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The Spectre of *Putinism*: National Patriotism and Militarized Moral Education in Contemporary Russia.

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The Soviet Union ended on 31 December 1991 and was replaced by the Russian Federation. This raised hopes of a Russia with a market economy and a political democracy where citizens would have equal rights and responsibilities under the constitutional rule of law rather than government by state bureaucracy and a kleptocracy of economic oligarchs. Thirty-two years later Russia is still mired in an authoritarian swamp, aggravated by imperialist aggression against its neighbours, in particular Ukraine. This has happened not by accident but through the hubristic design of Vladimir V. Putin, former KGB officer, political fixer, and since 1999 effectively in control of the Russian Federation. He is supported by fellow *siloviki* or state enforcers with the collective mentality of gangsters. Russian democrats have failed to sustain constitutional politics open to debate in a healthy civil society (Morgan, Trofimova, Kliucharev, 2019). Another failure has been to achieve an economy in which citizens participate and from which they benefit. Instead, it is deformed by oligarchic exploitation of natural resources (Etkind, 2023). External factors have contributed to this through at best political naivety aggravated by vanity and at worst the moral corruption of senior European politicians. We focus on Russia internally, on the *Putinist* ideology of national patriotism, and the implications for popular education.

The Soviet Legacy

Formal education in the Soviet Union was based on the ideology of Marxism-Leninism (Morgan, 2015). The ‘ideal citizen’ conformed to and worked for the Communist Party and State. This determined practice in non-formal education and informal learning. It included atheism with severe restrictions on the teaching and practice of religion (Daniel, Berger, Marsh, 2008). This was reinforced by an internal system of ideological training for Communist Party cadres which is well-documented. The relationship between ideology and education created tensions among intellectuals who dissented from the Party line, especially the ‘thinking reeds’ (derived from Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées*) described by Boris Kagarlitsky, (Kagarlitsky, 1989). This is in a country of vast and varied geography; with a population diverse ethnically, culturally, and in religious confession; which has experienced dramatic demographic, economic, and political changes over only a few generations (Trofimova and Morgan, 2022).

The State and Civil Society

Civil society is fundamental to a democratic polity. It provides a framework for citizen participation autonomous of state authority. This creates conditions in which citizens, their associations, societies, and other group interests can achieve a voluntary, legal, harmonious, but not subservient relationship to the state. The countries of the Soviet Union and its communist satellites in Eastern and Central Europe comprised a political system that regarded civil society as a challenge to its authority. The option for emerging democracies was to recognize a partnership between the state and civil society. This could be achieved by developing the autonomous civic competence of individual citizens through their associations. It relies on a communicative approach that enhances public understanding of

and engagement with social, economic, and political issues, locally, nationally, and internationally (Morgan, Trofimova, and Kliucharev, 2019).

A recent history of education in modern Russia considered the educational reforms of 1984–1985 as part of Communist Party General Secretary Mikhail S. Gorbachev’s *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (reconstruction) programmes, intended to save a system in demographic and economic crisis; and detailed their failure. The 1992 post-soviet educational reforms were aimed to “...counter the authoritarianism of the past and nourish a democracy of the future” (Dowler, 2022, 195). The aspiration was to educate citizens of a democratic polity and civil society. It was believed, optimistically, that adult education would gradually become an ‘...effective social factor contributing to a new community of citizens instead of to the maintenance of an all-pervasive state.’ This might be achieved through ‘... enabling citizens to recognize that a genuinely adult curriculum is determined individually, to critically comprehend the problems with which society is faced, and to become conscious of their right to participate in finding solutions.’ (Morgan and Kliucharev, 2001, 242).

A study published ten years ago suggested such an approach to sustaining the population of Russia’s vast rural hinterland. It could utilize the several thousand clubs and other local voluntary associations that sustain the social and cultural space of rural communities. These draw upon folk traditions, local knowledge, and concern for the needs of local populations and their environments. It said: “The problems of local cultures are many and various, including earning a living, the environment, lifestyles, community decision-making, and dealing with external authorities. Such informal communication and learning as we have described are crucial to the civic competence of a Russian population which has hitherto experienced either authoritarianism or political turbulence.’ Despite difficulties, the clubs were said “... to contribute significantly to the social capital of rural Russia and the democratisation of the country as a whole. They are authentic examples of an emerging Russian civil society.” (Morgan and Kliucharev, 2013, 54). This was optimistic as educational reform proved difficult and its impact was limited, given the problems facing the Russian Federation.

Putin’s Russia

Although public life was open to freedom of assembly, speech, and debate not known in Russia since the early years of the Russian Revolution, the transition to democracy proved difficult. Hopes for a new popular education and civil society continued, but active civic education was sporadic and regarded with suspicion by the Putinist state. (Morgan, Trofimova, and Kliucharev, 2019). The democratic aspirations of the 1990s were frustrated and faced direct repression. The 1992 educational reforms gave way to Putin’s national patriotic authoritarianism. This aims at national renewal through an identity that claims to include Russia’s “ancestral faith in God” (Dowler, 2022, 197).

Russians have been educated according to Soviet ideology and earlier that of Imperial Russia. It is important to understand the deep-seated effect on the cultural mentality of the people. According to Neklessa (2013), they have remained passive subjects rather than active democratic citizens; while Russia is a state capitalist collective rather than a free market. This autocratic mentality weakened the new democratic state, its public institutions, and nascent civil society. Public norms broke down with an increase in crime, both petty and state-wide. Stability took priority over democracy with the reassertion of authority by the state

(Gorshkov and Petukhov, 2017). This led to Putin and the *siloviki* who made an economic bargain with a business oligarchy that had asset-stripped the Soviet state. However, since February 2022, with the intensifying effect of international sanctions, Gross National Product (GDP) has been sustained only through ‘War Keynesianism.’

Attitudes to civic education came from opposite perspectives: open and critical of state authority and supporting civil society or closed and submissive to state authority, its policies and actions. The former had been possible in the early years of the Russian Federation but is now supplanted by a militarized moral training of national patriots. This determines formal education and squeezes the space available to non-formal education and informal learning in civil society and through the Internet. As Dowler concluded: “Education in modern Russia has served primarily as an instrument for the advancement of state interests.” (Dowler, 2022, 199). These are decided by those who control the state and benefit from it.

The wars in Chechnya, Syria, Georgia, and Ukraine are symptomatic of this. According to the state authorities or *siloviki*, directed by Putin and his National Security Council, they confirm the necessity of national patriotism. Although in practice the citizens of the Russian Federation have become more diverse in ethnicity, and unequal socially and economically, the state is seen as an unifier (Trofimova and Morgan, 2022). Formal education is state-controlled with civic education supporting the official ideology. This is *Putinism* which comprises national patriotism and Great Russian chauvinism with an aggressive foreign policy. It is authoritarian in domestic politics manipulating the constitution; and kleptocratic, autarchic, and imperialist in outcome. *Putinism* aims to restore Russia to the ‘great power’ status of the Soviet Union or indeed of the Russian Empire, with the passive support of a Russian population subject to a pervasive ideological message.

Non-formal education and informal learning as practised in civil society offer alternative and independent perspectives. The Internet has seen such opportunities in Russia grow exponentially, including opening the population to external opinion. It provides opportunities for autonomous and critical learning, especially among young adults. (Trofimova and Morgan, 2020). It enhances skills in obtaining and assessing information when making responsible decisions important for the individual and society. However, the current closure and restriction of independent media has opened the way for propaganda, together with a mass of trivial material that distracts people from real problems. In their self-realization, young people need objective information, and its lack in Russia pushes them towards outdated ideas by which so many of the older generation still live. This is not, of course, exclusive to Russia.

The potential of non-formal education and informal learning to influence popular attitudes is recognized by attempts by the Russian state to restrict it. On 5 April 2021, “On Amendments to the Federal Law ‘On Education in the Russian Federation’” prohibited the reporting of ‘false information’ about the historical, national, religious, and cultural traditions of peoples *i.e.*, different from the official state version. The intention is to bring *all* education under the control and censorship of the *Putinist* state. This was seen as early as the interim presidency of Dimitri Medvedev (2008-2012) when Putin was prime minister. On 15 May 2009, a presidential decree established the Historical Truth Commission to defend Russia against so-called falsifiers of history who claimed to deny the Soviet contribution to victory in the Second World War. The Commission, which ended on 14 February 2012, was criticised by

opponents of *Putinism* as an intellectually crude attempt to impose state ideology, reminiscent of the ‘Ministry of Truth’ described by George Orwell in his famous novel *1984*. More recently, school textbooks and the general curriculum have been rewritten to emphasise the *Putinist* version of modern Russian history.

Again, the categorization of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and indeed individuals with links outside Russia as ‘foreign agents’ shows how public trust in them is undermined deliberately. Two prominent examples are the effective closures of the NGOs *Memorial*, remembering the victims of Stalinism, in December 2021, and the Sakharov Center in February 2023. The latter was named after Andrei D. Sakharov (1921-1989) the nuclear physicist, political dissident, and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate (1975). In contrast with President Medvedev’s Historical Truth Commission, the two organizations were respected internationally for considering human rights in Russia. There are many examples of such systematic reduction of civil society by *Putinism*. It is accompanied by an external campaign using a ‘Firehose of Falsehood’ Propaganda Model (Paul and Matthews, 2023).

In 2022, the historian Boris Kagarlitsky, whom we have noted as a Soviet dissident, was branded a ‘foreign agent’ and, on 27 July 2023, arrested and charged with ‘advocating terrorism online’, which he denies. There is also the emigration of many of the Russian intelligentsia or their retreat into passive internal exile. This has a slow, but cumulative effect on the quality of Russian science as a recent survey in *Science* shows. (Dobrovidova, 2023),

Crucially, academic freedom in Russian higher education is curtailed severely. This was illustrated on 4 March 2022, in a statement by the Russian Union of Rectors (RUR), of loyal support for state policy towards Ukraine (reported by the state-controlled news agency TASS). This said: “It is important not to forget about our main duty – to conduct a continuous educational process, to instil patriotism in young people, the desire to help the Motherland” (cited in O’Malley 2022). This is painfully reminiscent of Hitler’s Germany after 1933 with its notorious *Statement of Allegiance by Professors of the German Universities and High-Schools to Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist State* (Internet Archive, 2009).

It should remind us of the importance of civic education and the consequences of ideological manipulation. *Putinism* aims to replace democratic civic education with an ideology of national patriotism and renewed imperial greatness. It is supported by a compliant Russian Orthodox Church hierarchy and rests on a militarized moral education that is autarchic intellectually, a form of arrested modernism, (Etkind, 2023). Indoctrination in national patriotic values is now the focus of civic education in Russia, whether formal or informal. The ban on the public expression of opinion opposed to state policy includes the suppression of protest actions, the closure of independent media, the assassination of political opponents such as Boris Y. Nemtsov on 27 February 2015, and the administrative death in prison of Alexei A. Navalny on 16 February 2024.

Conclusion

To adapt the famous opening line of Marx and Engels’ *The Communist Manifesto* (1848/1967,1), an internationalist statement of hope, there is once again ‘...a spectre haunting Europe.’ This time it is the malevolent threat of *Putinism*’s propaganda and imperialist wars aimed at extending the *Russky Mir* (Russian World) through illegal occupation and annexation. In Ukraine, this includes the systematic abduction and indoctrination of children

that on 18 March 2023 resulted in Putin's indictment by the International Criminal Court. (Peterson 2022). A year later Putin has again been 'elected' as Russia's *vozhd* (leader) continuing as president until 2030.

Regrettably, *Putinism* appeals to populist authoritarians elsewhere, impatient with opposition to plans for national patriotic renewal. Meanwhile, herd intolerance and group-think censorship across the political spectrum are affecting universities which should be global lighthouses of rationality (Douglass, 2021). The apologists for *Putinism* consider themselves realists. In practice, they are *naïfs* who fail to understand the lessons of history. As the philosopher George Santayana observed a long time ago: 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.' (Santayana, 1905, 284).

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