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Putin's Neo-Soviet Men

BY MATTHEW KAMINSKI

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Simferopol, Ukraine — Late the other night at 7 Pyatnits (“7 Fridays”), one of a few fashionable restaurant bars in the Crimean capital, the Soviet national anthem came on the karaoke machine. A couple of guys grabbed the microphone. Their girlfriends and a few others joined in, formed a dancing circle and together sang out the last refrain, “O Party of Lenin, the strength of the people,/ To Communism’s triumph lead us on!”

None of them looked old enough to remember the U.S.S.R. They wore casual clothes and carried smartphones. It’s safe to say their nostalgia wasn’t for class struggle or the Soviet lifestyle. This kind of nod to past Soviet glory is a favored way to express support for a revived Great Russian power in the future.

It comes in various forms in Crimea, parts of Ukraine and Russia itself. There’s all the “U.S.S.R. lives!” graffiti, and repurposed Soviet flags and slogans. There’s the Kremlin’s obsessive anti-Americanism. The orange-and-black ribbons of St. George favored by Russian nationalists are most closely associated with Soviet victory over the Nazis. The war was used to legitimize Soviet rule, and Vladimir Putin has appropriated it for his attack on Ukraine’s supposedly illegitimate and Nazi government.

The neo-Soviet man is the latest Putin avatar. In 1999, the obscure KGB colonel established his credentials for Russia’s presidency by waging war on the Chechens and improving the economy in the following decade. When he lost the educated middle classes of Moscow and St. Petersburg who demonstrated against a corrupt and authoritarian Kremlin in late 2011 — and growth slowed to a trickle after so many years of theft and bad investment — out came an ultra-nationalist with Soviet imperial ambitions.

Russians fiddled with press freedoms and political pluralism after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, but that “didn’t work,” as the Russian writer and filmmaker Alexander Nevzorov put it this week, and the familiar “cocktail of patriotism, chauvinism, imperialism” goes down all too easily.

In his speech annexing Ukraine’s Crimea last week, Mr.

Putin added a pointed retro-Stalinist warning about “a fifth column, this disparate bunch of ‘national traitors’.” He’s signaling a worse purge to come after two years of unremitting repression of dissent inside Russia — and a wider and ongoing conflict with Ukraine fought with higher natural gas prices, trade embargoes, KGB-style subversion and possibly tanks and soldiers. Mr. Putin has no good reason to stop with Crimea.

Moscow liberals may groan, and tens of thousands of them did come out to protest against conflict with Ukraine, but the neo-Soviet revival has pushed support for Mr. Putin at home to 80%, up 11 points in a month, according to a Levada Center poll released on Wednesday. As intended,

The young Crimean barhoppers singing the Soviet national anthem don’t know what they’re missing.

the invasion and war talk distracts from the bad Russian economy and hurts Ukraine’s chances of becoming a functioning (and Russian speaking!) democracy, the Kremlin’s worst nightmare next door.

So Mr. Putin rages about Western decadence from Moscow, the Gomorrah of easy petro-millions and everything-for-sale mores. While Russian propaganda portrays Ukraine as a fascist threat, the Kremlin encourages neo-Nazi groups at home. The number of reported hate crimes in Russia is rising, hitting a peak last year.

“This is not even double standards. This is amazing, primitive, blunt cynicism. One should not try so crudely to make everything suit their interests, calling the same thing white today and black tomorrow.” In his speech last week, Mr. Putin was riffing on the West’s “double standards” toward Kosovo and Crimea, but the self-analysis was strikingly apt. Or maybe they’ve not heard of Freudian projection at the Kremlin.

The Putin ideologies are a unique “fusion of despotism and postmodernism, in which no truth is certain,” as Peter Pomerantsev has written, “a world of masks and poses, colorful but empty, with little at its core but power for power’s sake and the accumulation of vast wealth.”

Neo-Sovietism offers up Russian jingoism stripped bare of Marxist internationalist pretenses, which scares its neighbors and could be used to further isolate a friendless Moscow in the region. The Kremlin elite’s unimaginable wealth and power offers another opportunity to end the Putin march.

Will the neo-Soviet men in that Crimean bar truly sac-

rifice their material happiness and vacations abroad for a bunch of Kremlin “thieves and crooks” (to use dissident blogger Alexei Navalny’s famous phrase)? Will Moscow tycoons sit by as the ruble tumbles, the economy stalls and their access to bank accounts, yachts and schools for their kids in the West is endangered? Much harder sanctions than the European Union and America have so far proved willing to consider could test these propositions.

There’s another familiar note from the past. Over the last four months, Kiev came to resemble Gdansk or Prague in 1989 or Lithuania’s rebellious capital Vilnius a few years later — the scene of a society coming of age, demanding a say over its own future, preferably in a free Europe. Then as now, standing in the way is a little man at the Kremlin desperate to hold on to the Soviet/Russian empire and his own throne.

Mr. Kaminski is a member of the Journal’s editorial board.