

**The Eternal Great Power Meets the Recurring Times of Troubles: Twin
Political Myths in Contemporary Russian Politics**

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Introduction

In certain respects this chapter is the odd one out. Whereas 1989 represents an obvious political watershed for Europe at large, 1991, the year when the Soviet Union after a series of tumultuous events finally ceased to exist, plays the corresponding role for Russia. That is why this chapter will deal with developments post-1991, not post-1989, as is otherwise the general theme of the volume. For Russia the events after 1991 has meant a continuous, at times frantic and frustrating, search for a new, or at least reconstructed, post-Soviet national identity. In this endeavour, political myths drawing on collective memory of Imperial Russia have featured prominently in societal discourses. This is what this chapter is about.

Like others before me (Lo 2002, 20), I would argue that in Russia the claim to be recognised as a great power seems to be inseparable from national identity. This phenomenon was vividly illustrated by the current Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in his statement that ‘either Russia will be great or it will not be at all’ (Shevtsova 2003, 175). In an interview in 2000 Putin, then President, was asked to comment on the concern caused in the West by ‘renewed Russian claims to the status of a great power’ and the ensuing trends towards military re-armament. As a response he snapped:

Russia is not claiming a great power status. It is a great power by virtue of its huge potential, its history and culture’ (Putin 2000c).

The matter was seemingly closed, whether Russia was a great power or not was not up for discussion; rather this could be interpreted as the very point of departure for Russia’s relations with the outside world.

Interestingly enough, however, even in the years of seemingly bottomless political and economic weakness, during the Yeltsin presidencies in the 1990s, there was by the elite and the public alike a steadfast insistence on Russia being a great power (Lo 2002). From the perspective of any rational observer, the arguments against such a view would have seemed devastating. By all objective criteria Russia had lost the superpower status that used to be ascribed to the Soviet Union: the national economy was in shambles, the military had lost

its bite, as was most vividly borne out during the first Chechen War in 1994-96, wage and pensions arrears marred most areas of enterprise, and in the socio-economic realm stunning numbers of the population were jobless, destitute and below the poverty line. In comparison with the Soviet Union Russia had lost 40 per cent of its population and a third of the physical land mass. The arsenal of nuclear arms and the seat on the Security Council of the United Nations were in practice the only insignia still there to remind about the former glory.

In spite of all these problems there thus seemed to be an unwavering and consensual belief in Russia's continued great power status (Lo 2002, 19-20). Yeltsin's first, markedly liberal and pro-Western foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, for example remarked that Russia was 'doomed' to be a great power (Lo 2002, 19). Expressing similar trains of thought, a regional parliamentarian in Volgograd mused in the midst of deepest political and economic crisis in 1998: 'Russia has always been, is still today and will always remain a great power' (Petersson 2001). At that time such statements amounted to little more than mantras, but they were deeply indicative of the importance that the wielding of great power status seems to have in Russian national identity.

No doubt, the key significance attributed to the great power quality has political implications. In the words of one observer, 'the great power identity is fundamental, not only in an identity perspective but for the very prospects of the regime of remaining in power' (Vendil Pallin 2009, 268). Indeed, Vladimir Putin's apparent endeavour to reestablish Russia as a great power can be believed to have contributed to consolidating his legitimacy at home (Anderman, Hagström Frisell and Vendil Pallin 2007, 32).

However, the idea about Russia as a nature-given great power is not the only notion of key political significance in the contemporary Russian political domain. I would argue that there is also a deep-rooted belief offering an explanation to why Russia has often throughout its history fallen short of realising the great power potential supposedly being allotted to her. This is the notion of the recurring Times of Troubles ("*smuta*"), which denote deep socio-political and economic turmoil, where state weakness is endemic and where the country is beset by a mixture of foreign intervention, weak domestic leaders, and internal opportunists conspiring with aggressive foreign powers. The articulation of this idea is a potent weapon in domestic political life, as it can be used to sow suspicion against political actors allegedly working in favour of foreign interests. At the same time, it is a powerful rhetorical device giving strength to nationalist arguments of the need of ensuring a strong, respected and maybe even feared Russia.

The line of argument that I will adhere to in this chapter is therefore that the two forceful political ideas, the ones about the preordained great power status and about the frequent inhibitions to the great power aspirations due to domestic weakness, foreign intervention and Times of Trouble, make up two partly symbiotic, partly countervailing political myths which reveal major dynamics of contemporary political developments in Russia. In the chapter I will discuss what I consider to be reflections of these two political myths in Russian political practice during the Putin and Medvedev presidencies. First, however, I shall introduce the theoretical conception of political myth and how it is related to history and collective memory.

Political myth and collective memory

Taking the cue from social psychology, political myths could perhaps best be understood as shared beliefs in a society (Bar-Tal 2000). These myths provide senses of belonging and togetherness, underpin shared identities and serve to bestow popular legitimacy on political leaders who act in manners consistent with the myths (Esch 2010; della Sala 2010; McDonald 2010). Importantly, and contradictory to the common, everyday usage of the term, the actual truth of a political myth is not relevant for determining its political impact (Bottici 2010). Indeed, it is beside the point; as Blustein (2008, 190) points out, ‘truth is simply not its object’. Regardless of whether the myth happens to be historically true or false, what is of paramount importance is that it has broad popular appeal, and that it provides a sense of origin, identity and purpose to its followers (Davies 1997; Tanasoiu 2005; Blustein 2008, Bottici 2010).

Thus leaving aside their actual truth claims since these are not relevant anyway, political myths display strong tendencies towards simplification for the sake of achieving accessibility and popular appeal (Tanasoiu 2005). On the positive side, they facilitate social cohesion and hold back alienation by helping groups and individuals feel that they are part of a greater whole (Weiner 1996). The downside is of course that they serve to provide the ideational foundations for the exclusion of groups and individuals deemed to be fundamentally Other. Thus, they comprise much of the webs that narratives of nationalism and other -isms, hot as well as banal, are woven of (Billig 1995; Petersson 2009).

In other words, political myths are narratives which are *believed to be true* or *acted on as if they were believed to be true* by a group of people, and hence have implications for the lived and perceived political reality of those people. The myths provide building

blocks for the group's efforts to define a common purpose and a collective identity. Indeed, preferred readings of the past, shared by many, are of central importance for the construction of collective identities. They provide a general framework into which people can strive to fit in order to make sense of their destinies and life paths. For individuals and groups it adds considerable strength to the construction of identities if they can be part of a meta narrative which puts their present in relation to a greater past and indicates the direction towards a preferably brighter future. This gives meaning, a sense of cohesiveness, and added significance. Again, however, these myths tend to complicate the existence of those individuals and groups not invited inside to share in the community defined and delimited by the governing myths.

Political myths are by their very nature supported by the powers that be, as they lend legitimacy to them and to the main directions of the policies that they wish to pursue (McDonald 2010). As a matter of course the myths become inscribed in political practices, rituals and institutions of different kinds and supported by prevailing beliefs and norms (della Sala 2010). If successfully constructed, they come to be considered normal and taken for granted, and thus on many occasions become shielded from critical scrutiny since they are not put in question in the first place. Indeed, especially powerful myths attain such a status that questioning their orthodoxy in certain societies may amount to breaking taboos and almost committing sacrilege (della Sala 2010, 9; cf. Strömbom 2010).

As underlined by Blustein (2008), myth is intimately related to the concepts of history and collective memory. There is a fundamental opposition between myth and history, as the latter is normally driven by the truth claims and demands for factual accounts and unbiased reporting made on academic historians. Collective memory is, again according to Blustein, poised in between the two extremes of history and myth, and hence in a position to profit from both but also to be negatively affected by both. Like myth, collective memory is constructed on the basis of a selection of possible accounts about what has taken place in the history of a group of people. This is not to say that the construction of collective memory or political myth is always a fully conscious process; it most often is not.

All in all, however, in the construction of collective memory there is a tug of war between the political considerations underlying the construction of myth and the quest for aptness in relation to the audience, on the one hand, and truth claims from below, on the other. Like Duncan Bell (2003, 65) reminds us, there is good reason to keep the concepts of myth and collective remembrance apart, since the latter denotes a bottom-up process which may actually challenge prevailing political myths. His concern is that the concept of collective

memory tends to obfuscate the distinction between the concepts of political myth and collective remembrance, respectively. That is why Bell introduces the concept of mythscape, as the ‘temporally and spatially extended discursive realm wherein the struggle for control of peoples’ memories and the formation of nationalist myths is debated, contested and subverted incessantly’ (Bell 2003, 66). Both the myths groomed by the authorities and the acts of potentially divergent collective remembrance on the part of the public compete for attention in the mythscape. Most often, they are in synch with each other, but if there is discrepancy tensions may arise. The most powerful example that comes to mind is of course the collective awakening of the peoples in East and Central Europe in the years around 1989, and their formidable calling into question of the thitherto prevailing political myths about the superiority of the communist parties and the preordained worldwide victory of Marxism-Leninism. To put it mildly, those myths did not match the collective remembrance of what had taken place in the near past, and the dramatic consequences are of course well known.

In undertaking analyses of political myths one will often have to engage with and differentiate between myths at different levels of generality and abstraction. One important differentiation often encountered in the literature is the one between foundation myths – or governing myths (Bell 2003, 74) - and derivative myths that are subordinate to them (della Sala 2010). That is however not the line of inquiry that I shall pursue in the present chapter. Rather, I will argue that the post-Soviet Russian mythscape has been quite consistent in the sense that the same two governing myths have been adhered to throughout the period. The contestation between the two is continuous, and they serve to subvert each other. These two governing myths are thus the myth about Russia as an eternal great power and the myth about Russia as regularly ridden by periods of internal unrest – Times of Trouble – which are instigated from abroad, supported by defectors from within and finally overcome through the united efforts by the people and its resourceful leader(s).

The interplay of the two myths is subtle. As pointed out by Volkan (1995) collective memories are constructed on the grounds of chosen glories and chosen traumas. The glories bring inspiration about inherent strengths and great performances in the past, whereas the traumas serve to remind of lessons never to be repeated but still welding the people together in the collective remembrance of the suffering of their forebears. Both myths contain formidable affective glue, and I would argue that they lie at the base of collective identity construction in Russia. Two Russian words can be assigned to label the governing myths, where the first one depicts the great power status and its rightfulness and is hence called *derzhava* (great power), whereas the myth about the Time of Troubles would aptly be

called the *smuta* (which is a literal translation). The two preponderant narratives run, as it were, at times parallel to each other in the Russian mythscape, at times they overlap and cross each other, the one temporarily gaining in significance, the other receding. And so, the strange dance of the two myths, the one about the *derzhava* and the other about the *smuta* constantly dragging the former down, seems to go ever on, and they are incessantly changing positions relative to each other¹.

Yeltsin and Putin: smuta and restoration of order

The Yeltsin presidencies during the 1990s were characterised by a widespread and humbling awareness of the political, economic and social conundrum that Russia was in. As has been recounted above, the former superpower glory imparted on the Soviet Union was all gone, and chaos seemed to reign everywhere in domestic politics. Indeed, it is small wonder that Yeltsin's 1990s have come to be characterised almost as a typical case of Time of Troubles by latter-day observers.

Even so, in all fairness recognition is due of the fact that the Yeltsin presidencies represented the finest hour of Russian democracy so far in history. Political parties mushroomed and were given wide spaces of maneuver, virtually no boundary lines were drawn with regard to which issues were permissible to raise in the political debate, and the freedom of expression as manifested in mass media was vast with few discernible limits imposed. Yet, the democratic political movement spearheaded by Yeltsin in the early 1990s failed to cultivate any sustainable mass following and it did not leave a lasting imprint.

One explanation to this, which is especially interesting in view of the arguments of the present chapter, is offered by Sherlock (2007). He argues that one reason why the once so vigorous democratic movement was unable to make a more durable impact is that the Yeltsin administration did not use the opportunity that was offered to mythologise the victory over the coup-makers back in August 1991. Otherwise, this story would seem to have all the ingredients that powerful political myths are woven of: a reactionary coup attempt to turn the clock back, a courageous defence against the ringleaders, a massive popular uprising to defend the gains of the democratic movement, and a bold leader – Boris Yeltsin - taking decisive action in the nick of time. There were even graphic and symbol-laden moments that

¹ I am indebted to Dr. Andreas Önnersfors for this graphic suggestion.

could have been used to epitomise these would-be mythological events, above all when Yeltsin famously climbed on to the top of an armoured vehicle to read out his defiant appeal against the putschists. In the words of Sherlock (2007, 160): ‘This dramatic victory provided sufficient raw material for a successful foundation myth’. However, this was not to be. Sherlock’s explanation is that too much discontent was created by the sharp decline in people’s living standards in the wake of radical economic and social reform. One could have added that Yeltsin’s heavy-handed way in 1993 of squaring the bill with the recalcitrant parliament, inherited from the Soviet period, hardly added to his popularity. The man who had confronted the powers-that-be seemed to be as jealously guarding his own power positions as his opponents in August 1991 had ever been. Also, the site of the parliament at the time – the so-called White House in Moscow – had been the prime symbol of resistance against the coup-leaders back in 1991. It was from that location that Yeltsin emerged as the figurehead of the struggle against the putsch. However, in 1993 the White House was instead the site of resistance *against* Yeltsin, being the abode of the parliamentarians with whom the President had fallen out in a violent power struggle. After the White House was subjected to heavy artillery fire and practically turned into a smoking ruin, the building lost its potential to engender symbolic appeal in the legitimising of the Yeltsin administration.

Chasing for other grounds of legitimisation and in the wake of the loss of the great power element that has proved so central to Russian national identity construction, there was in the Yeltsin years a frantic search for alternative traits defining what Russian post-Soviet national identity was about. Tellingly, a national commission was appointed by Yeltsin to come up with a formula of what constituted the Russian national idea (Hunter, Thomas and Melikishvili 2004, 127). The commission, perhaps predictably, failed in its task, but both its appointment as well as its meager results bore witness to the Russian predicament during those years. Already during his first year as Yeltsin’s successor, Vladimir Putin, dismissed the project of ‘inventing or implanting’ a national idea as a ‘futile and meaningless thing’ (Putin 2000e).

As national identity was not generally perceived to be secure and unquestionable in the 1990s, there was fertile soil for that identity provisionally to be defined in negative terms. The national Self thus had to be defined through the specification of what proper Russians were not, and there was in other words a dire need of identifying an Other who epitomised the unwanted characteristics that the bulk of Russians could unite against. A major answer to this quest was provided by the renewed war effort against Chechnya, rectifying the humiliation that the Russian central power had suffered by the hands of Chechens after the

first war in 1994-96. In the run-up to the second war, started in 1999 during Vladimir Putin's first stint as Prime Minister, Chechens were in essence scapegoated for being behind every major problem facing Russia, from separatism and secessionism over Islamic fundamentalism and terror to corruption and organised crime (Petersson 2001). Indeed, by blaming all these ills on an enemy within, the idea could be retained that Russia's rightful position was one of a great power, but that at the time being a malignant force, i.e. Chechen separatists and terrorists, inhibited its realisation.

Even though the victory in Chechnya turned out to be hard-won also in the second war, the public confidence in Putin's leadership abilities soared to and remained on a high level. This was not all due to Chechnya, however. Quite clearly, Putin was much aided by the fact that world market prices in oil and gas increased six times over in the period from 2000 to 2008. This did remarkable things to Russia's national economy. Being the exporter of about a third of the European Union's demand of natural gas and believed to wield about half of the world's known production reserves of such gas, Russia was suddenly elevated to the position of what became known as an energy superpower. The justification of this label has been contested (Kivinen 2010) but it does catch a discernible tendency in the development of Russia's status in the eyes of the outside world. There was a remarkable change from being a country in deep crisis in the Yeltsin years into the coming back to the world stage with a renewed confidence already during the first years of Putin's presidency.

Order and recognition in collective memory

According to Neumann (2008), there are two main dimensions determining the international recognition of Russia's great power status. Historically, such recognition has over extended periods largely been denied to Russia. The first dimension is about international influence, and at least for most of the time after WWII this component would certainly seem to have been there. However, the second aspect has been the critical and frequently lacking one, namely assessments of the internal dimension of Russian politics. Neumann argues that recognition as great power has been withheld mainly on the ground that the principles of governance in Russia have been too distanced from Western ideals of how good, or at least effective, governance is to be enacted.

I would agree that the most important evaluations are about the effectiveness of internal control rather than about its inherent quality, but that this is more crucial for the recognition by the domestic public than by the international community (cf. Rich 2009). The

domestic concern is more than anything about order, not about good governance or democracy, which has actually often been counterpoised to order in the Russian debate (Putin 2005a). In Russian political discourse, domestic order is frequently conceptualised as the ability to avoid internal weakness, or above all its epitome, lengthy states of disorder and times of trouble. Order is then a precondition for reaching and upholding great power status. It is my argument that the ideas about the cyclically recurring Times of Troubles provide an explanation for why Russian has not always been able to realise its ambitious great power aims. However, overcoming of Times of Troubles also testifies to the inherent greatness and moral stamina of the Russian people, which are depicted as major foundations of Russia's great power claims. Indeed, the relationship between the two myths is intricate and characterised by both symbiosis and parasitism. The two myths live off each other and sap each other's strength. They are dialectically bound together and account for the fact that neither eternally high glory nor bottomless defeat seem to be Russia's lot.

The paradigmatic Time of Troubles, the *smuta* or *smutnoye vremya*, lasted between 1598 and 1612/1613. The period was characterised by political disorder, chaos, and foreign occupation by the hands of European powers such as Poland and Lithuania (Dunning 2001). During the period the total collapse of the Russian state seemed imminent (Coalson 2007). Internally, a number of false pretenders had tried to use the political vacuum to make it all the way to the throne, presenting themselves as the miraculously resurrected-to-life Tsar Dmitri, the youngest son of Ivan the Terrible. In 1612 the noblemen Minin and Pozharskii initiated and led a popular uprising in Moscow which ultimately achieved the ousting of foreign powers from Russian soil. Finally, the ascendancy of Mikhail Romanov to the throne of the tsars in 1613 marked the symbolic end of the Time of Troubles.

The new tsar, Mikhail Romanov, not only managed to restore order to the Russian house. He has also become famous as the founder of the Romanov dynasty, which less than a hundred years later would see Mikhail's grandson Peter the Great as its most renowned descendant. More than anyone else Peter came to symbolise the attainability of the Russian dream about great power status. Also, Peter's fame as a reformer and moderniser brought Russia recognition and respect from the outside world. Russia was made great again, feared due to its successful power projection in Europe, and respected because of its progress and gains in the internal economic development.

One can, like Solovei (2004) has done, from the contemporary scholarly discussion distil the idea that periods of *smuta* come and go in Russian politics. The period associated with the original Time of Troubles was the one subsequently to give rise to the

term, but the phenomenon had been known in Russia even prior to that. For instance, Parland (2005) discerns four principal periods of smuta in Russian history: the collapse of the Kievan state 1200-1350, the paradigmatic Time of Troubles in 1598-1613, the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Adding to this and depending on political perspective, the entire Soviet period or, at any rate, the years of civil war following the October coup in 1917 could be read as a smuta. Likewise, the final years of the Soviet era, the ones associated with the name of Mikhail Gorbachev, could be regarded as a smuta, as could, no doubt, the Yeltsin presidencies of the 1990s (Hedlund 2006).

In essence, then, the idea that gives mythological strength to the conception of the smuta is that smuty are recurring periods of weakness and humiliation which temporarily get in the way of the realisation of Russia's true and rightful greatness. The connoted meaning of the concept has it that there is hope, even in the darkest of moments, because Russia will always prevail in the end. Thus, the weakness will be overcome and greatness and order will be restored, almost no matter what. Russia will rise again, thanks to resourceful, wise and bold actors who will appear when it is most needed to lead Russia out of the crisis (Solovei 2004).

Putin's first tenure: back with a vengeance

It is now time to turn to the way in which the two twin political myths have been reflected in contemporary political discourse. I shall approach the matter through an analysis of the annual state of the union addresses delivered by presidents Putin and Medvedev to the Russian Federal Assembly in the decade between 2000 and 2010. These speeches follow a practice instituted under Yeltsin and are a direct equivalent of the US Presidents' State of the Union addresses to the Congress. They provide an annual declaration of intent with regard to the coming year's political priorities and sum up the main political events of the year that has passed. They are a highly authoritative source with regard to policy statements which is also why I have chosen to analyse them.

Vladimir Putin's first annual address to the Federal Assembly in the year 2000 was bluntly realistic and somber. It was tainted by the renewed war effort in Chechnya and the perceived and dire need to restore law and order to the Russian Federation at large. In spite of Putin's insistence that Russia did not have to aspire to be a great power since it was

one already, there was a pronounced awareness of the weak condition that Russia was in. Every citizen needed to work hard, but even if everybody did there was a long way to go. Putin noted that the gap was growing in relation to the leading powers of the world. The President's diagnosis of the situation was uncompromising and fell well in line with the denigrating popular saying about Russia being comparable to Burkina Faso but with missiles:

The economic weakness of Russia continues to be another serious problem. The growing gap between leading nations and Russia pushes us towards becoming a third world country. The figures of current economic growth should not be any course for comfort: we continue to live in conditions of progressing economic lag (Putin 2000d).

Putin also pointed to Russia's dependence on Western loans and credits, and asked rhetorically whether this situation was going to continue or whether Russia would eventually be able to stand on her own legs. The Russian state could only be as strong as her economy allowed her to be, he stressed, and one precondition for the state economy becoming strong was that law and order began to prevail. Putin's famous expression about the necessity of establishing 'the dictatorship of the law', made for the first time in this state of the union address, should be seen in this context.

Already in the following year, President Putin seemed more optimistic. The message that he consistently tried to get across was that, even though monumental problems remained to be solved, Russia was again on the right track. Forceful measures had been taken with regard to administrative and judicial reform, and the laborious process had begun to resurrect the economy. On a somewhat self-congratulatory note Putin stated that the economic growth figures were the strongest in 30 years. Pointing to this and also to the military successes claimed in Chechnya, he asserted:

If we are to have a genuinely strong state we need a solid federation. We can now say today that the period of erosion of the state is over. A stop has been put to the disintegration of the state that I spoke of in last year's address (Putin 2001).

In 2002 and 2003 the key themes of the previous years were still prioritised: the need for continued hard work to resurrect the economy, the necessity of carrying out administrative

and judicial reform. Even though the President was seemingly pleased to announce the economic growth figures, he made a wink to one of Yosif Stalin's famous speeches in the 1930s, underlining that there was no reason to become 'dizzy with success'; hard work without complacency was still necessary for Russia to become and remain strong. Hinting at the international level of aspiration that President Putin believed Russia should nurture, he argued that its prospects of becoming rich, strong and globally respected were not dependent on how well it lived up to a certain set of international criteria of success, but rather on whether it would ultimately become able to decide on and set those criteria by itself.

In order to reach great power status Russia had to have a strong economy and a strong army able to defend and protect its citizens and its national interests, Putin argued. There was in fact no other way to go for Russia, he claimed:

Our entire historical experience shows that a country like Russia can live and develop within its existing borders only if it is a strong nation. All of the periods during which Russia has been weakened, whether politically or economically, have always and inexorably brought to the fore the threat of the country's collapse (Putin 2003).

In order to reach pride of place it would not do for Russia to set the ambition at muddling through or simply surviving, Putin underlined. Instead, Russia needed to have an intellectual, moral, economic and military edge on other powers. The ambitious objective was therefore set of doubling the national GDP in ten years. This, Putin claimed, was the only way of sustaining a position among the great powers of the world; it was not enough to become an equal, Russia had to become somewhat better than the rest. It was thus clearly the matter of trying to become a dominant rather than a dependent state (Tsygankov 2005, 140). At least rhetorically, Russia was back with a vengeance.

Putin's second tenure: clearing the debris, watching out

In the year of 2004 Putin cautioned that in the surrounding world there were forces who hoped that Russia would not be able to attain its great power goals and reach the positions of true independence, self-sufficiency and strength. Therefore Russia had to rely on its own abilities to get there. It appeared that one factor that had prompted Putin's negative reaction was the recent foreign criticism of alleged authoritarian tendencies in Russian politics. This was alluded to as a means to denigrate and renounce Russia's strategy of rebuilding its strength through the consolidation of the state (Putin 2004). In other words, Putin tacitly suggested that the foreign criticism indicated a wish to keep Russia down.

These new and rather brusque elements in Putin's address were even further developed in 2005. This was the occasion when another of the President's famed statements was put on record, namely the much publicised phrase that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was one of the major geopolitical disasters of the 20th century. Harsh wording was also employed elsewhere in the speech; the cease-fire agreement between the Russian central government and the Chechen separatists in Khasavyurt in 1996, which ended the first Chechen war, was e.g. condemned as a 'capitulation'. Also, according to Putin's description, the domestic economic and political reformation efforts had been successful with regard to 'clearing the debris' and preventing the 'degradation of the state'. This was pretty obvious criticism leveled at the *smuta* characterising Yeltsin's administration. Putin was very insistent that democracy must not be realised at the expense of law and order, and it was Russia and no other power that was to have the privilege of deciding in what manner democracy was to be implemented in the country. This was the famed doctrine about the sovereign democracy articulated in practice:

Russia is a country that has chosen democracy through the will of its own people. It chose this road of its own accord and it will decide itself how best to ensure that the principles of freedom and democracy are realized here, taking into account our historic, geopolitical and other particularities and respecting all fundamental democratic norms. As a sovereign nation, Russia can and will decide for itself the time frame and conditions for its progress along this road (Putin 2005a).

While repeating that there were certain forces outside of Russia who wanted the country to become enfeebled and bogged down in ethno-religious strife, the President pointed out that

militarily Russia was no longer that formidable a force. Measured by total numbers the military expenditures in the United States were 25 times higher than those of Russia, and Putin left no doubt that he found this disturbing. The governing principle of US defense planning seemed to be ‘their home – their fortress’, he said. This strategy appeared to be akin to Putin’s own favoured philosophy, but after having conceded that this was the case, he went on to express caution:

And good on them, I say. Well done! But this means that we also need to build our home and make it strong and well protected. We see, after all, what is going on in the world. The wolf knows who to eat, as the saying goes. It knows who to eat and is not about to listen to anyone, it seems (Putin 2006).

Thus, for the first time since he began to deliver the annual addresses to the Federal Assembly, Putin started to take up the old practice of using the US as the taken-for-granted yardstick and object of comparison (cf. Petersson & Persson 2010). Likewise, for the first time during his tenures his state of the union speech indicated the US as a prime military adversary. The old cold-war bloc mentality prevailed in many quarters in the US, Putin warned, and he blamed the Bush Administration for using concerns about democracy and human rights as pretexts for meddling in the internal affairs of other countries. The most obvious reason for these reactions seemed to be US actions in Iraq. What was formerly referred to as a ‘civilising mission’ nowadays went under the label of ‘democratisation’, he remarked dryly. Also, there were seemingly irritating actors within the European security architecture. Thus, Putin suggested that the OSCE should start to deal with real issues of substance instead of ‘hunting for fleas’ in the former Soviet Union. The recipe for Russia to be unaffected by such foreign schemes remained to keep on building a strong economy, and Putin reiterated the old objective of doubling the national GDP during a ten-year period. In order to achieve this, Russia’s economy would have to uphold average growth rates amounting to seven per cent annually.

Summing up Russia’s international position, the President said that the country was now rebuilding its former strength and was becoming increasingly aware of its potentialities. This process was claimed to be undertaken in the same manner ‘as in all other states’: with due consideration of national economic interests and with active use of comparative advantages. The latter formulations seem to have been inspired by Russia’s swift

surge to relative affluence thanks to skyrocketing world market prices of oil and gas. All in all, Putin's second term in office ended on a chilly note and with clear indications of assertiveness substantially regained.

Enter Medvedev: smart power and confrontational tone

If one would have taken a guess in advance one would perhaps have thought that, given the commonly perceived political nuances between Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev, the latter's presidential addresses would have been held on a generally more conciliatory note. This, however, was far from the case, at least not in his first state of the union speech. Three months after the Russian Georgia/South Ossetia war in 2008, Medvedev's general tone was almost belligerent with regard to the US. The relations between the two states were far from optimal but this was not due to any inherent anti-Americanism on the part of Russia but to US actions, the new President said. He mentioned two major irritants which had contributed to making the situation particularly tense. First, the US moral support of Georgia in the 2008 war was evidently one of them. Medvedev accused the US of adhering to double standards, recognising the sovereignty of Kosovo while strongly criticising Russia for doing exactly the same thing with regard to South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Secondly, Medvedev was very critical of the US for its handling of the global financial crisis that had erupted during the year. The crisis had broken out because of the shortsightedness and selfishness of US actions, he argued. In his interpretation, this underscored the need for having a polycentric global system of international relations.

Medvedev characterised the Russian Georgia/South Ossetia war as a turning point in global politics, since the unfolding of events had showed that Russia was again 'capable of protecting its citizens abroad' and that its armed forces had regained their striking ability and combat potential. The latter assessment was made also in the context of the NATO plans for the deployment of a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic. According to the President, it was warranted to sound the alarm over these intended NATO actions:

I would add something about what we have had to face in recent years: what is it? It is the construction of a global missile defence system, the installation of

military bases around Russia, the unbridled expansion of NATO and other similar 'presents' for Russia – we therefore have every reason to believe that they are simply testing our strength (Medvedev 2008).

However, in his 2009 and 2010 addresses Medvedev scaled down his criticism of the United States, even if he continued to stress that Russia was advocating a multipolar international political system, thereby explicitly using the term once favoured by the former Prime Minister Evgenii Primakov. Medvedev clearly expressed his ambitions of making Russia one of the global leaders in such a multipolar structure.

Contrary to what Medvedev had said the year before, the US was no longer blamed for being the sole culprit behind the global financial crisis. Russia itself had been hit harder than most, he conceded. Evidently self-criticism was therefore due. Most of all, Russia retained its primitive economic structure and its dependence on sales revenues of strategic unprocessed goods like oil and gas. In the year of 2009 this was nothing but humiliating, the President said. Russia would have to develop into a smart power, basing its future affluence on unique knowledge and cutting-edge technology. Medvedev argued that there in recent years had been an element of complacency among key actors in Russia's national economy; in view of the skyrocketing world market prices in oil and gas many had fallen for the temptation to make do with easy windfall profits. Instead Russia needed to modernise in order to survive, and areas like medicine technology, IT, nuclear energy and space technologies were mentioned as top priorities. Also in the security field technological development was needed to make sure that Russia would be able to hold the upper hand against any enemy. The criterion for measuring the effectiveness of Russian foreign policy simply had to be to what extent it contributed to Russia's modernisation and to increases of its living standards. Influx of foreign capital, cutting-edge technology and innovative ideas were to be the key indicators.

The 2010 address was Medvedev's most low-key state of the union speech so far. The tone was rather conciliatory towards the US, which was perhaps no surprise in view of, among other things, President Obama's decision to shelve the missile defense deployment plans in Poland and the Czech Republic. Instead of this dismantled scheme, Medvedev suggested the development of a joint European missile defense system across the old NATO-WTO divide. If this was not to be developed, he warned, there were risks of a renewed spiral of European arms race some ten years off. In the final analysis, the President argued, the

Russian state would not be able to develop without the protection by efficient national security and defense.

Reflections on the overcoming of the latest smuta

The Yeltsin era has in contemporary Russian political discourse been branded as a period of national humiliation, of quintessential smuta (Hedlund 2006). Its openness to the major Western powers, above all the US, and its adoption of large-scale economic experiments and reform associated with the term of shock therapy, has in the Russian debate been branded almost as the equivalent of treason. By way of forceful contrast, Vladimir Putin's insistence on Russia's independence in relation to the Western powers and his coining of the expression 'sovereign democracy', which stresses that Russia will follow no path in its internal development save from its own, is fully consistent with the myth about the ending of the smuta through the actions of a strong domestic leader. The event which perhaps showed most clearly to what lengths the Russian leaders were prepared to go to demonstrate their sovereignty in relation to foreign powers occurred in connection with the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2007-2008. One should here remember Putin's scornful characterisation of the OSCE as an organisation 'hunting for fleas' in the former Soviet Union. At the time, Russia imposed so severe restrictions on the contingency of international election observers planned by the OSCE that the latter refrained from sending any observers at all. An accommodating stance against observers had been instituted during the Yeltsin presidencies, and now the contrast was striking indeed. The actions taken by the Russian authorities thus squared very well with the ideal of projecting an image about again being the master of one's own house. The use of the term 'sovereign democracy' is consistent with this; 'sovereign' is an important qualifier to stress that the mode of governance is one of Russia's own choosing. No foreign powers must ever dictate the way that Russia is to be governed. Democracy itself which was widely hailed in the Yeltsin period is in the public discussion of later years depicted as a rather dubious phenomenon when transplanted into the Russian soil, especially since it is often contrasted with order. As told, Putin underlined in one of his addresses to the Federal Assembly that democracy must not be realised at the expense of law and order (Putin 2005a).

Thus, according to the contemporary rhetoric Putin put an end to the prolonged smuta under Yeltsin. But what historical figures was Putin inspired by in this endeavour?

Were there any references to the twin myths? In fact, during his presidential tenures Putin on occasion publicly indicated Peter the Great to be one of his prime sources of inspiration among Russians leaders in history (Bagger 2007, 15; Putin 2000f). Commenting on the rumours that he had a portrait of Peter in his presidential office, he admitted to having had such a painting in his deputy mayor's office in St. Petersburg:

I proceed from the maxim that you should not make an idol of anyone. I think we should keep our attachments and sympathies to ourselves and not parade them. Having said that, I have immense respect for Peter the Great as a reformer who did a great deal for the emergence of modern Russia. I think his times are very consonant with the period we are living in today. I think we should take some measures that appear to be complicated but that are absolutely necessary, and we should be persistent, energetic and resolute. If this is what you wanted to hear from me in reply, then I think you have achieved your aim (Putin 2000f).

At the same time, the parallels to the founder of the Romanov dynasty, Mikhail Romanov, are easy to see in contemporary mythmaking. Putin, just like Mikhail, put an end to internal weakness and outside meddling and brought order back to the Russian house. The turmoil was terminated through his resolve and his solid domestic legitimacy as a leader. In short, Russia was reinstated to a position enjoying respect and recognition. Significantly, through changes in the Russian national calendar parallels have been underlined between Putin's tenures and the ending of the smuta. Instead of the old Soviet-time holiday celebrating the start of the October coup a new national holiday – the People's Unity Day - was in 2005 introduced on November 4th, which is the date of the initiation of the Minin and Pozharskii uprising (Tobakov 2005). On the very first occasion when this new holiday was celebrated, President Putin expressed his hopes that this ending of the smuta through the united effort by the Russian people would serve as a source of inspiration also in today's Russia (Putin 2005b).

Conclusion: pride and shame in myth and memory

As I more than ten years ago, in the midst of Russia's lengthy political and socio-economic crisis, undertook a series of interviews with politicians at central and regional parliamentary levels, the reign of Peter the Great, as well as the victory over Nazi Germany in the Great Patriotic War, were repeatedly held out as golden ages in the history of Russia (Pettersson 2001). In fact, both are about the overcoming of smuty, international humiliation and

perennial weakness. They are also about victories against overwhelming odds. Both these historical cases were by my informants cited as sources of national pride to be drawn upon for inspiration in periods of weakness, and they were said to show that, no matter how despairingly hopeless the prospects seemed to be, there was always hope for the great nation of Russia to reassert and resurrect itself to its rightful position. In fact, the great power trajectory was depicted as a preordained development, which however from time to time might need to be given a push by adequate, formidable, national actors.

What kind of stuff are, then, such national saviours woven of? In the literature on collective identities the observation is often made that the construction of identities relies on dichotomies as a foundational element (Petersson & Tyler 2008; Esch 2010, 370). The good and virtuous in-group is seen in a very favourable light in contrast to the out-group, the quintessential Other (Billig 1995). Therefore it is hardly surprising that mythologised national heroes display characteristics that amount to the positive part of dichotomous pairs. They are the good and noble, the wise and the virtuous that will come forth to save the country from the reprehensible and the decrepit.

The need for strength and vigour, the need to reestablish law and order and to stop the erosion of the state were, as shown, themes consistently brought up in Putin's speeches during the first years of his presidency. This was also when he coined the expression of the need to establish 'the dictatorship of the law'. The connotations were that prior to his presidency, chaos and anarchy reigned. People were insecure and uncertain about their future, which was exemplified not least by what was taking place in Chechnya, with its alleged degradation of the state.

At the beginning of his presidency Putin was often low-key in his criticism of Boris Yeltsin whereas he was more damning in the characterisation of his predecessors in the Prime Minister's office. With regard to the situation in Northern Caucasus and Chechnya, he even argued that the previous government 'did not have enough guts to tackle the problems confronting it' (Putin 2000g). On the eve of the presidential elections in 2000 Putin was however also quite clear in his message about the record of his predecessor's administration:

Let me repeat that we are electing the President, whose duty is to ensure economic recovery, restore the country's prestige and leading role in the world,

make Russia governable again, and deliver stability and prosperity to everyone (Putin 2000b).

Thus, Russia needed to rid itself of anarchy and chaos, and Putin seemed to be in no doubt that he was the man to deliver. ‘The state has to be strong, and it has become weak’, he underlined (Putin 2000a). The prolonged smuta was under no circumstances to be allowed to continue, and no meddling would be tolerated from the outside world. No civil war was to be allowed, and secession from the Russian Federation had to be prevented at all costs.

On a more general note, I have in this chapter argued that the analysis of political myth helps scholars to focus on socially shared beliefs which promote collective cohesion, suggest proper action and facilitate for political actors to gain legitimacy for their political agendas. Furthermore, I have maintained that the idea that Russia is destined to be a great power, despite the negative circumstances that at times might prevail and conjunctures that might appear unfavourable, is precisely such a myth. Using the analytical angle of political myth, i.e. that the actual truth contents of those myths are irrelevant as long as they are believed and acted upon, adds valuable understanding to the analysis of contemporary political processes in Russia.

Thus, in my analysis of the presidential state of the union addresses delivered by Presidents Putin and Medvedev to the Federal Assembly in the periods 2000-2010 there was a frequent invocation of the myth of Russia as a preordained, rightful great power. A constantly recurring theme was also that Russia at the present point in time was inhibited by the circumstances from assuming its rightful place. It was not there yet, but it was making good headway, and just a few final steps had yet to be taken, and they would no doubt be taken in the end, provided that the Russian people took concerted action and made a joint, hard, collective effort. Thus, the political myth of Russia as an eternal and collective great power could be used for both legitimating and mobilising purposes.

The twin myths of the smuta and its eventual overcoming provide legitimisation of attempts to weld Russians together and instill hopes about more favourable political developments to come. Conversely, allegations and experiences of being in the midst of a smuta can be used to reduce the popular legitimacy of political incumbents and predecessors, whereas legitimacy and credit can be reaped by actors associated with the ending of such

periods of weakness. This is one way of understanding Vladimir Putin's popularity, and it helps also to explain the dislike with which the Yeltsin years are discussed in contemporary political discourse.

It would be my contention that a clue to the understanding of Putin's stunning popularity rates lies in his aptness to latch on to the political myths about the overcoming of the smuta and the restoration of great powerhood. He acquires domestic legitimacy from the fact that he was the actor to step forth from the chaotic 1990s to guide Russia out of its perennial crisis and back to a reclaimed position of international respect and greatness. Putin's presidencies and Russia's return to great power status during those years may in the public imaginary come across as yet another golden age in the construction of Russia's national greatness. Even if Dmitry Medvedev in this regard has basically continued to adhere to the rhetorical and political traditions set by his predecessor, the impression is that he comes across more as a caretaker. The one who really led Russia out of the last smuta was Vladimir Putin. Partly on this ground, the current Prime Minister and former President remains a formidable potential contender for future presidential tenures.

Tony Judt (1992) once famously suggested that in post-1989 Europe 'the past is another country'. He believed that Europe was experiencing 'a moment between myths' as old versions of the past turned out to be either redundant or unacceptable and new ones had yet to surface, setting the stage for something completely new (Judt 1992, 109). However, in the case of post-Soviet, post-1991 Russia, time has clearly proven Judt wrong, as the past in this setting is very far from being another country. Russia's past seems to be here and now. Together, collective memory and political myth blend with the present to bestow legitimacy on political actors or bring them down in disrepute.

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