. In some cases, Machiavellianism was practically ignored.

During the early years of the Cold War, for example, the USA did not rely as much on diplomatic manipulation as on rough force, plainly because Washington's "neo-cons" believed that the USA had no military peers, barring, of course, direct nuclear conflict, a rather unlikely catastrophic event. Robert Kagan, one of the leading "neo-cons," elaborated on the preference of military force in his *Of Paradise and Power*.<sup>34</sup> Here, he stated that effeminate Europe represented Venus, because of the European elite's penchant for diplomacy, whereas the USA was realistically-minded Mars, who understood the importance of rough force. Despite seeming to be successful, as it appeared to be at the beginning of the venture, invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan did not convince everyone that discarding Machiavellian-type manipulation was a wise idea.

Edward Luttwak, the well-known historian and unorthodox political scientist, stated that the USA's problems stem from Washington's people not mastering the skill of manipulation and "outsourcing" dealings with its enemies. This was due to the fact that the USA followed the Roman empire model, with its reliance on force, whereas it should be following the Byzantine model, which implied the use of manipulation of their enemies.<sup>35</sup> If one would follow Luttwak's template, the Renaissance Italian rulers were possibly more Byzantine than the Byzantines themselves, for they used intrigue and contract murders in dealing with foreign threats more than the Byzantines had.

## Putin as Renaissance Leader

If we applied this model to Putin's Russia, we could see that the regime in Moscow has many similarities to the early modern European model, especially Renaissance rulers. Putin is clearly neither charismatic nor a traditional ruler. He is hardly a totalitarian Leviathan-type despot, as some observers believe.<sup>36</sup>

The "rational" aspect of his authority is also limited. He came to power in the wake of the "unhinged 1990s" (*lichie devianostye*) for a variety of reasons. Still, one of the major reasons for his original support, among the elite and populace alike, was his attempt to stop the "*bellum omnium contra omnes*"; in the Russian case, it was violent

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<sup>34</sup> Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

<sup>35</sup> Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2011).

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Andrey Semenov, "Taming the Leviathan: How Russians Learn to Counter the State," *Ponars Eurasia* (March 2020); Sergei Medvedev, *The Return of the Russian Leviathan* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).

crime and general push toward anarchy. By 2019 and 2020, the appeal had become increasingly unworkable as the society had basically stabilized. It is true that potential regionalism and even separatism still exists. Yet the level of violent crime apparently had subsided, and, for example, the residents of Moscow could be much safer than residents of some American cities, such as Chicago, where up to a thousand people are killed in one year. Putin is thus not seen as indispensable for a considerable segment of the Russian population, both the elite and *hoi polloi* alike. Putin himself understands this well and has adjusted his internal and foreign policy accordingly. Putin definitely does not exclude the large scale use of rough force in case of mass upheaval. This was the reason why he created a huge National Guard. In case of dire emergencies, he could also rely on Ramzan Kadyrov, the Chechen viceroy, who professed his absolute loyalty to Putin; and his Chechen detachments could be used as the force of last resort in case of emergency.

Still, Putin understands that spilling Russian blood on a large scale is dangerous, and – due to comparatively weak support – could be fatal to him. Consequently, he has tried to maintain restraint in dealing with the rare case of visible internal opposition, e.g. mass demonstrations. It is true that riot police have violently dispersed demonstrators. Still, they treat demonstrators much more leniently than riot police in many Western countries, such as France, where during the recent Yellow Vest demonstrations, demonstrators were mercilessly beaten on a large scale. Putin's foreign policy is also relatively limited, regardless of many Western observers' assertions that Putin is nothing but an insane imperialist who would risk even a nuclear holocaust to conquer the states of the former USSR, and extend Russia's global presence. Still, this is not the case. As is true with internal policy, the regime feels keenly restrained. There are several restraints in place. To start with, Putin's regime is not totalitarian, and despite all the "distortions of the market," private property is quite entrenched, as the regime moves toward more privatization and markets. And here, Putin's Russia is quite different from totalitarian China, where Xi Jinping's rise led to increasing government control over the "means of production." Thus the regime cannot squeeze the society, including the oligarchs, his major power base, in totalitarian fashion, to build formidable military machines and engage in major wars, risky and expensive enterprises. Secondly, the regime differs from totalitarian regimes, such as North Korea, in another respect. It wants Russia to be incorporated into the global concert of powers. Indeed, the oligarchs, as well as the emerging Russian middle class, is tightly connected to the West, especially Germany, by their economic interests. Russia's image as a dangerous imperialist, bound for European and, even more so, global conquest, would hardly help Moscow build a profitable economic relationship with Europe.

Finally, the regime's pragmatism is also manifested in Putin's Judeophilia, displayed in many ways. The Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow serves as a good example here. One might add that Putin allegedly contributed his monthly salary to fund the museum's construction. This peculiar Judeophilia is absolutely unique in Russian/Soviet history. Indeed, even early Bolsheviks, quite a few ethnic Jews, patronized mostly assimilated Jews, who had lost or downplayed their ethnic affiliation and connection with a distinct Jewish culture and religion. In Putin's Russia, Jews are patronized as a distinct religious and cultural group. While this is unique in Russian/Soviet history, tolerance for Jews was not unusual in early modern and Renaissance Europe, and in some places such as Venice and especially Holland, they prospered.

All of these reasons make Putin's regime similar to "Renaissance" rulers, and therefore instinctively Machiavellian in many manifestations of its internal and external policies. The application of open violence was downplayed. Manipulation, corruption, and other non-violent means to pursue goals are preferred. If violence is used, it must be discreet, and the authorities' role in the violence must be obscured as much as possible. This has been the mode of operation for the entirety of Putin's rule since its incipient stage and is clearly seen in internal policy.

Putin's rise was marked by a spectacular terrorist attack in Moscow when several apartment buildings were blown up with several hundred people instantly killed. Authorities accused Chechen terrorists. Still, it was clear to impartial Western observers, and not only them, that the act was the handiwork of Yeltsin's inner circle, with Putin as a part of it.<sup>37</sup> Later during his rule, Putin consistently sent assassins to murder enemies who lived in Russia or who had emigrated abroad. Several cases gathered worldwide attention.

There was, for example, the case of Alexander Litvinenko, who directly implicated Putin in the apartment bombing and who was murdered via the use of radioactive materials; Boris Berezovsky, one-time Yeltsin and Putin confidant and later his mortal enemy, and Sergei Skripal, former security agent, suffered the same form of retaliation. Both Skripal and Litvinenko were poisoned by polonium, which could hardly have been obtained by people who were not related to Russia's security agencies. In Litvinenko's and Berezovsky's cases, the reason for their deaths (or would-be death; Skripal survived) was their issues with the Kremlin. Some of the cases were not officially declared murder, and for several reasons. The unwillingness of the British government to attribute

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<sup>37</sup> David Satter, "The Unsolved Mystery Behind the Act of Terror that Brought Putin to Power," *National Review*, August 12, 2016; John B. Dunlop, *The Moscow Bombings of September 1999: Examinations of Russian terrorist Attacks at the Onset of Vladimir Putin's Rule* (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2012); Lamar Salter, Linette Lopez and Alana Kakoyiannis, "How a Series of Deadly Russian Apartment Bombings in 1999 led to Putin's Rise to Power," *Business Insider*, March 22, 2018.

Berezovsky's death to Russia was due to London's reluctance to facilitate a diplomatic scandal. It was not just people in the West who were targeted. The Kremlin's long hand reached former Eastern European allies as well. In Bulgaria, for example, "journalists and researchers concluded that as many as eight Russian military intelligence (GRU) officers may have been involved in the Bulgarian arms dealer's poisoning by an unknown nerve agent."<sup>38</sup> As in the case of the UK, Bulgaria did not make a big scandal, and the reason was quite similar to that of the UK. Like London, Sofia did not want diplomatic complications.

Another reason was that, in true Renaissance fashion, Russia's intelligence community used an extremely sophisticated recipe of poisons which, while deadly, could not be easily detected.<sup>39</sup> Putin's enemies were not only Russian expatriates; their Western helpers were also targeted.<sup>40</sup> Most Western observers saw Putin's hand in all these murders, and some of them indeed implied that, as in the Renaissance, these murders, because of their sophistication, were a peculiar form of art.<sup>41</sup> One might also state that the Kremlin created a special group to engage in murders abroad.<sup>42</sup> Needless to say, Russian journalists are convinced that Berezovsky was killed by the Western intelligence community.<sup>43</sup>

Putin's foreign policy also demonstrates Renaissance attributes. As in the case with Renaissance kings and other rulers, on occasion he has engaged in employing rough force. Still, he apparently does so with hesitation, when he is hard-pressed, or when Moscow can "outsource" the hardest, bloodiest and dirtiest work to someone else. In

<sup>38</sup> Kseniya Kirillova, "Russia Faces New Demands and Conditions from Bulgaria," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 17, no. 22 (February 19, 2020).

<sup>39</sup> Mary Kay Linge, "These 8 Russian 'Traitors' Died Suspiciously on Foreign Soil," March 17, 2010; "Taina Raskryta: Putin Poslal Killera k Berezovskomu," *Detali* (<https://detaly.co.il/berezovskij>), February 16, 2020; Heidi Blake, "How the Kremlin's Assassins Sowed Terror through the Streets of London while British Authorities Scrambled to Stop Them," *BuzzFeed*, November 19, 2019; Heidi Blake, *From Russia with Blood: the Kremlin's Ruthless Assassination Program and Vladimir Putin's Secret War on the West* (New York: Mulholland Books/Little, Brown and Company, 2019); Dmitry Volchek, "Lisitsa zalezla v Kuriatnik," Radio "Svoboda," November 16, 2019; David Filipov, "Here are 10 critics of Vladimir Putin who Died Violently or in Suspicious Ways," *The Washington Post*, March 23, 2017; Tom Winter, "Nikolas Glushkov, who had Links to Putin Critic, Dies in London," <https://www.nbcnews.com>, March 13, 2018.

<sup>40</sup> "BuzzFeed: Iz Rossii s krov'iu. Kak v Britanii pogibaiut vrugi Putina," *The Insider*, June 21, 2017.

<sup>41</sup> Amy W. Knight, *Putin's Killers: the Kremlin and the Art of the Political Assassination* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2019). One might state that murder as art was not just an implicit notion of some form of Renaissance art, but also was developed by some postmodernist, such as Michel Foucault.

<sup>42</sup> "V FSB otreagirovali na obvineniia v podgotovke spetsnaza dlia ubiistv za rubezhom," *Lenta.ru*, February 24, 2020; Mitch Prothera, "'Unit 29155': Putin's Assassination Squad – Suspected of Killing all over Europe – received Diplomatic Cover from the Russian Mission in Switzerland," *Business Insider*, March 16, 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Mariia Remizova and Mikhail Ozerov, "Berezovsky byl ubit iz-za togo, chto sobiralsia peredat' Putinu svedeniia o popytke gosperevorota," *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, March 24, 2015.



2008, Moscow responded with force when Russian peacekeepers in the Caucasus were attacked by Georgian forces, clearly encouraged by the ruling “neo-cons.” Russian forces could have easily taken Tbilisi, Georgia’s capital. Still, they did not do this. It was not so much fear of US involvement – Georgia was not a NATO member, and the USA had its hands full in Iraq and Afghanistan and was unlikely to risk a major conflict over Georgia. The reason was different: the Kremlin did not want to escalate the crisis and the possibility of a broader conflict. In 2014 the Kremlin entered the Ukraine crisis and took Crimea, where the mostly Russian-speaking population hardly resisted. Losing Crimea would be tantamount to losing the Black Sea fleet. The Kremlin also supported East Ukraine rebels, but was still unwilling to engage in a full-fledged war with Ukraine, despite passionate pleas from some Russian nationalists, such as Alexander Dugin, and clear military predominance. While participating in the Syrian war since 2015, Moscow sent mostly air forces and outsourced the most dangerous and bloody work to al-Assad and the Iranians. Still, as the Syrian war proceeded without a clear end in sight and as tensions grew, with Iranians, Turks, and the Americans, Moscow increasingly sought to outsource the operations on the ground to loyal forces. These forces had to have minimal, if any, formal connection with the Russian government, and could only be used indirectly. In such cases, Moscow would ostensibly have no visible responsibility for their behavior or fate.

Moscow wants to do the same – pretend that it is not involved – not just in Syria, but also in other parts of the world, including Africa. And this led to the emergence of a peculiar Renaissance-type mercenary in Russian settings. As was true in early modern Europe, the leaders of these new Russian *landsknechts* could, on occasion, engage in fighting to render a favor to the “king.”

In other cases, they apparently received some payment. Still, in most cases, while solidifying Russian influence in different parts of the world, they would live off the land, so to speak, benefiting by exploiting various natural resources, with gas and oil as some of the most important spoils. This setting made possible the emergence of Evgenii Prigozhin’s peculiar economic empire, with mercenaries as an integral part of it.

Moscow has used mercenaries for a variety of reasons. In some cases, it might indeed need to establish control over lucrative deposits of raw materials. In other cases, it might need political influence and not need any direct economic benefits, as was possibly the case in the Middle East. Indeed, the Kremlin’s interest in the Middle East is not directly related to its quest for gas or oil. Aleksei Malashenko, a well-known Russian specialist in the Middle East, noted that Russia has enough of its own oil and gas and does not need more.<sup>44</sup> Influence or geopolitical interests might be a major motivation.

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<sup>44</sup> Andrei Lipskii, “Ot Sirii do Libii, A potom v Izrail’,” *Novaya Gazeta*, January 27, 2020.

In this context, gas and oil would just be a form of payment for those who would promote Russia's interests and yet not be officially related to the Russian government. This provides these forces with the most flexibility and does not create problems for Moscow.

Evgenii Prigozhin, Russian businessman and ex-criminal, helped the Kremlin to accomplish its plans. He created or controlled several companies, some real and some bogus. "Vagner" was the most important of these. It controlled a group of mercenaries engaged in military operations in various parts of the globe on behalf of the Kremlin, albeit not formally affiliated with it. As payment, they often received access to gas and oil fields, or at least part of the proceeds from extractions from these gas and oil fields. This was the case in Syria.

### **Prigozhin's Biography**

Evgenii Prigozhin was born in 1961. He had already begun life as a dangerous career criminal in his teens. He seems to have soon been apprehended by Soviet authorities, and in 1981 Prigozhin was sentenced to 12 years in prison for stealing, banditry, engaging minors in prostitution and other serious crimes. He spent several years in jail.<sup>45</sup> Gorbachev's "*perestroika*" changed everything in his life, and in the lives of many similar individuals, including criminals. Soviet liberal intellectuals followed, in general, the sentimental, Rousseau-ist, Romantic-era views on criminals as often innocent, or even heroic people who were victims of the brutal totalitarian state. The view of the *perestroika* elite was similar, not just to the views of many Westerners in several periods in history – one shall also remember that the image of criminals as heroic individuals was quite popular in the USA in the 1960s – but also to the views of the Russian public in the spring of 1917 when the tsarist regime collapsed. At that point, common criminals, widely seen in a positive light, were often released as innocent victims of tsardom. The same seems to have happened with young Prigozhin during the Gorbachev era.

In 1990 he was released, and almost immediately became engaged in the restaurant business. He seems to have become a successful businessman and soon became acquainted with Putin, and this was possibly the major reason why he was chosen to create the first Russian mercenary brigade. With his influential backers in the Kremlin, and with clearly great energy and organizational talents, Prigozhin followed the path of other emerging oligarchs, and became owner of several companies, including those

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<sup>45</sup> "Boitsy ChVK 'Vagnera' zhestoko ubili siriitsa: otpilili golovu, a telo sozhgli (18+)," *Ves'ma*, January 29, 2019.

which were dealing with Russia's foreign policy. Indeed, Prigozhin "built a political consulting firm, the Internet Research Group, that the Justice Department says was behind Russian efforts to sow discord among Americans in the 2016 election."<sup>46</sup>

It looks as if Prigozhin, following the explanatory models about Russia's ability to influence global affairs, extended this influence far and wide on behalf of the Kremlin. He seems to have influenced politics as far as Madagascar.<sup>47</sup>

While operating business companies, propaganda machines, and mercenaries, Prigozhin was also engaged in Russia's domestic politics, and hereby helping Putin, solidified his Kremlin connections. For example, members of Putin's opposition accused Prigozhin of involvement in the election of Moscow's government to prevent the opposition from winning.<sup>48</sup> Unsurprisingly the USA imposed sanctions on Prigozhin and those surrounding him,<sup>49</sup> and this further strengthened Prigozhin's connections with the people in the Kremlin. While Prigozhin controlled several companies, some real and some bogus, "Vagner" was the most famous among them.

### **Vagner: Post-Soviet Mercenaries**

The idea of creating a mercenary force with no formal connection with the government had emerged a long time ago. The idea of creating "Vagner" most likely was born in 2010 inspired by Russian military brass. One might assume that the tradition of the French Foreign Legion might have played some role here. American military contractors who were actively involved in Washington's military adventure in the Middle East also provided some examples. Indeed, Russian observers from the semi-official *Regnum* noted that contractors became "quite handy instruments for carrying out unpopular protracted conflicts."<sup>50</sup>

Still, the example of mercenaries who operated in post-colonial Africa was apparently more important. Indeed, the Foreign Legion was under formal command of the French government, and the mercenaries in the Middle East, especially if they were U.S. citizens, were in some way controlled by Washington. At the same time,

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<sup>46</sup> Benoit Faucon and James Marson, "Russia Leans on Mercenary Forces to Regain Clout," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 24, 2020, p. A10.

<sup>47</sup> Josh Gerstein, "Feds: Mystery Witness will Implicate 'Putin's chef' in Election Interference," *Politico*, March 4, 2020.

<sup>48</sup> "Evgeniia Prigozhina Obvinili v Provokatsii na Vyborakh v Mosgordumu," *Kommersant*, December 21, 2019.

<sup>49</sup> SShA Nakladyvaiut Sanktsii na Okruzhenie Evgeniia Prigozhina," *DW*, October 1, 2019.

<sup>50</sup> "ChBK v Afganistane: Chto Budet Posle Sdelki?" *Regnum*, March 10, 2020.

mercenaries who were engaged in numerous post-colonial conflicts in Africa, especially in the beginning of the post-colonial era, were not under anyone's control and attached themselves only to those who provided good payment. Besides the foreign influence, one shall of course note domestic influence. Organized crime and the spread of contract killings marked the "unhinged 1990s" (*likhie devianostye*). Prigozhin, an ex-criminal, certainly was influenced by this experience. Finally, there was another influence: Nazi Germany. Germanophilia was a part of Putin's image, and also reflected the broad economic and, in a way, geopolitical cooperation of Berlin and Moscow, despite the ire of Washington and Eastern European capitals. Nazi Germany was also quite popular in the 1990s, for a variety of reasons. Among them was the Nazi reputation for being ruthless, organized, and efficient. This was what possibly led Prigozhin to call his mercenary brigade "Vagner" – a clear reference to Richard Wagner, the composer who had created the famous "Ride of the Valkyries," the Norse goddesses of war who collect dead heroes' souls to dispatch them to Valhalla, the Norse paradise. Thus, the idea of the creation of a paramilitary group not directly attached to the Russian military, which would engage in the riskiest missions, from both a military and political perspective, emerged early on and clearly attracted the interest of some in the top brass. Nikolai Makarov, the leader of the Russian General Staff, supported the project. At the same time, a considerable part of Russian military brass was strongly against the idea. In 2012 Makarov was replaced by Valerii Gerasimov, who was in full support. Gerasimov had direct access to Putin and it looks as if Putin supported the idea as well, and Prigozhin was instructed to accomplish the plan.

Prigozhin created "ChVK Vagner" in 2013. While formally independent of the Russian government and its army, "Vagner" coordinated its actions with the GRU (*Glavnoe Razvedyvatel'noe Upravlenie*), the Main Intelligence Agency, the major intelligence outfit of the Soviet and later Russian, army.<sup>51</sup>

"Vagner" trained its folk in the Krasnodar region, quite possibly with the help of the Army. "Vagner" was designed primarily a business enterprise without any political or economic affiliation with the Russian government or military. "Vagner"'s mercenaries would be, so to speak, self-funded, and lived at the expense of those who housed them. It was an old tradition when mercenaries lived at the expense of the local population. Still, in some cases, Moscow most likely provided some compensation.

"Vagner" started to act in Ukraine since 2014, and Prigozhin's involvement in the region was noted by Western observers. "Moscow's tactics emerged with its interventions in eastern Ukraine in 2014, where the Kremlin worked with armed groups fielded by

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<sup>51</sup> "Russia's 'Private' Military Companies: the Example of the Wagner Group," CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program (rep@csis.org), Announcement, March 9, 2020; the presentation was postponed on 16 March.

politically connected Russian businessmen. Companies owned by former restaurateur Yevgeny Prigozhin won multimillion-dollar catering and construction contracts for the Russian armed forces. Mr. Prigozhin then created Wagner Group, a private military company, according to European security officials.”<sup>52</sup>

It is most likely that Prigozhin received some money from Moscow, albeit the financial arrangements of the enterprise were not clear. “Wagner”’s people were also sent to Venezuela to protect Maduro, the embattled Venezuelan president,<sup>53</sup> and one could assume that Venezuela’s government, and possibly the Kremlin, provided the financial framework. While engagement with Venezuela likely was not a very lucrative enterprise, but more of a particular favor to the Kremlin, the story was quite different in Africa, where the benefits were considerable.

## African Deal

Recently, Russia decided to return to Africa, where the USSR had exercised considerable influence before its collapse and provided local rulers with mercenaries and military/political instructors. “Now, at a time of diminished Russian economic and military power, its efforts to exert political influence involve private security companies and businesses seeking access to oil, gold, and diamonds, according to European security officials who monitor the groups. The private companies answer to the Kremlin, these people said.”<sup>54</sup> Prigozhin’s “Wagner” was among them. Prigozhin and his people engaged in working in many African countries rich in natural resources since either 2017 or 2018.

### Northern Africa Engagement

“Wagner” was engaged in Sudan, a country in turmoil. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs implicitly acknowledged that “Wagner” people were in Sudan. A spokesman from the Ministry stated that Russian “instructors” were indeed in the country.<sup>55</sup> Prigozhin’s people also emerged in Libya. Russia’s engagement in Libya was fueled not just by pragmatic considerations, but also by a sense of revenge. Moscow had provided consent for limited military action to the Western powers during their standoff with

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<sup>52</sup> Benoit Faucon and James Marson, “Russia Leans on Mercenary Forces to Regain Clout,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 February 2020, p. A10.

<sup>53</sup> Irina Malkova and Anton Baev, “Chastnaia Armiaia Dlia Prezidenta: Istoriia Prrucheniiia Evgeniia Prigozhina,” *Vremia i Den’gi*, January 29, 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Faucon and Marson, “Russia Leans on Mercenary Forces to Regain Clout.”

<sup>55</sup> “Tuda, Sudan Obratno,” *Novoia Gazeta*, April 12, 2019.

Qaddafi, the Libyan leader. Presumably the Western powers should have just prevented Qaddafi from massacring the rebels. Still, the West quickly forgot about promises about limited action. Qaddafi was not only deposed but brutally killed. The Western powers implied that the end of Qaddafi's dictatorship would lead to a flourishing democracy, to the "end of history," in an almost Fukuyamian fashion.

Predictably, and quite similar to what transpired in other Arab countries following eruption of the "Arab Spring," another scenario materialized. After the removal of the authoritarian ruler, anarchy spread, leading to the emergence of even more brutish rulers who "disciplined and punished," if one would use Michel Foucault's term, more ferociously than the previous heads of state.<sup>56</sup> Egypt here could offer a good example. General Sisi, the country's current ruler, is much more brutal than the previous one, the late Mubarak. The general's judicial system condemned several hundred defendants as a group to execution. In other countries, and this was the case in Libya, the country disintegrated. Russia became actively involved and competed with the West for influence. Here, Moscow not only tried to exercise a sort of revenge, but also tried to control important natural resources and, even more so, increase its influence. And here, "Vagner"'s people and possibly other mercenaries indirectly played an important role.

"In the middle of last year, Gen. Haftar's troops brought Russian military contractors into two ports to train commandos and launch strikes, according to Libyan oil and security officials. Mr. Bashagha, the interior minister, said the Russians were Wagner employees. 'Whoever controls the area controls the oil fields,' said Mr. Bashagha, who is part of the internationally recognized government."<sup>57</sup> Moscow acted promptly, and 200 Russian mercenaries, possibly employees of "Vagner," arrived in the country.<sup>58</sup> Ultimately, up to 1,200 of "Vagner"'s mercenaries would operate in the country.<sup>59</sup> While some of "Vagner"'s folk were professional, skillful soldiers, many seemed to have been provincial lads from Russia's heartland, with no other job outlets,<sup>60</sup> and here they were quite similar to many American lads from the provincial heartland, where well-paid industrial jobs had disappeared long ago.

While in the future, more than a thousand "Vagner" folk would be engaged in the Libyan conflict, the initial encounter was modest, and just "dozens of armed Russian mercenaries fanned out across two Libyan oil ports. Brought in by a renegade Libyan

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<sup>56</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

<sup>57</sup> Faucon and Marson, "Russia Leans on Mercenary Forces to Regain Clout."

<sup>58</sup> "Putin Otravil Sotni Naemnikov 'Vagnera' na Eshche Odnu Voynu," *Obozrevatel'*, November 6, 2019.

<sup>59</sup> Dmitry Boudarenko, "V OON Rasskazali, Chem Zanimaiutsia Naemniki Putina v Livii i skol'ko Zarabatyvaiut," *Liga Novosti*, May 7, 2020.

<sup>60</sup> Konstantin Eggert, "Kommentarii: CVK Vagnera v Livii – na Sluzhbe Interesov Kremliia," *DW*, May 8, 2020.

general, they helped rebel forces wrest control of the oil-rich region from the Libyan government. After the fighting ended, a delegation of mining and oil executives from former Soviet states arrived seeking business with the rebels who now controlled the ports, Libyan immigration records show.”<sup>61</sup>

The foothold in Libya was quite important from both strategic and economic perspectives. “The Libya foray could give Russia a foothold in a failed state that is a significant energy exporter and a main route for illegal trafficking in people, drugs, and weapons to Europe. European officials are concerned about the precarious state of Libyan security, in part because regions to its south are war zones and terrorist breeding grounds. European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said in January that the Russian intervention could have undermined its efforts to broker a deal between Libya’s warring parties without using force. ‘Libya is a big gate to America’ for Russia, said Libyan Interior Minister Fethi Bashagha. ‘It’s also the entrance to Southern Europe.’”<sup>62</sup>

Not only the European Union but also the U.S. high military brass were concerned with Russia’s presence. “Gen. Stephen Townsend, head of the U.S. Africa Command, warned recently about Russia’s involvement in a region that is grown in prominence as a source of natural resources. ‘Russian private military companies have a highly destabilizing influence in Africa, as they are frequently employed to secure Russian investments at the expense of Africans, to prop up corrupt regimes and establish a broader Russian military footprint globally,’ he told the Senate Armed Services panel.”<sup>63</sup>

Not only the West but even Turkey, with whom Russia is engaged in tenuous and contradictory relations, accused Moscow of direct engagement in Libya. Erdogan, the Turkish president, noted that Wagner’s people were hardly an independent force, and were directed in their actions by Sergei Shoigu, Russia’s Minister of Defense, and Valerii Gerasimov, the Chief of Russia’s General Staff.<sup>64</sup> Turkey has not been an idle watcher of the Libya conflict, and Ankara sent pro-Turkish Syrian fighters to Libya.<sup>65</sup> While Ankara was recruiting pro-Turkish mercenaries in Syria for the Libyan war, Wagner did the same: it recruited Syrians to fight on their side.<sup>66</sup> It looked as if despite the support of Syrian mercenaries, Wagner’s group did not reach its goal, and suffered considerable

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<sup>61</sup> Faucon and Marson, “Russia Leans on Mercenary Forces to Regain Clout,” p. A1.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> “Erdogan Obvinil Rossiiskih Voenachal’nikov v ‘Rukovodstve Voinoi’ v Livii,” *Vedomosti*, February 16, 2020.

<sup>65</sup> Valerii Shiriaev, “Front pokatilsia,” *Novaia Gazeta*, May 24, 2020.

<sup>66</sup> Liviiski Marshal, “Pri Podderzhke Moskovskikh Naemnikov, Predprinial Novuiu Popytku Gosu Darstvennogo Perevorota,” <https://central.asia-new.com>, April 29, 2020.

losses,<sup>67</sup> and possibly departed the country.<sup>68</sup>

While Russia's involvement in the Libyan war was clear, Moscow denied any direct role. "The Kremlin spokesman said Mr. Zakharov 'has nothing to do with the Russian government or our embassy or with Russian intelligence.'<sup>69</sup>

While the Libyan engagement was quite profitable for the Kremlin and Prigozhin, it was not the only one. The engagement in the African heartland was especially promising.

### **Central African Republic and Mozambique Engagement**

In 2017, Moscow received permission from the U.N. to sell weapons to the Central African Republic and engaged in various deals with this African country. The Central African Republic is rich in natural resources and this is one of the major reasons why Moscow wants to increase its presence there.<sup>70</sup> While some benefits from developing natural resources possibly got to Russian-affiliated companies, Prigozhin's companies also clearly fed off the land, so to speak. Several companies affiliated with Prigozhin received permission to extract gold and diamonds in Sudan and the Central African Republic.

Prigozhin and his Moscow protectors/affiliates were not anxious to publicize their Central African venture, and those who tried to find out about Prigozhin's activities faced severe penalty. On 30 July 2018 a group of Russian journalists, which included Aleksandr Rastorguev, Kirill Radchenko and Orkhan Dzhemal, son of the late Geydar Dzhemal', the leading Islamist ideologist in Russia, investigated Prigozhin's activities in the Central African Republic and were killed.<sup>71</sup> Quite likely, Prigozhin's people had engaged in murder.

The Central African Republic was not the only country in the African heartland where Vagner operated. Mozambique was another.<sup>72</sup> According to some observers, Vagner folk were not very successful in Mozambique, and suffered considerable losses.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Pictures of the body of one of the killed mercenaries was posted on the internet. See: "Rossiiskie Khukhuzy. Sud'ba Liudei Prigozhina v Livii," *Novaia Gazeta*, May 24, 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Aleksandr Petrov, "Zapadnye SMI: ChVK Vagner sdal pozitsii v Livii," <https://yandex.ru/story>, May 19, 2020; "Anadolu: 1.6 Tys. Boitsov ChVK 'Vagner' Pokinuli Zonu Boevykh Deistvii na Zapade Livii," <https://www.znak.com/2020-05-25/>, May 25, 2020.

<sup>69</sup> Faucon and Marson, "Russia Leans on Mercenary Forces to Regain Clout," p. A10.

<sup>70</sup> "Zachem Putinu nuzhna Afrika? Govoriat, chto Putin Kupil Afrikanskuiu Stranu. Eto Pravda?" *etcetera*, July 5, 2019.

<sup>71</sup> Denis Korotkov, "Chem izvesten Evgenii Prigozhin," *Kommersant*, January 29, 2019, p. 6.

<sup>72</sup> Aleksandr Ianevskii, "Kak Rossiia ispol'zuet Polugosudarstvennyye Voennye Kompanii v Svoikh Interesakh," <https://www.golos-ameriki.ru>, April 29, 2020.

<sup>73</sup> Aleksandr Kovalenko, "Naemnik CVK 'Vagner' v Mozambique Vnov' Ponesli Poteri," *Odesskii Kur'er*, May 29, 2020.



While Prigozhin made considerable money in Africa, the most lucrative or at least potentially lucrative was in Syria.

## **Syrian War and the Quest for Gas and Oil**

Since 2015 “Vagner” has engaged in the Syrian war, and there is no doubt that Prigozhin did so only with permission from Moscow, which believed that, together with Iranian forces, it could save al-Assad and restore some influence in the Middle East. At the same time, “Vagner” expected considerable benefits from exploiting Syrian gas and oil fields. Vagner’s mercenaries’ involvement in the war was a bloody enterprise, and the mercenaries suffered considerable losses.

“Vagner” mercenaries dealt brutally with the Syrian soldiers whom they apprehended. At the same time, they also suffered considerable losses. In 2018, “Vagner” and its Syrian backers’ drive to control Syrian oil and gas fields confronted a similar drive from the Kurds and the USA, and this sometimes led to direct confrontations between Vagner’s mercenaries and Kurds and the Americans on their side.

According to some informants, “Vagner”, or most likely people who represented them, signed an important agreement in Syria. According to the agreement between one of Prigozhin’s companies and the Syrian government, the company would “liberate, guard and develop Syrian gas and oil fields” in exchange for either gas, oil, or proceeds from their sale.<sup>74</sup> “Vagner” would do most of the job. The agreement was signed not long before the conflict between American forces and “Vagner.”<sup>75</sup>

On 7 February 2018 up to 600 pro-Assad forces and a certain number of “Vagner” mercenaries moved toward an oil refinery and important oil and gas fields, controlled by businessmen close to al-Assad, who most likely directly sent the mercenaries. The gas and oil fields were under the operational control of the Kurds, the USA’s allies, and it was they who called for support from the American Air Force, which mercilessly bombed “Vagner”’s people, killing from 300 to 500, marking the first direct confrontation between Russians and Americans since Vietnam.<sup>76</sup> According to other reports, in February 2018 “Vagner” lost up to 200 mercenaries in Syria,<sup>77</sup> while others

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<sup>74</sup> “Vagner. Pervaia neft,” *Novaia Gazeta*, January 19, 2020.

<sup>75</sup> “Le Monde: ‘Povar Putina’ Prigozhin Byl na Vstreche s Liderami Vooruzhennykh Gruppirovok TsAR,” *Znak*, December 17, 2018.

<sup>76</sup> “Liviiskaia Kampaniia Fel’dmarshala Putina,” *detaly.co.il*, April 1, 2020.

<sup>77</sup> “Sviazannye s Prigozhinym Kompanii Zaimutsia Dobychei Nefti v Sirii,” *Novaia Gazeta*, January 19, 2020.

believed that only one hundred mercenaries died.<sup>78</sup>

“Vagner”’s attack had been authorized by Russian commanders in Syria, yet Moscow denied any involvement. Later, the Pentagon called the Russian Ministry of Defense for clarification. The Russian counterpart responded by saying that there were no Russian troops there. It is likely that the Pentagon mentioned “Vagner” folk. Still, a spokesman for the Russian government stated that the Russian government had nothing to do with “Vagner” and these events. In addition, the government did not pay compensation to the widows of the slain mercenaries. Some of the mercenaries appealed to the International Criminal Court (*Mezhdunarodnyi Ugolovnyi Sud*) to deal with companies similar to “Vagner.”<sup>79</sup>

Despite serious setbacks, “Vagner” continued to play an important role in Syrian fighting in February 2020, a time of intense fighting between al-Assad, Iranians and Russians on one hand and Turkish and pro-Turkish forces on the other.<sup>80</sup> There were clashes with U.S. forces. “Photos circulating on social media show a U.S. military truck blocking civilian vehicles that local journalists say are carrying Russian contractors on the highways. The encounters, while tense, haven’t involved the use of force.”<sup>81</sup>

While “Vagner” was engaged in fighting, other Prigozhin companies were in Syria to extract gas and oil and, as one could assume, sell it, albeit the actual mechanism of receiving money is not clear. There are several Prigozhin companies, some real and some bogus, which were engaged in the venture.

## **Prigozhin Companies in Syria**

Prigozhin was engaged in Syria via several companies, some of them real and some fictitious. The most important here seems to have been “Mercurii,” which seems to have started as a company providing meals to soldiers. “Mercurii” had been engaged in providing meals in the Far East from 2015 to 2018.

It looks as if “Mercurii” people combined the food-providing business with the extraction of oil and gas in Syria. Recently, “Mercurii”’s interests changed and it is now

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<sup>78</sup> “Sily Koalitsii vo Glave s SShA sorvali Nastuplenie Storonnikov Asada v Sirii, bolee 100 Pogibzhikh – SMI,” *Gordon*, February 8, 2018.

<sup>79</sup> “V Kremle ne Videli Rolik o Zverstve ‘Vagnerovtsev’ v Sirii, no Uvereniy, Chto eto ne Rossiiskie Voennye i Reputatsiia RF ne Postradaet,” *NEWSru.com*, November 21, 2019.

<sup>80</sup> “SAM. Neirob osvobozhden. Na Iuge Idliba Asadity, Irantsy i Russkie Vedut Nastuplenie,” *Kavkaz Center*, February 24, 2020.

<sup>81</sup> Jessica Donati, “U.S. Troops in Standoffs with Russian Military Contractors in Syria. Top U.S. Envoy Warns that Rise in Tensions could Lead to Hostile Action between Two Powers,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 6, 2020. Quoted in *Johnson List*; “SShA Rasskazali o Stolknoveniakh s Rossiiskimi ChVK v Sirii,” *Lenta.ru*, February 11, 2020.

engaged in a search for rare metals in Syria, where it has worked since 2017. Those who represented “Mercurii” and other Prigozhin-affiliated companies did not hide their identity in signing the 2019 agreement with the Syrian government.<sup>82</sup>

“Velada” was another Prigozhin-affiliated company, which was clearly a bogus institution. “Velada” was created in 2015 by Ekaterina Trofimova, who worked for Concord Management and Consulting (*Konkord menedzhment i konsalting*) and it was connected and quite likely fully controlled by Prigozhin. In 2018 Trofimova emigrated to the USA, where she acknowledged being the fictitious leader of a basically fictitious company. After Trofimova’s departure, Dar’ia Baranovskaia, a student, became the leader, most likely a fictitious one, of the company. Besides “Velada” and “Mercurii,” “Konkord” also signed an agreement with Syrians.<sup>83</sup> While all the above-mentioned companies played an important role in the Syrian enterprise, the major role seems to have been allocated to “Evro Polis,” which signed an agreement with the Syrian government in 2016. While most likely fully controlled by Prigozhin, the company has an official “roof” (*krysha*), a government agency which provides additional protection and respectability. Indeed, EuroPolic (*Evro Polis*) presumably was affiliated with the Ministry of Energy in Russia. According to the agreement with Damascus, the company would protect gas and oil fields in Syria and in exchange would receive compensation for military operations and 25% of gas and oil revenue. In May 2017 the company opened a branch in Damascus. The military actions would be conducted by “ChVK Vagner.”

Prigozhin was well compensated for his troubles in Syria. He received several gas fields from which to extract gas, each with at least 250 billion cubic meters of gas. “Prigozhin structures” also received 20 million in resources from Syria each month. The Kremlin was not formally affiliated with Prigozhin to completely remove itself from responsibility, and quite possibly pushed “Vagner” to relocate its headquarters to one or several African states with pro-Kremlin regimes.<sup>84</sup>

## Conclusion

It is clear that Putin’s regime is authoritarian or, as Vladislav Surkov, until recently Putin’s major ideologist, remarked, a regime of “sovereign democracy.” Dubbing the

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<sup>82</sup> Evgenii Sakharov, “Naemniki i Neftianiki,” *News World*, January 12, 2020.

<sup>83</sup> “Kompanii, svyazannye s Prigozhinym, Budut Razrabatyvat’ tri Neftegazovykh Mestorozhdeniia v Sirii,” *Novaia Gazeta, 4 Gordon*, January 20, 2020.

<sup>84</sup> Sergei Il’chenko, “Pakt Putina-Merkel, kak Moskva i Berlin snova podelili mir,” <https://rada5.com>, January 14, 2020.

regime authoritarian is an easy task, but it does not provide many clues by which to understand its *modus operandi*. The point here is that authoritarian regimes include several different social, political, and economic species and subspecies, so to speak. The same could be said about other regimes, e.g. totalitarian and democratic. All of these subspecies could be quite different from each other. They have different models of behavior in dealing with internal and external problems. One shall remember that both internal postures and foreign policy are related, and should be seen in a holistic way. The study of Putin's Russia is usually placed in general, prevailing ideological trends and researchers in the West rarely deviate much from the "party line." In this context, Putin's rule over the populace is usually seen as a result of the prevailing discourse: the Russian populace's "bad" cultural genetics, Putin's skillful manipulation, and use of the masses' worst instincts, most notably Russian nationalism. Putin's authoritarianism is increasingly placed in a global context, in which the "end of history" is not democracy but authoritarian rule, even in the West.

The fear and selective use of violence is not connected here with political or ideological manipulation. The Kremlin's foreign policy is usually seen as separate from Putin's domestic policy or presented as aggressive and reckless imperialism. Still, connecting Putin's internal policy including manipulation, intrigue, and selective murder, among its attributes, and Putin's foreign policy, marked more by restraint rather than by reckless "neo-con" imperialism, provides an accurate picture of the regime. The widespread use of mercenaries provides even better focus and helps to define Putin's idiosyncratic form of authoritarianism.

Historical analogies help us to understand the nature of the regime and its workings in a holistic way. While several different past regime types could provide clues to understanding present-day Russia, Renaissance and early modern Europe is the most attractive and, indeed, many aspects and actions of the Putin regime display Renaissance features.

The similarities between Putin's Russia and Renaissance and early modern Europe, while helping to show, from a structural perspective of course, how regimes work, should not mislead the researcher.

First, history never repeats itself, and modern technology and economics do not duplicate the distant past. Secondly, the dynamics of the process could be different, sometimes absolutely different, for regimes that seem to be quite similar to one another. Renaissance and early modern Europe evolved – at least in France – into an absolutist, centralized monarchy of the "Sun King," and later Napoleonic France. The Russian trajectory could be absolutely different, and the end of Putin's rule might well lead to the country's disintegration. Thus, "Renaissance" Russia is not so much a projection

into the future or clue for understanding the country after Putin, as a snapshot of the present, and should be taken as such in its static, structural concreteness.

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