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Putinism, Populism and the Defence of Liberal Democracy

Olga Oliker

To the casual follower of mainstream Western media coverage, Vladimir Putin's Russia has, in recent years, become the platonic ideal of modern autocracy. Putin has continued the centralisation of power in the presidency begun by his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin. He has governed Russia for almost two decades, having returned to the job of president after a four-year stint as prime minister by interpreting Russia's constitutional term limitation as prohibiting more than two consecutive terms (allowing for, presumably, infinite pairs of non-consecutive terms). Not only does Russia's parliament do what Putin tells it to, there is little evidence of other constraints in the system. To the contrary, most specialists describe Russian decision-making as an approach in which few are consulted, and one makes the calls.¹ Then there are the crackdowns on the press that have resulted in high levels of self-censorship (though not enough to stop the crackdowns) and the use of police, the courts, propaganda and legislation to all but eliminate political opposition. Yet, and, indeed, partially as a result, Putin's popularity appears unshakably high, even as the economy stagnates and public services dwindle.

Meanwhile, around the world, illiberalism seems to be on the march. One component of this is the fairly long-standing practice – evident most prominently in Latin America, as well as in Russia and most of its post-Soviet neighbours – of using democratic institutions to centralise power and limit civil liberties. The other is the rise, over the last 20 years or so, of

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right-wing parties in long-standing, seemingly established liberal democracies.² For many years, scholars studied the former as a phenomenon, but dismissed the latter as an aberration that did not appear to threaten the alignment between liberalism and democracy that had been a mainstay of the global system since the end of the Second World War.³ Today, while most post-Soviet countries remain illiberal and a number of Latin American countries have continued to vacillate, civil liberties are also being curtailed, and power centralised, in states that seemed well on the path to democracy. Not only does Viktor Orbán maintain power in Hungary, and Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, but the Law and Justice Party holds the reins in Poland. The United Kingdom's vote to leave the European Union apparently rested on many of the same factors that have swept these and other less-than-liberal groups to office, including fear of outsiders, distrust of globalisation and social conservatism. Donald Trump has won the US presidency with rhetoric that echoes similar views. The tendency of these individuals and parties, once in power, to seek to strengthen executive rule, combined with their shared ideological threads, makes those who believe that the foundations of democracy lie in openness and tolerance understandably nervous. As we look ahead to Europe's various elections in 2017, to be held in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Portugal, the tension builds.

The strengthening of centralised rule, especially, raises concerns that what we are witnessing is not simply a crisis of values – a backlash against two decades of rapid social progress and economic change that have left some feeling disenfranchised – but also a shift towards more autocratic rule. The experience of Turkey, where crackdowns on journalists and opposition figures have followed centralisation, is telling. Hungary, too, has increased constraints on the media, and Orbán has used a parliamentary majority to impose constitutional changes. In Poland, the Law and Justice Party's effort to replace judges on and limit the power of the Constitutional Tribunal has led to constitutional crisis and rebukes from the European Union.

Viktor Orbán has publicly spoken of Putin's Russia as a model for his self-proclaimed illiberalism. Erdogan and Putin have had a complicated relationship, but much about Turkey's current climate recalls aspects of

Russia's. Donald Trump's praise of Putin continues to make headlines. France's Front National leader Marine Le Pen has also lauded the Russian leader. So has Udo Voigt, who heads the far-right National Democratic Party in Germany. The fan club extends beyond Europe and the Americas: the Philippines' President Rodrigo Duterte, known for his extreme comments (such as those calling for the assassination of journalists), calls Putin a hero. Is it Putinism, then, that is spreading through Europe and beyond? And what do these trends together imply for the future of Europe?

This is not a scientific study; my analysis is preliminary, impressionistic and overly focused on Europe and the United States, giving short shrift to the rest of the world. But it is enough to identify some topics that could do with more comprehensive attention, and to conclude that while Putinism and populism are mutually reinforcing phenomena with some shared components, they are not the same. Russia is certainly gaining from and will likely continue to try to foster movements towards centralisation and autocracy. The illiberal surge we see today, however, should not be primarily attributed to an emulation of Russia and the influence of the Russian government. The causes of these phenomena lie within democratic countries, and their solutions must be found at home.

What is Putinism?

Russia's 25 years since the collapse of the USSR have been nothing if not tumultuous. The early promise of the 1990s, when political parties and press freedom flourished, was overshadowed by lawlessness and economic freefall. A small number of people became incredibly wealthy, taking advantage of a corrupt system in which regulations and rules were ever-changing, contradictory, loophole-ridden and sporadically enforced. Most Russians struggled. Vladimir Putin's assumption of the presidency in 1999, by contrast, coincided with the start of a decade of growth. This growth trickled down to a developing middle class, leaving Russia as a whole unquestionably better off. Throughout this period, Putin and his team were also able to use public and elite dissatisfaction with the instability of the 1990s to steadily centralise power. Russia's parliament, the Duma, was weakened. Most political parties and movements disappeared. Importantly, Putin was able to present himself as

a bridging figure set apart from parochial views, a seemingly all-but-essential leader for the country as a whole.⁴ Wealthy business leaders who sought to challenge Putin were eliminated, in part through selective prosecution for the various crimes of the 1990s. Press freedom became increasingly restricted.

Limitations on political opposition and the press accelerated after Putin began his third term as president, after serving as prime minister from 2008–12. Convinced that foreign interference was at the heart of the (comparatively small-scale) protests that had been mounted in major cities prior to his re-election, the Putin government and an acquiescent Duma put in place new legislation that required NGOs to turn down funding from

abroad or else register as ‘foreign agents’. By eliminating this important source of support, the Foreign Agents Law weakened a core component of civil society and silenced some of the remaining voices of dissent. Meanwhile, targeted prosecutions (which had begun during Putin’s first run as president) made very clear to those who held the bulk of Russia’s wealth

that there was only one place their loyalties could remain if they wanted to hang on to their money. And Putin and his inner circle themselves also appear to have profited, leading to the perception that Russia is, in fact, a kleptocracy, run to enrich a small group of people at the top.⁵ That said, it is important to note that most Russians did not and do not seem to mind.

One reason that they may not mind is that the Putin years have also seen the evolution of a new Russian nationalism, one that draws on narratives of historical tradition and religion, and specifically that of the Russian Orthodox Church; social conservatism plays a role as well. Russia’s evolving self-definition also draws on a juxtaposition to the West. Appeals to ‘conservative values’ are explicitly presented as an alternative to Europe’s liberalism, particularly when it comes to the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people, religious minorities, women and other historically disadvantaged groups. Russia is presented as a bulwark against the threat to traditional families and societies posed by European liberalism, often as part of a civilisational stand-off with the West.

*Conservative values
are presented as
an alternative to
Europe’s liberalism*

The rhetoric of a civilisational model based on traditional values was a centrepiece of Putin's 2012 presidential campaign. The underlying philosophy (or, really, philosophies, as a number of threads are woven together) draws in part on Russian right-wing intellectual movements, whose members have varying degrees of ties to Putin's circle. As translated into government doctrine, however, the philosophy skirts some of the privileging of Russian ethnicity inherent in its source material. The Putin administration takes pains to present Russia as a multi-ethnic society, its identity based on history (including that of the Russian empire), not ethnic identity. For all their alleged ties with right-wing intellectuals, Putin and his allies do not want to be seen as endorsing Russia's nationalist right. But the continuing emphasis on Orthodoxy and the role of ethnic Russians in society can make this a complex equation. One example of these challenges was presented by the 2014 experiment with a narrative of an ethnic Russian *Novorossia* encompassing parts of Ukraine. Although the narrative was put forward forcefully, it was dropped within a few months. It is also worth noting that Russian nationalists are sometimes prosecuted for extremist and violent behaviour. Some analysts suspect that the Russian leadership worries that Russian nationalists, if empowered, could at some point pose real competition to their own rule.⁶

This combination of centralisation, nationalist ideology and narrowed political space sounds familiar to many. The former Bulgarian prime minister Philip Dimitrov has characterised Russia's ethnocentrism, state control of the economy, state control of information, absence of opposition parties, lawlessness and overt support for non-Western regimes globally as typical of totalitarianism.⁷ One can argue, of course, that Russia is a weak match for, say, the models presented in Hannah Arendt's path-breaking take on totalitarianism. Russia's evolving sense of nationalism falls short of providing the country with the sort of pervasive ideology Arendt describes as a hallmark. And despite the crackdowns on the press and opposition, the degree of coercion in Russia is not at present that of Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Soviet Union.⁸ Dimitrov's take is, however, in keeping with the definition of totalitarianism proffered by the Spanish political scientist Juan Linz,⁹ and that by Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski,¹⁰ whom Linz cites, which

do not require either the ideological or the extreme state-terror component. The American scholar Alexander Motyl, for his part, argues that Russia is fascist, defining fascism as a condition comprising authoritarianism, mass support, a personality cult and an active, personalistic leadership style. The aspect of mass support, he argues, is what differentiates it from authoritarianism – though it should be said that he tends to define fascism somewhat tautologically, as that which exists in Russia.¹¹ On a similar theme, in a recent book on Putinism, Dutch author Marcel Van Herpen sees fascism in the process of emerging in Russia, presenting parallels to Weimar Germany.¹² All of this does more to underline the continuing problem with defining terms than it does to describe Russia. Nevertheless, it does lead to the conclusion that there is much about modern-day Russia that harkens back to oppressive, centralised regimes of the past. While we may quibble about the degree of democracy in Russian elections, Russia's path away from liberalism is difficult to dispute.

What is happening to democracies?

To those looking nervously at developments in Hungary, Turkey, Poland and now the United States, United Kingdom, France and elsewhere, there are also echoes of some of the same phenomena. Constraints on the press, centralisation of power and various elements of nationalism combine with a backlash against progressive ideals and globalisation in ways that seem to parallel what has happened in Russia in recent years.

It is not that democratic backsliding is new, particularly in a global context. But evidence suggests that counter-democratic shifts are manifesting differently than they have in the past. Executive coups, in which a sitting leader does away with checks and balances in one fell swoop, have stepped aside in favour of what the American political scientist Nancy Bermeo calls 'executive aggrandizement', in which a leader does the same thing, but more slowly, perhaps by means of the very institutions he or she is weakening. This, in turn, may help explain another phenomenon Bermeo highlights: that *coups d'état* have made way for 'promissory' coups: democratically elected governments are accused of having become insufficiently democratic (perhaps through executive aggrandizement) and are ousted

with the promise of elections and a return to true democracy. Those promises are, it turns out, rarely kept. Similarly, while voter fraud in elections is fading, it is being replaced by longer-term efforts to manipulate election results, obviating the need to stuff ballot boxes.¹³

In addition to the change in means, these phenomena are also occurring in unexpected places, such as Europe, posing a threat to liberal democracies previously thought to be solid. Scholars have long argued that while new democracies are prone to some backsliding risk, those that are established – going on two decades, say – should be safe.¹⁴ Observers might then not be too surprised by the situation in Poland, which is skirting that two-decade mark, or Turkey, with its history of military intervention. The rise of Marine Le Pen in France, however, and Donald Trump in the United States – and specifically their campaign rhetoric indicating little support for existing national and international institutions of checks and balances – is something of a shock. Indeed, new research suggests that the risk of an ‘incumbent takeover’ (which is to say a democratically elected totalitarian centralising power, including both executive coups and executive aggrandizement in Bermeo’s terms) remains a factor even for long-standing democracies. Worryingly enough, presidential systems seem particularly vulnerable.¹⁵ Also worrying is the evidence that people’s overall belief in democracy has declined, or at least the notion that democracy is essential. A recent study suggests that Western youth, especially, are less enamoured of democratic ideals than their elders.¹⁶

This brings up the question of what democratic ideals truly are. Often, democracy and liberalism, which is to say the defence of individual rights and freedoms, are written and talked about as though they were indivisible. And they do, indeed, have a strong relationship. Absent free speech and freedom of association, it is difficult to see how ideas could develop and a public become informed about them sufficiently to cast informed votes. But polling suggests that not everyone sees protection of civil rights, free speech and other tenets of liberalism as crucial to democracy.¹⁷ Of course, these tensions are as old as are democratic philosophies; Plato wrote about unrestrained democracy devolving into tyranny.¹⁸ To jump forward a couple of millennia, America’s founders, seeking expressly to fuse democracy and liberty, wanted to preclude the danger that majority rule would trump the

rights of individuals and minority groups. For this reason, they created a republic with institutionalised checks and balances, meant to constrain the power of the popular vote. This combination of constitutional liberalism with democratic political systems is then the model of liberal democracy that is described as under threat in the discussion above.¹⁹ And it is under threat precisely because those checks and balances are usurped when power is centralised in a democratic system.

In Europe, recent efforts to de-liberalise are consistently associated with populist movements. Populism is, of course, a word that, like fascism and totalitarianism, has almost as many definitions as it has people discussing it. Some see populism as any political movement that seeks popular support, and perhaps panders to it with promises that either will not be fulfilled or can only be fulfilled at long-term cost. By their definitions, this does not imply a particular political ideology and can refer to progressive political movements.²⁰ Many scholars, however, more narrowly view populist political movements as those rooted in some sort of identification of the populists as the voice of the people, rising up against corrupt elites and outsiders who do not represent their popular will.²¹ As the Dutch scholar of populism Cas Mudde puts it, the struggle is presented as that of ‘pure people’ fighting ‘corrupt elites’.²²

As it presents itself in Europe and around the world today, the combination of anti-elitism and xenophobia often conflates elites and outsiders as an adversarial whole.²³ Xenophobia also manifests as a combination of anti-globalisation and anti-immigrant feeling. Nationalism, unsurprisingly, is a common component;²⁴ so is traditionalism.²⁵ Dimitrov characterises European populist trends as ‘fascistoid’, which is to say ‘antidemocratic, statist, xenophobic, ethnocentrist trends, which oppose representative institutions, free initiative, competition, and a number of “Western values” like diversity, tolerance, and freedom of expression’.²⁶ Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz write that populism opposes the ‘representative nature of modern democracies, the protection of the rights of minorities, and the constraints to the sovereignty of the people, a distinctive feature of globalization’.²⁷

Dimitrov notes the tendency of these movements, at least in Eastern Europe at the end of the previous decade, to be anti-individualist (which

fits with their rejection of diversity, tolerance and freedom of expression), and trending towards totalitarianism (hence ‘fascistoid’ rather than outright fascist).²⁸ This is also in line with the tendency of populist groups and leaders to incorporate a moralistic aspect: the belief that they, and they alone, understand the common good, something that can make them more likely to claim to have majority support even if they, in fact, do not, and to delegitimise any opposition and thus reject compromise.²⁹

Put all of this together and one indeed sees an effort by those openly opposed to liberal democracy to take power by democratic means in order to do away with it. They do this through centralisation. As Dimitrov suggests, populism is the mechanism by which regimes holding these views come to power, and authoritarianism is how they then govern and hold on to power, while continuing to claim public support.³⁰ Indeed, from what we have seen in recent years, populists who come to power do, in fact, seek to centralise rule and limit civil liberties, with some success. By one count, populist movements caused 40% of failures of democracy between 2000 and 10.³¹ Meanwhile, based on coding by some of the same scholars, it seems that the share of dictatorships in the world has risen from 23% in 1988 to 40% today.³²

Turning back to Europe, then, the rise of populism begins to look even scarier, at least to fans of liberal democracy: in addition to the new and aspiring populist executives discussed above, populists are members of government coalitions in Finland, Norway and Lithuania. In addition, as Mudde points out, populist parties have at least pluralities in the parliaments of Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Slovakia and Switzerland, and they consistently win a majority of the votes in Hungary, Italy and Slovakia (albeit sometimes in competition with each other).³³

Is Putinism populism?

A number of analytical discussions of populism and populist movements over the years include Russia in their datasets as an example of populism.³⁴ Putin did indeed follow the same path as some European populists, in that he came to power through elections and then proceeded to centralise. But while Putin pays attention to popular opinion, and relies to some extent on a nationalism with elements of xenophobia, the overall fit is imperfect.

Anti-elite and anti-corruption campaigns, and popular feeling, are fundamentally different in Russia, where corruption is simply more accepted as part and parcel of the system, than in Europe (which is not to say it is not loathed in Russia as well). Moreover, Putin by no means came to power on a populist platform – he came to power in large part because he was anointed by his predecessor and there was no viable alternative. He returned to the presidency espousing some nationalist views, to be sure, but again ran against no real alternative.³⁵

Indeed, what happened in Russia and most of its neighbouring countries were brief experiments with pluralism which were never institutionalised and which fizzled out within a decade.

*Checks and balances
were never truly
established*

Whether or not you believe that Russia's leadership laid the groundwork for autocracy and kleptocracy from the start,³⁶ the system evolved into what it is from a communist past. Some democratic institutions, including elections, were put in place, but checks and

balances were never truly established. By contrast, populist movements in established Western democracies such as the United States, United Kingdom and France, and even more recent adopters such as Hungary and Poland, present a different model: a democratic choice for less liberalism.

The Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev traces the roots of populist success to the first decade of the twenty-first century. He blames the development of popular discontent in large part on elite efforts to manipulate concerns about insecurity and corruption (as well as anti-Americanism in Europe) into support for their preferred, liberal economic directions. Krastev argues that liberal reformists failed because their policies did not bear fruit, as unemployment and social inequality continued to rise.³⁷ The US-based scholar Yascha Mounk, for his part, goes back further, tracing the rise of populism in established Western democracies to the 1990s. He discounts near-term economic hardship as an explanation, pointing out that while economic conditions have varied, populists have consistently gained in strength. He is more convinced by the possibility that an overall economic decline – the fact that prospects for young people today are worse than they

were for prior generations – is a factor. Eurosceptics and the Tea Party in the United States were a challenge to long-standing, almost static political-party systems and the imposition of a progressive domestic agenda (for example, healthcare in the United States) by parties in power.³⁸ Similarly, Mudde holds populism's success to be a 'democratic response to decades of illiberal democratic policies', strengthened by the increased access to debates and information available on the internet. This last makes criticism of traditional elites more accessible and easier.³⁹

Mudde also argues that it is critical not to view populist approaches as aberrant and a rejection of Western democracy borne of crisis. Rather, he posits that nativism and nationalism, authoritarianism and populism are radical versions of mainstream values in Western societies. Nativism, he argues, is an outgrowth of the very idea of the nation-state; authoritarianism is in line with the idea of law and order, the need for a state and religious beliefs; and populism derives from democratic principles and anti-establishment views.⁴⁰ This argument has some merit, although for the most part it could be applied to almost any country and any system, as none of these factors, except perhaps the emphasis on democracy, are specific to Western societies.

What to make, then, of the admiration for Russia and its system expressed by populist leaders? To say that populism is not driven by the same root causes as Putinism is not to say that some of its adherents, at least, are not seeking similar results. Indeed, it seems that the Russian fan base for populism seems to exist in two places – at the tops of these movements, and at the very fringes. Most publics, even if they vote for populist leaders, do not appear to do so out of any great love for Russia.⁴¹ But it is notable that so many of those who seek to take Western democracies in a less pluralistic direction see Russia as a model. Throughout the world, including in the United States, neo-Nazi White Power-affiliated activists voice substantial admiration for Vladimir Putin, seeing him as an embodiment of 'strength, racial purity and traditional Christian values in a world under threat from Islam, immigrants, and rootless cosmopolitan elites'.⁴²

If the roots of populism and Putinism are different, however, the systems in which they exist are even more so. Russia has the divided society described

by populism (a split between elites and the general public),⁴³ but not the popular frustration with it. While Russian elites may fear democracy for some of the same reasons that Western elites fear populism,⁴⁴ Russian elites have convinced their public that they, too, want stability, and, moreover, that there is no other choice.⁴⁵ Thus, while European populist movements (and those in other seemingly established democracies) may eventually lead to systems that have more in common with Russia's (potentially including aspects of more corruption, in direct opposition to populists' campaign promises and mandates), the differences are important, in no small part because any effort to reverse these trends can only be successful if it starts with their causes.

Is Russia proselytising populism?

Even if populism is not Putinism, is Putin's Russia actively working to promote it? Analysts and observers have long discussed relationships between the Kremlin and various far-right and far-left groups in Europe. Notwithstanding the Kremlin's efforts to distance itself from Russian ultra-nationalists, it is worth noting that in 2015, Russia's Rodina party hosted a conference in St Petersburg that brought together many such groups to rail against gay marriage, the threat of Islamist radicalism (in this case, code for the threat of Muslims) and so forth. A global umbrella group for ultra-right activism, the World National-Conservative Movement, also calls Russia home.⁴⁶ While this could as easily have happened in many other countries, it is notable that, despite Russia's laws precluding hate speech and instigation of ethnic hatred, none of this appears to have met with any particular challenge.

There is no question that Russia has become increasingly involved in other countries' domestic politics, especially in the last three years. After years of accusing the United States and European countries of interfering in elections and supporting opposition movements, Russia is trying its own hand at the practice, and not just in Ukraine and other former Soviet countries. Russia funds substantial international media campaigns, in a range of languages, that challenge the narratives put forward by EU and US leaders and officials. It also appears to have undertaken highly effective social-media campaigns to influence public opinion.

In terms of institutional ties, the most overt is surely the cooperation agreement that Russia's ruling United Russia Party signed with the Austrian far-right Freedom Party in December 2016.⁴⁷ Beyond that, many point to loans that France's Front National received from the First Czech–Russian Bank.⁴⁸ Other links are murkier. Ties between Russian business and foreign officials have raised eyebrows, despite being notoriously difficult to trace and define.⁴⁹ Financial support for Hungary's far-right Jobbik party (which Orbán has denounced) has been alleged but not proven.⁵⁰ Of course, by far the most notable indication of Russian interference appears in the late-2016 assessments by US intelligence agencies that their Russian counterparts not only broke into Democratic National Committee computer networks (which would seem par for the intelligence course), but provided the resulting material to WikiLeaks, which released it to the public. The intent, US intelligence assesses, was to damage the electoral chances of Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and aid her Republican rival, now President-elect Donald Trump.⁵¹

So is the Kremlin trying to bring populists to power in the hopes that they will turn liberal democracies into clones of the Russian Federation? I suspect not. Russia is certainly interested in what its new-found tools of domestic interference can do. It has found that, with relatively small levels of financial, propaganda and, it appears, cyber activity, it can create a pretty large splash. Russia's target, with all of this, is the post-Cold War security order in Europe and the unquestioned predominance of US leadership there and in the world. Russia's central foreign-policy goal for many years has been to better position itself to challenge existing security structures, establish its right to a sphere of influence, and to generally attain the respect it feels it deserves as a great power. This includes no foreign interference, as Moscow defines it, in Russia and its neighbouring countries. But Russia likely did not expect the systems that exist in Europe to prove as brittle as they did.

Russia is not causing the rise of populism in Europe and elsewhere. While Russia may be admired by populist leaders as well as right-wing extremists, it did not create them and is not the reason they gain popular support. But Russia certainly has an interest in supporting movements that challenge the cohesiveness of NATO and the EU, raise questions about globalisation and

counter narratives that would promote liberal democracy around the world – and what better way to shut those narratives down abroad than to put an end to them in their homes? That said, Russia’s tools are only effective when they bolster existing movements and support bases. This means that, while Russian support may, indeed, help bring illiberals to power by democratic means, efforts focused on countering Russian support will remain deeply insufficient to keep illiberals out of power.

* * *

I must admit that I am a fan of liberal democracy. I enjoy having civil rights, and as a woman, an immigrant and a Jew, I know that those are not guaranteed to me everywhere in the world and have been far from assured, to say the least, throughout history. I am fond of pluralism, debate and tolerance as foundations for society. I am proud of the progress made in the United States in recent years, impressed by that made in Europe, and remain hopeful for more of the same, as I do not see it as sufficient, and am worried about the possibility of reversals.

I therefore close this essay with two sets of thoughts. One is an agenda for research. We clearly do not yet know enough about many of the factors discussed here. We do not understand what pushes countries towards populism and illiberalism, and the differences, as well as the overlaps, between the two. We could stand to have more study of the links between illiberal groups and nations, and the tools they use to challenge liberal narratives. We could understand better why some countries continue on paths away from liberal democracy and others return to it. It is also worth delving more into questions of political protest, and the circumstances that lead different approaches to be more or less effective – which leads me to my second agenda, an agenda for response.

The evidence that we do have strongly indicates that, for those who seek to preserve and strengthen liberal democracy, complacency in the face of current trends would be a mistake. While it is true that the premise behind the checks and balances built into constitutional democracies is that they will prevent tyrannies from emerging, it is wrong to believe that they do

this automatically. Existing institutions are there to be used by the people. If those who believe in free speech, civil liberties and constraints on power do not make use of the tools at their disposal, those who disdain them will work to take them away. It is, as it were, a use-them-or-lose-them proposition. Political awareness, political organisation and political action are therefore crucial. To be effective, however, defenders of constitutional democracy must recognise that they also have to make the case for it to a broader public, which appears to have become disenchanted, which requires dialogue and political education.

It is also unwise to focus too much on Russia. This is not to say that Russian meddling should be ignored. It is to say that Russia is not the principal cause of the West's problems. If Western democracies are to succeed, they must get their own houses in order – and in doing that, they will render themselves less vulnerable both to capture by would-be authoritarians and to Russia. For example, the best defence against efforts to transform business ties with less-than-above-board Russian firms and organisations into leverage for the Kremlin and others may well be to ensure transparency and clear regulation of corporations.⁵²

The bottom line is that, while Putinism may not be spreading, liberal democracy is under threat from within, albeit with a little help from (and an eye to) Russia. If it is to be defended, the defence must also come from within. Institutions can indeed protect democracy. But only if the people who value it stand up for those institutions.

Notes

- ¹ See Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013), pp. 210–18, 229–37, 240–2, 269; and Shaun Walker, 'Inside Putinworld, Where Few Risk Speaking Truth to Power', *Guardian*, 29 August 2014.
- ³ See Fareed Zakaria, 'The Rise of Illiberal Democracy', *Foreign Affairs*, November 1997; and Cas Mudde, 'The Populist Radical Right: A Pathological Normalcy', *West European Politics*, vol. 33, no. 6, 2010, pp. 1,167–86.
- ² Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 23.
- ⁴ Philipp Casula, 'Sovereign Democracy, Populism, and Depoliticization in Russia', *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 60, no. 3, 2013,

- pp. 3–15.
- 5 Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).
 - 6 For background and discussion of these issues, see Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire* (Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press with Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Casula, 'Sovereign Democracy, Populism, and Depoliticization in Russia'; Andreas Umland, 'Alexander Dugin and Moscow's New Right Radical Intellectual Circles at the Start of Putin's Third Presidential Term 2012–2013: The Anti-Orange Committee, the Izborsk Club and the Florian Geyer Club in Their Political Context', *Europolity*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2016, pp. 7–31; Igor Zevelev, 'Russian National Identity and Foreign Policy', Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 2016, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/161208_Zevelev_RussianNationalIdentity_Web.pdf; and 'Russian Propaganda Is State-of-the-Art Again', *Economist*, 10 December 2016, <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21711538-1930s-moscow-beacon-international-movement-russian-propaganda>.
 - 7 Philip Dimitrov, 'Does "Populism" in Europe's New Democracies Really Matter?', *Demokratizatsiya*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2009, pp. 310–23.
 - 8 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Harvest, 1968).
 - 9 Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000).
 - 10 Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (New York: Praeger, 1956).
 - 11 Alexander J. Motyl, 'Putin's Russia as a Fascist Political System', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 49, no. 1, March 2016, pp. 25–36.
 - 12 Marcel Van Herpen, *Putinism: The Slow Rise of a Radical Right Regime in Russia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
 - 13 Nancy Bermeo, 'On Democratic Backsliding', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2016, pp. 5–19.
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 - 15 *Ibid.*
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