



**DANISH INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**

STRANDGADE 56 • 1401 COPENHAGEN K • DENMARK

TEL +45 32 69 87 87 • [diis@diis.dk](mailto:diis@diis.dk) • [www.diis.dk](http://www.diis.dk)

**A TIME LIKE NO OTHER:  
RUSSIAN POLITICS AFTER THE END OF HISTORY**

Sergei Prozorov

*DIIS Working Paper no 2006/17*

© Copenhagen 2006

Danish Institute for International Studies, DIIS

Strandgade 56, DK-1401 Copenhagen, Denmark

Ph: +45 32 69 87 87

Fax: +45 32 69 87 00

E-mails: [diis@diis.dk](mailto:diis@diis.dk)

Web: [www.diis.dk](http://www.diis.dk)

Cover Design: Carsten Schiøler

Printed in Denmark by Vesterkopi as

ISBN: 87-7605-152-8

Price: DKK 25.00 (VAT included)

DIIS publications can be downloaded  
free of charge from [www.diis.dk](http://www.diis.dk)

This paper has been produced as part of the “Europe’s North” working group within the EU-financed EUBorderConf project (Fifth Framework Programme, cf. <http://www.euborderconf.bham.ac/uk>), run in part by DIIS and directed by Pertti Joenniemi, Senior Research Fellow at the Department of European Studies at DIIS. Dr. Prozorov worked at DIIS as a quest researcher during the year 2004.

**Dr. Sergei Prozorov**, Professor of International Relations

Department of International Relations

Petrozavodsk State University

[Sproz@mail.ru](mailto:Sproz@mail.ru)

# Contents

Summary.....	2
Introduction: The Long Farewell to the 1990s.....	3
Timelessness without End: How Things Take Place without Significance.....	4
The Suspension of the Messianic: Why Russia No Longer Celebrates November 7.....	14
Happily Everafter: How to Forget the Future.....	22

## SUMMARY

The paper ventures a reading of Russian postcommunist politics from the perspective of the messianic turn in continental political philosophy, specifically Giorgio Agamben's conception of the 'end of history'. Taking its point of departure from a retrospective construction in the Russian political discourse of the 1990s as a period of 'timelessness', the paper argues that postcommunism may indeed be viewed as a paradoxical 'time out of time', a rupture in the ordinary temporality that entirely dispenses with the teleological horizon of politics. While the problematic of the 'end of history' has been popularised by Francis Fukuyama's liberal recasting of Kojève's reading of Hegel, the Russian experience is entirely contrary to this complacent and self-gratifying account of the triumph of liberalism but rather accords with Agamben's understanding of the end of history as the deactivation of the teleological dimension of politics as such. The paper concludes with outlining the implications of this reading of Russian postcommunism for understanding the present conjuncture of Russian politics, particularly the difference between the Yeltsin and the Putin presidencies.

# A Time like no Other: Russian Politics after the End of History

Dr. Sergei Prozorov

The life that begins on earth after the last day is simply human life. (*Giorgio Agamben, The Coming Community, 6-7*)

## INTRODUCTION: THE LONG FAREWELL TO THE 1990S

Contemporary Russian politics is conventionally grasped in terms of a simple antithesis of the Yeltsinite decade of the 1990s. From its very emergence, the Putin presidency posited as the condition of its legitimacy the overcoming of the 1990s in numerous ways: political stabilisation, economic growth, the reassertion of sovereignty in foreign policy, the restoration of historical tradition, the reconstitution of the state, etc. Despite the origin of the Putin presidency in his designation by President Yeltsin as his successor, the regime's discourse of self-legitimation has invariably articulated the 'Putin era' as an outright negation of the 1990s as 'Yeltsin's decade'. Responding to criticism of contemporary policies, the apologists of the current administration never fail to remark that the present situation is 'at least better than in the 1990s'. Conversely, the most damaging criticism of the Putin administration, advanced e.g. in the left-conservative circles, relates precisely to the denial of this negation by pointing out that the 'farewell to the 1990s', inaugurated by the Presidency, is at best illusory and that at worst the Putin administration persists, ever-more cynically, in the same political paradigm that characterised the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> The discussion of whether 'Putinism' is as heterogeneous to 'Yeltsinism' as its advocates claim is perhaps the core of the contemporary political debate in Russia. Rather than make another contribution to this interminable discourse, we propose to focus on its central presupposition, which characterises the positions of practically all its practitioners, i.e. the *disavowal* of the 1990s. Whether one believes that the politics of the Putin administration marks an overcoming of the

---

<sup>1</sup> This is the position of Stanislav Belkovsky and the numerous researchers of the Institute of National Strategy that he founded in 2003. See e.g. Belkovsky, "Posledny Blef Putina", APN, <http://www.apn.ru>.

1990s or remains tied to this period, the decade itself appears to receive an almost universal condemnation. Furthermore, this condemnation does not merely single out particular features of this period as an object of negation, but rather negates the 1990s in their entirety, negates this period as a *time of pure negativity*. In a previous study we have discussed this disavowal in terms of the dialectic of politicisation and depoliticisation that inevitably accompanies the revolutionary moment, of which the demise of Soviet socialism is certainly a prime example. In this article, we shall focus in more detail on the specifically temporal aspects of the period of the 1990s and the contemporary period that remains tied to the 1990s by a complex ritual of disavowals and recuperations. We shall argue that the perception of the 1990s as a ‘negative time’ is correct ontologically, if not normatively, insofar as this period has been marked by a paradoxical temporality that is best grasped with the help of Giorgio Agamben’s understanding of ‘messianic time’ and his idiosyncratic reading of the ‘end of history’. Similarly, we shall propose that the Putin period does not break with this ‘post-historical’ temporality in spite of its diametrically opposite relation to its post-revolutionary nature. These reflections on the specific temporality of ‘our time’ serve as prolegomena for the much more extensive project of rethinking Russian postcommunist politics with a view to establishing modes of political practice proper to the strange present which we inhabit – a project whose time has long arrived, but whose temporality is entirely alien to the linear-progressivist and circular-conservative narratives that preclude from the outset any possibility of understanding the Russian politics of our time.

## **TIMELESSNESS WITHOUT END: HOW THINGS TAKE PLACE WITHOUT SIGNIFICANCE**

In the contemporary Russian discourse on the 1990s, this period is regularly characterised in terms of ‘timelessness’ (*bezvremenie*), a veritable black hole in between the crisis of the Soviet order and the reassertion of the Russian ‘liberal bureaucratic’ state under President Putin. However facile, these readings are not entirely without credence, since it is possible to establish a historical connection between the Putin period and the crisis-ridden period of the later Perestroika. Ironically, however unpredictable Putin’s rise to power was in 1999, it was perfectly anticipated in the late 1980s, when the media discourse on the immediate future of Soviet politics was dominated with hyperbolic fears and hopes for ‘black colonels’, who would restore order, drop the degenerate Marxist-Leninist ideology and introduce a ‘modern’ economic system with an ‘iron fist’. This ‘authoritarian modernisation’ scenario is precisely what happened in Russia in the late 1990s, although in that context it was a lot less likely, in comparison with such alternative scenarios as the *revanche* of the Communist party or the triumph of far-right populism of either Vladimir Zhirinovskiy or Alexander Lebed. One can therefore link up Gorbachev and Putin eras

in a straight historical narrative, beginning with failed attempts to reform the system from within and ending with a moderately successful restoration of order and welfare under a modernising autocracy. In a retroactive projection, Russia could have simply moved from Gorbachev to Putin, bypassing the 1990s. This is what is suggested in many semi-official narratives, for which the Yeltsin period is indeed reduced to a 'nightmare', which is of course a period of time that is, as it were, taken out of the 'normal temporality' of existence, even if it leaves its lurid stain on it at the moment of awakening.

Should we then drop the 1990s as a mere disappointing deviation, a period of meaningless lingering in political instability and a chronic crisis, a 'waste of time'? In fact, it is precisely the strange temporality of the 1990s that permits to reassess this period in the light of contemporary tendencies in the Putin presidency. Such a reassessment has nothing to do with endorsing particular tendencies and policies of that period as somehow more 'progressive', 'liberal' or 'democratic' than the present course of development. While the half-hearted valorisation of the 1990s as an era of 'reforms' in some circles of the 'liberal' anti-Putin opposition appears to us to be entirely implausible, there remains something intangibly attractive in this period that could be the object of a Foucauldian gesture of 'nonpositive affirmation', possibly the only possible form of affirmation available to us in the present condition of global post-political scepticism and a self-righteous cynicism that permeates the entire political spectrum in Russia.

The 1990s are indeed a time like no other. In the present context of political consolidation and economic growth this period is used as a derogatory metaphor for two at first glance incompatible modes of temporality. For some, the 1990s are the moment of *ceaseless* political activity, endless change and constant crisis, a period when time, as it were, *accelerated* itself to the point of *unbearably rapid* transformation, so that the present political stabilisation is a 'healthy' symptom of a return to normality after a bad dream. For others, the 1990s are a period of 'timelessness' (*bezvremenie*), when nothing really happened or all that happened was in vain. For instance, political struggle between the Yeltsin presidency and its opposition in the Congress of People's Deputies during 1991-1993 or the Communist-dominated Duma during 1995-1999 was manifestly a zero-sum (if not a negative-sum) game, which weakened both parties and entailed that every victory was, in a sense, a return to 'square one', a replay of the foundational moment of the end of the Soviet order. All political struggles of this period were paradoxically inconclusive, victory (which was usually Yeltsin's) being frequently indistinguishable from defeat, as the old antagonism was immediately reinscribed in a new form. In this sense, the landmark events of the politics of the 1990s (the dissolution of the Congress of People's Deputies in 1993, Yeltsin's re-election in 1996, Yevgeny Primakov's ascent to and descent from power in 1998-1999) were manifest non-events, as all that was revealed in them was simply the perpetuation of the existing

structure in an unstable and illegitimate mode. Perhaps, these diametrically opposed diagnoses should be read together: during the 1990s *too much actually took place, but with no effect*. The diagnosis of timelessness then refers not to the *temporality* but to the *finality* of the event. The 1990s were a period of momentous *change without end* in both senses of the word: the change lacked all purpose precisely in its being ceaseless and was ceaseless by virtue of the absence of any purpose.

It is not surprising that this period was marked by a strange and discomfoting temporality. In the Russian experience, the 1990s stand for the revolutionary moment of *foundation* and this period is therefore by definition ‘a time out of joint’, an uncomfortable *time out of time*, a time of timelessness that can only retroactively be posited as the ‘dawn’ of a new temporality or be otherwise recuperated in a regular chronology. As a momentary spark of violent revolt that dispenses with the old order and inaugurates a new one, revolutionary time is always, as it were, taken out of the ‘normal’ chronological context or ‘borrowed’ from it. The failure of revolution restores this ‘borrowed time’ to the old regime in the form of a pure negation of the revolution as a ‘time of troubles’ or a ‘putsch’. On the other hand, the success of the revolution inaugurates a new temporality, whereby the time, borrowed from the temporality of the old regime itself becomes the source of value, functioning as the foundational moment of the new order. In no case, however, does revolutionary time re-enter the temporal economy without being radically transformed. The difference of the Russian experience from this logic of the ‘extra-temporal’ revolutionary spark simply consists in the fact that this moment lasted far longer than one might expect, i.e. for the most part of the decade of the 1990s, and, as we shall argue below, might still be with us today.

In a previous book we have defined this period in terms of the *lingering of the political*, a paradoxical perpetuation of the foundational moment of postcommunism for almost a decade, when the revolutionary origin of the new regime remained visible, which hampered any efforts to depoliticise the new regime by reinscribing founding acts in terms of stable foundations.<sup>2</sup> Empirically, this failure to depoliticise owed to the political weakness of the presidency, which remained embattled by the oppositional legislature, separatist tendencies in the regions and the

---

<sup>2</sup> See Sergei Prozorov, *Political Pedagogy of Technical Assistance: A Study in Historical Ontology of Russian Postcommunism* (Tampere: Studia Politica Tamperensis, 2004), chapter 4. The dialectic of the appearance of the political event and its depoliticising occultation has been addressed by Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* (Cambridge: The MIT Press), Jacques Derrida “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundations of Authority’” in Drucilla Cornell et al (Eds.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (London: Routledge, 1992); Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).



assault on the political autonomy of the state by the oligarchic clans of business elites.<sup>3</sup> The overall effect of the lingering of the political was precisely this perception of ceaseless and meaningless activity of change without end, of a revolution that reflexively turned to revolutionising itself, increasingly creating the impression that the Yeltsin regime was literally living ‘on borrowed time’.

At the same time, this lingering state of political rupture was never a mere ‘waste of time’ in the sense of the absence of political content. We should rather say that the 1990s were *oversaturated* in terms of content and it is precisely this oversaturation that in our view provides a clue to the strange temporality of the 1990s. As a time out of time, this period *condenses a multiplicity of times*, uniting in a single decade all that *might have happened*, all possibilities of Russia’s political development, and *suspending* them at the very moment when a single model of the future looked set to become irreversible. The 1990s were therefore also a *time of trials*, of trying out every possible pathway of future development at the same time, without a final commitment to any single one of them. Ironically, one of the reasons why the Putin project of state-led authoritarian modernisation eventually came out on top is because most other options have already been tried out in this suspended time: General Lebed’s military-style right-wing conservatism, Zhirinovskiy’s carnivalesque street populism, Chernomyrdin’s and Primakov’s bureaucratic ‘centrism’, CPRF’s communist revanchism with a nationalist flair, a technocratic market liberalism of a Chubais or Kirienko, etc. All of these potential outcomes of postcommunist transformation actually *took place* but were *suspended*, in all cases by Yeltsin himself (through his unmatched art of creating and then resolving political crises), who himself arguably did not *stand for* anything at all other than radical openness of the political and resistance to its closure. The Yeltsin period witnessed a series of brief hegemonies of alternative political orientations (e.g. the Lebed moment in 1996 or the Primakov ascendancy in 1998-1999), but as soon as these hegemonies threatened to redefine the Russian political space, they were effaced by Yeltsin’s intervention, which arrested the rise to power of the hegemonic figure in question. For example, the sacking of Lebed from the position of the Head of Security Council in Autumn 1996 led to Lebed’s gradual disappearance from national politics and his subsequent self-imposed exile as a regional governor. The dismissal of the Primakov cabinet in May 1999 that was wrongly expected to prop up Primakov’s chances as an oppositional presidential candidate actually led to Primakov’s retreat into obscurity with the advent of Putin. The issue here is not the detailed dynamics of political struggle, which were

---

<sup>3</sup> See Prozorov, *Political Pedagogy*; Prozorov, “EU-Russian Regional Cooperation: Logics of Regionalisation and the Challenge of the Exception” in Chris Browning (Ed.), *Remaking Europe at the Margins: Northern Europe after the Enlargements* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

different in every case but the general tendency of the *suspension of all futurity in a radically open present*.

Against all accusatory attributions to Yeltsin of an autocratic style, we must assert that Yeltsin's rationality of rule was in a strict sense *anti-hegemonic* at the same time as it was *sovereign* in Carl Schmitt's sense. Recalling the decade of Yeltsin's rule we can't help noticing that Yeltsin's leadership in 'normal' political periods was close to disastrous, being marked by incessant court intrigues, the high influence of informal or 'shadow' interests and a generally poor state of administration. At the same time, Yeltsin was incomparably successful as a leader in times of crisis, which is perhaps less surprising given that the crises in question were of his own making. In full accordance with Schmitt's dictum, Yeltsin only decided on the exception, leaving the capacity of everyday administration of the state to the competing interest groups in and out of the government. Starting from Yeltsin's masterful seizure of power in the aftermath of the failed coup of August 1991 to the equally brilliant transfer of power to Putin as a designated successor on the Eve of the Millennium, we observe a series of interventions that frequently came at the last moment, when it was thought that the opposition was firmly on its way to power. Failing miserably in establishing a meaningful sociopolitical order of his own, Yeltsin nonetheless also succeeded in preventing all other political forces from doing this, so that the political history of the 1990s may be viewed as a series of 'averted catastrophes' or 'lost opportunities', depending on one's political orientation.

What Yeltsin's sovereignty guarded was not any positive order but the very possibility of trying out various courses of political development that, however, could always be *played back*, suspended or reversed with no consequence for the country. If politics resembled a theatre in the 1990s, it is because it was indeed a spectacle, in which political struggle took place intensely but somehow *not seriously*, as something that can always be suspended by an intermission or simply finished when the time of performance runs out.<sup>4</sup> Risking a psychological explanation, we might venture that this political style might well be an idiosyncrasy of a revolutionary that Yeltsin clearly was: having succeeded in the struggle against Soviet communism, which even the most radical

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Mikhail Remizov, "Apologia Vlasti: Razmyshlenia po Sledam Spektaklya". *NG-Stsenarii*, no. 8 (53) (2000). The reader might consider it questionable to speak of the 'unserious' nature of such events as the suppression of the nationalist-communist uprising in October 1993. At the same time, the fact that all the participants of this 'mutiny' were amnestied weeks after the event of the uprising and some have subsequently pursued rather lucrative political careers in the new regime points to a certain reversibility of this event. The sad fact that most of the victims of these events were non-participating bystanders also points to the fact that the costs of the political spectacle were largely borne by its audience rather than by its participants.

dissidents comfortably viewed as requiring years if not decades, he remained too stunned by his own victory to attempt the construction of a new system. Instead, Yeltsin's decade of rule may be viewed as a certain mesmerized fixation on the ruins of the Soviet order that from the outset disabled any productive activity. Having dared and succeeded in destroying a system with claims to world-historical significance, Yeltsin could only be expected to perceive any construction of a new system to be a project that was doomed from the outset. However, this sense of futility was not Yeltsin's alone: the radical nationalist and Communist opposition to Yeltsin throughout the 1990s was remarkably half-hearted (as was its support by the society), carrying a romantic air of a 'lost cause' even before its cause was properly articulated.<sup>5</sup> The enormity of the collapse of the Soviet order was such that it could well be perceived as the 'end of time', which indeed calls for a certain suspension of action because *everything has already happened*. In this sense, the temporality of the lingering moment of the political is clearly of the order of *messianic suspension* as described by Giorgio Agamben.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> The writings of Alexander Prokhanov, a novelist and a founding editor of the national-Communist weekly *Zavtra* that has been the primary forum of radical opposition, are particularly illustrative of this tendency.

<sup>6</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), *Potentialities: Selected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). In Agamben's work, as well as generally in the 'messianic' turn in political philosophy (Derrida, Badiou, Taubes, etc.), the concept of the messianic is divorced both from the concrete figure of the messiah and from the theological tradition in general. This 'messianism without messianism' only seeks to retain in the messianic tradition the experience of a pure event that ruptures the existing order of being, radically reshaping one's conditions of existence. In this sense, the concept of the messianic functions as a metaphor that condenses a number of problematics that have long preoccupied continental philosophy, from the concept of the event to the experience of radical alterity. In this 'messianic constellation', we may distinguish between the Derridean approach, which conceives of the messianic as 'to-come', present in the present only in the modality of a promise or injunction, and Agamben's more strictly speaking *post-messianic* approach, in which the messianic moment has already arrived or, more precisely, there is no need to wait for its arrival since it is fully available to us in our present existence. While Derrida's 'weak messianism' does not seek to dispense with the existing structures of order but rather to highlight the undecidability and the presence of the messianic promise within them, Agamben's 'strong messianism' seeks to dispense with the existing structure of the political as such in a self-consciously apocalyptic prophecy of a profane 'happy life' beyond the reach of the law. For the discussion of the differences between Derrida and Agamben see Adam Thurschwell, *Specters of Nietzsche: Potential Futures for the Concept of the Political in Agamben and Derrida*, mimeo (2002), Catherine Mills, "Agamben's Messianic Politics: Biopolitics, Abandonment and Happy Life", *Contretemps*, vol.5 (2004).

In the time of messianic suspension, all time is *fulfilled* and in a way comes to an *end*. “The messianic time – insofar as what is at stake in it is the fulfilment of times – brings about a recapitulation, a sort of *abridgement of all things*, both heavenly and earthly – a vertiginous consummation of the whole history, in which all the events which occurred from the creation on are summoned to appearing in the messianic now.”<sup>7</sup> In our case, we are dealing not merely with the consummation of all history but also with the condensation into the revolutionary time of all possibilities of the future. This is not the end of history in the familiar trivial sense of the establishment of a single teleological temporality, prophesied by Francis Fukuyama. In contrast, history arrives at its end because of the rupture of the revolutionary event, whose radical openness entails that *all possible futures are present in the here and now*. The messianic time of postcommunism is the time of extraordinary condensation of *potentialities*, all of which are however suspended in the aspect of their *actualisation*. All things can and do happen, though without significance or finality, ‘as if they did not’. All restorations of the past and visions of the future are summoned up in the messianic now and are in a certain sense accomplished, but precisely because all these incompatible things are *equally accomplished*, none of them are accomplished in a final, non-transitory state.

All things could unfold in the timelessness of the 1990s, but precisely because this time is out of normal, ‘chronological’ or historical time, their unfolding is entirely inconsequential. This is the end of history in the sense of the messianic suspension of all teleology, whereby the sacrifices of the past and the dreams of the future are all equally redeemed in the timeless *now*. The difference between Agamben’s messianic concept of the end of history and the more familiar, liberal-universalist reading by Fukuyama is evident: what is at stake for Agamben is not the triumph of one progressive teleology but the destruction of the teleological dimension as such. In a sense, the 1990s were the time of the *many ends of history*, the simultaneous expiry of *all* teleological metanarratives that ultimately displaced the very teleological terrain, in which they could compete. With the end of the Soviet order history ended not because of the unrivalled supremacy of Western liberalism (that itself could only be established by a facile subtraction of the Soviet Union from the bipolar system) but rather because the pitiful demise of the Soviet order made the very idea of rivalry between grand teleological metanarratives inconceivable. The end of the Soviet Union, which has famously failed to be predicted by analysts inside and outside the country, marked a violent entry of pure contingency into politics, after which ‘history’ as a field of contestation between rival images of the future lost the very condition of its possibility. Insofar as such contestation did take place in the Russia of the 1990s, it was tainted from the

---

<sup>7</sup> Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, 5?

outset by the perception of this impossibility to master history, which renders all ‘substantive’, future-oriented politics suspect not only due to its insensitivity to contingency (a point raised repeatedly in the Western critical discourse with regard to any value-based politics as potentially ‘totalitarian’) but also due to the meaninglessness of the very discourse on historical progress amid the ruins of Soviet socialism. This permits to understand why the frequently discussed depoliticisation of the Russian society took place almost *immediately* after the anticommunist revolution in August 1991.<sup>8</sup> Rather than a betrayal of the anticommunist revolution, this retreat into private life was rather its logical conclusion. The exodus of the society from the space of value-based political antagonism left Russian politics to its own devices, so that it increasingly resembled a spectacle with an ever-diminishing audience.<sup>9</sup> The anti-communist revolution was manifestly not democratic, let alone liberal, but rather *perfectly nihilist* in sense given to the term by both Benjamin and Agamben.<sup>10</sup> Rather than attempt to depose a discredited order and replace it with a positive alternative (liberalism, nationalism, etc.), the anticommunist revolution suspended the very possibility of the construction of a new order, instituting instead a paradoxical, permanently unstable regime, whose authority was only sufficient to ensure that nothing ever takes the vacant place of the Soviet order. All things could *happen* (the revolution was, after all, about freedom), but they should not *matter* to the society in the sense of once again transforming its conditions of existence or putting this existence at stake in yet another ‘progressive project’. The societal depoliticisation in the 1990s might therefore be viewed as itself a form of politics, i.e. a politics of fundamental *passivity* in Agamben’s sense. According to Stefano Franchi, Agamben’s concept of passivity must not be read in terms of pure inactivity, but rather as a ceaseless activity that is however deprived of any telos, whereby all sorts of things happen for no reason whatsoever. This is of course the only politics proper to the suspension of teleology in the end of history:

---

<sup>8</sup> See Prozorov, “The Paradox of Infra-Liberalism: Towards a Genealogy of ‘Managed Democracy’ in Putin’s Russia” in Harald Wydra and Alexander Woell, Alexander (Eds.), *Myth and Democracy in Eastern Europe* (Forthcoming, 2006), Marc Garcelon, “The Shadow of the Leviathan: Public and Private in Communist and Post-Communist Society” in Jeff Weintraub and Krishan Kumar, Eds, *Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997); Oleg Kharkhordin, ‘Reveal and Dissimulate: A Genealogy of Private Life in Soviet Russia’ in Jeff Weintraub and Krishan Kumar, Eds, *Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997); Lev Gudkov, ‘Russia: A Society in Transition?’ *Telos*, no. 120 (2001).

<sup>9</sup> For the more detailed discussion of these developments see Prozorov, “Infra-Liberalism”.

<sup>10</sup> See Mills, “Agamben’s Messianic Politics”, note 48, p. 60. See more generally Agamben “The Messiah and the Sovereign” in *Potentialities*.

Historical beings act in order to bring about certain ends; in the political realm, they act in order to transform the ideal ends provided by the metaphysical description of man into actuality by transforming or empirically negating the given reality. Post-historical beings, being the rascals they truly are, *just act with no particular end in sight*. Their life is pure self-contained action that does not receive its meaning from a transcendent *telos*, but becomes, paradoxically, meaningful in its being meaningless.<sup>11</sup>

In the absence of a transcendent *telos*, 'post-historical' existence becomes its own only value, which is summed up in the key concept of Agamben's ontology, 'being-such' or 'whatever being', i.e. "life for which living itself would be at stake in its own living". The affirmation of 'being-such' by the society which exited the condition of Soviet socialism is furthest away from the mantras of 'transition to democracy' that passed for political analysis for the most part of the 1990s. Indeed, if there is any substance at all in this politics of whatever being, it is the refusal of any idea of 'transition', of any demand of the population to submit its existence to any political project ever again.

The "happy life" on which political philosophy should be founded thus cannot be either the naked life that sovereignty posits as a presupposition so as to turn it into its own subject or the impenetrable extraneity of science and of modern biopolitics that everybody tries in vain to sacralize. This "happy life" should be rather, *an absolutely profane "sufficient life" that has reached the perfection of its own power and its own communicability*—a life over which sovereignty and right no longer have any hold.<sup>12</sup>

In the manner of Melville's *Bartleby*, a figure that probably embodies Agamben's entire philosophy, the Russian society 'would prefer not to' engage in any transition, transformation or

---

<sup>11</sup> Stefano Franchi, "Passive Politics", *Contretemps*, vol. 5. (2004), 26.

<sup>12</sup> Agamben, *Means Without End*, 114-115.

reform and only engages in politics to defend its 'being-such-as-it-is'.<sup>13</sup> The societal exit from the political space in the course of anticommunist revolution may thus be said to perform a 'messianic shift that *integrally changes the world, leaving it almost intact*'<sup>14</sup> – nothing much really took place in 1991, in comparison with the other great revolutions of modernity, but nonetheless after this event everything has changed, even if and especially when it appeared to stay the same. Artemiy Magun is thus entirely correct in his claim that the 'minimal' character of the anticommunist revolution is not an indicator of its deficiency, but rather the proof that this revolution was a genuine event, a purely formal act of negation, after which nothing stays the same even if it does not undergo any substantive change.<sup>15</sup> What the messianic shift of the 1990s has left us with is a sense of the profound impossibility of any teleological politics due to the societal refusal to lend its present-being-such for any *work* towards the future. In other words, the postcommunist society has refused the *appropriation of temporality by state power*, whereby the society would surrender its living in the pure present and be left with an indeterminate and worthless 'bright future'. By virtue of this single gesture, both the progress of the liberal-democratic transition and any kind of restoration and revanche have become impossible.

---

<sup>13</sup> See Prozorov, "Infra-Liberalism" for a more detailed empirical discussion of this situation. The singular value of Agamben's conception of passive politics is that it permits to approach without facile condemnations, quasi-cultural totalisations and dubious definitions-by-negation, the phenomenon of societal depoliticisation that is given a mention in practically every study of Russian politics since the early 1990s but never, to our knowledge, approached in its positivity, but always viewed as a (more or, usually, less tolerable) lack, deficiency or an indicator of deviance or pathology. Such an a priori negative construction of the object of analysis is problematic not only because it permits the analyst to speak in the enunciative modality of a doctor, offering to cure this societal pathology, but also because from the methodological standpoint this stance 'doctors' the empirical evidence, describing what-is in terms of what-it-is-not. The benefit of an Agambenian reading of the societal retreat from politics is therefore not whether it is more or less 'applicable' or 'correct' with respect to Russian postcommunism, but that it offers a mode of description, in which this phenomenon can be rendered in its positivity. The same goes for the more general argument of the 'post-historical' and 'post-messianic' character of Russian postcommunism. It is evident that we are not making an empirical claim that 'Russian history has ended' or that 'history has ended in Russia', which would be logically impossible precisely as an empirical claim, since it would be impossible to refute it. The end of history does not function as an empirical observation, nor is it any form of a regulative idea or, by definition, a utopian promise. It is rather an ethos, in the form of a way of life or a relation to the self, that is situated entirely in the present and acquires its specificity precisely from this 'being entirely in the present'.

<sup>14</sup> Agamben, *Means without End*, 79.

<sup>15</sup> See Artemiy Magun, "Opyt i Ponyatie Revolutsii", *Novoje Literaturnoje Obozrenie*, vol. 64 (2003).

In the remainder of this article we shall probe the question of how this paradoxical politics of the 1990s has fared in the Putin period, whose official discourse has posited the task of the overcoming of the 1990s.

## THE SUSPENSION OF THE MESSIANIC: WHY RUSSIA NO LONGER CELEBRATES NOVEMBER 7

Putinism is normally viewed by both its adherents and its critics as a period of time *after* the end of time, a return to normality after a traumatic rupture of Yeltsinism that lingered for an entire decade. However, why was Yeltsin's 'sovereign anarchism' succeeded precisely by Putin's liberal-bureaucratic authoritarianism with (as we shall argue below) its highly specific vision of normality? We may suggest that it was because this mode of depoliticisation is paradoxically *closest* to Yeltsinite 'time of trials' in retaining the radical openness of the political despite being strictly speaking its *diametrical opposite*. The two temporalities are identical in their suspension of teleological time of 'normal politics', i.e. *progressive development* within a certain institutional, ideological and symbolic order. A pure moment of the political is closer to a moment of pure depoliticisation than to a hegemonic articulation of a particular political orientation (e.g. communism, nationalism or liberalism), which delegitimises all others. The triumph of any particular political pathway of development and its universalisation through the adoption of a hegemonic status breaks out of the messianic time of coexistence of radically incompatible elements in a suspended form and opts for one such element as a model of development (progressive time) with a simultaneous delegitimation of all others. In contrast, Putin's bureaucratic depoliticisation suspends the legitimacy of all political options (witness the decline of all ideological parties, from liberals to communists) *without itself occupying a substantive ideological locus*.

Putin's style of rule has been manifestly deprived of any trace of 'revolutionary' (or counter-revolutionary) political charisma, so characteristic of the political elite of the early 1990s.<sup>16</sup> Public opinion surveys in Russia have demonstrated that despite extremely high approval ratings, the President's figure stirs very little public emotion or passion, receives no 'admiration' or 'love'. The public opinion of the President is rather 'positively indifferent'. The 'carnival style' of

---

<sup>16</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Putin's style of rule see Prozorov, "Infra-Liberalism", Prozorov, "Russian Conservatism in the Putin Presidency: The Dispersion of a Hegemonic Discourse", *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2005).



Yeltsin-era politics<sup>17</sup>, characterised by hyperbolically intense political divisions and mass media controversies has given way to the technocratic and business-like style, thoroughly devoid of the political pathos of the 'Perestroika' period and early post-communist politics. In a number of interviews and speeches, Putin has repeatedly presented himself as a 'hired manager', providing 'services to the population'.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the Putin presidency has been marked by the decline of interest in the elevated and elusive 'national idea' as the ethico-political foundation for the new Russian state. In a number of public appearances, Putin has offered as his vision of the national idea 'the idea of effective and efficient statehood'. Critical commentators have correctly pointed out that this answer simply evades the question, offering the *achievement* of desired goals in the least costly manner as the *definition* of these very goals. Putin delegitimises all determinate answers to the question of Russia's future (the vexing question of the 'Russian national idea') but refrains from offering his own answer.

The fractured society clumsily asks [the President] how to become *whole*, and he answers that it must become *wealthy*. Strictly speaking, the president's response is tautological: *he refers to efficiency, while the question is about charting that very social unity, which subsequently may be found efficient or inefficient.* [...] To declare pragmatism as the ideology of power in today's Russia is merely to put the cart before the horse.<sup>19</sup>

The increase of the momentum and efficiency of the reform process in the absence of political confrontation has been described as the main achievement of the Putin presidency and a sign of political consolidation and stabilisation in postcommunist Russia. The relative success of this consolidation is well illustrated by the bitterness with which it is addressed by Putin's opponents from the 'left-conservative' camp<sup>20</sup>:

The decade of reforms was sufficient to come to terms with 'being-thrown-into-the-market' as something inevitable. Two years of Putin's 'rule' were sufficient to spontaneously *legitimate the post-Soviet structural degradation of society [...] as a constituted and adequate reality*. This is the necessary precondition of the conservative politico-

---

<sup>17</sup> As a side comment, let us recall that the temporality of the carnival was described in Bakhtin's classic study of Rabelais as, in a sense, 'taken out' from the course of ordinary chronological time.

<sup>18</sup> The latter expression was used by Putin to describe his 'occupation' during his televised participation in the census poll in October 2002.

See e.g. <http://www.izvestia.ru/community/article24971>.

<sup>19</sup> Remizov, "Vtoroye Dyhanie", *Russkiy Zhurnal*: <http://www.russ.ru/politics/20030214-rem-pr.html> (2002).

<sup>20</sup> See Prozorov, "Russian Conservatism".

psychological complex: the ability to perceive one's social environment not in terms of collapse, catastrophe or a chaotic 'transitional moment' but as a crystallised reality, with regard to which it is possible to talk about 'conservation', 'reproduction' and 'transformation'.<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, it appears difficult to reconcile this impressive degree of stabilisation and consolidation with Putin's tautological politics of efficiency, which evades any determinate answer to the question of *for what* the society must be stabilised or consolidated. Early in the Putin presidency, this dissonance resulted in the increasing recourse to phantasmatic discourses that claim to find behind the façade of sterile technocracy something like a 'real Putin' with a substantive political project that was, depending on the taste of the observer, either extremely liberal or extremely authoritarian – but *always* extreme, as if the only way to compensate for the surface nihilism of Putinite politics was to imagine its 'real' content to be so extreme as to somehow *deserve* being hidden. As Mikhail Remizov, a conservative political philosopher, has amply demonstrated, these discourses have been little more than self-serving illusions, since a hidden or latent political project is a contradiction in terms, the political being necessarily phenomenal rather than noumenal and hence contained *without remainder* in the actually occurring discursive practices. "‘Putin’s soul’ is a metaphysical prejudice. [...] We simply need to recognise that there is nothing beneath the apparent, *even if the apparent hints towards the existence of a secret*. Secretiveness is the last resort of power, which no longer has anything about it that could deserve being hidden. Thus, Putin ‘wants’ precisely that which he talks about, i.e. *nothing*."<sup>22</sup> The fact that there is a perception of the existence of 'another Putin' behind the surface of technocratic nihilism is merely a blunt proof of the fact that that the actual Putin project 'comes down to nothing'. Putin is thus interpreted in the oppositional circles as merely the sign of the routinisation of the nihilism of the 1990s, its most logical conclusion: if Putin is a patriot, his 'patria' is the 'New Russia' of decadent hedonism that the oppositional observers consider an abominable historical accident.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Remizov, "Russkie Vne Sebya, ili Konservatism protiv Konservatizma", *Russkiy Zhurnal*: <http://www.russ.ru/politics/20030131-remizov-pr.html> (2003).

<sup>22</sup> Remizov, "‘Putin’ kak Slovo Parazit", *Russkiy Zhurnal*: <http://www.russ.ru/politics/20020327-rem-pr.html> (2002)

<sup>23</sup> See Belkovsky, "Biznes Vladimira Putina", APN: <http://www.apn.ru> (2005) for the most eloquent example of this form of criticism.

The rule of Vladimir Putin does not amount to an autonomous or distinct politico-historical phenomenon. It is rather a final stage of the development of the regime of Boris Yeltsin or rather the regime of certain persons that acquired all power in the country in the period from July 1996 [Yeltsin's re-election] to May 1999. The goal [of the regime] is to guarantee the sanctity of the results of the 'grand' privatisation of 1993-2000 for a period of time, necessary for the beneficiaries of privatisation to sell their assets at a market price to international corporations and thereby legalise tens of billions of dollars in the West. The basic technology of achieving this goal is the proverbial 'stability' of Putinism. [...] The main achievement of Putin's regime is declared to be stability itself. "Our feat is that we still govern you" – this is the message of the Kremlin bureaucracy to the people, which remains beyond its comprehension.<sup>24</sup>

Although we may be in agreement with the 'left-conservative' critique of Putinism as a routinisation and sedimentation of Yeltsinism in terms of substantive political content<sup>25</sup>, we must nonetheless emphasise their stark difference in terms of political form, or rather the relation of the two presidencies to the political as such. While Yeltsin *stood for* the radical openness or the void of the political in the sense of preventing the onset of any 'normal politics', Putin *stands in* for the emptiness of the political in a different sense, *positivising* this emptiness in terms of his own ideological neutrality, summed up in the tautological vision of the 'Russian Idea'. If Yeltsin's sovereign leadership symbolised emptiness as a function of *transcendence* that marks the ineradicable presence of the revolutionary event, Putinism is an emblem of a purely *immanent vacuity*. While this vacuity has been interpreted in terms of bureaucratic authoritarianism, technocratic pragmatism or simply the intellectual impoverishment of the current political elite, let us venture that Putinism also exemplifies the only possible politics after the end of history – an absolutely *profane* politics, a politics traumatised by the catastrophic messianic event to the extent that it forecloses any possibility for such an event in the future.

Consequently, if for Yeltsin all politics could play out in the condensed messianic time with no serious finality because everything significant has already happened, for Putin nothing serious should happen because it already happened once and it is the *terror* of this event (which Putin personally witnessed not in Russia but in the GDR) that animates every aspect of Putin's politics. For Yeltsin, the void of the political functioned as a transcendent opening, in which all past and

---

<sup>24</sup> Belkovsky, "Posledny Blef".

<sup>25</sup> See Prozorov, *Political Pedagogy*, chapter 4 for a detailed presentation of this argument.

future politics may be accomplished in a state of a messianic suspension of teleology that drops all demands on human existence. In contrast, for Putin this void is a mere gap in the immanent fabric of the new order, the condition for its non-identity with itself, which must be filled in by the sovereign to effect the closure of the system unto self-immanence. However, by filling in this locus in a posture of ideological neutrality and technocratic tautology, Putin reduces his own sovereignty to a purely formal marker that conceals the constitutive vacuity of the social order. The very name 'Putin' is an empty signifier that weaves together a set of meaningless tautologies into what today passes for 'Russian politics', a politics of efficient stability or stable efficiency.

Thus, Putin's advent as Yeltsin's successor marks a paradoxical succession in terms of retaining the openness of postcommunist ateleological temporality. If, as Remizov argued, 'Putin wants nothing', this nihilism logically entails the suspension of all political teleology and thus a perpetuation of the 'timelessness' of the 1990s, this time in the guise of 'stability'. While the timelessness of the 1990s was an effect of a *messianic suspension* of teleological temporality, Putin achieves much the same outcome in his *ateleological suspension of the messianic*. The background politics of this 'suspended time' is however entirely different in the case of the two presidencies. If Yeltsinism is conceptually graspable in terms of *awe before the event*, Putinism can be conceived as the attempt at the *effacement of the event* as such. While Yeltsinite politics unfolded entirely in the shadow of the revolution of 1991, whose persistent tremors plagued any attempt at stabilisation and rendered dubious any teleology of 'political development', Putinism may be understood as a rather quaint *via media* between the extemporal rupture of the political and the progressive time of 'normal politics', which denies both the telos of the future and the traumatic event of the past in favour of a stable endurance in the present *as if nothing ever has or will take place*. While in the Yeltsin period the event of the anticommunist revolution was fully visible in its pure negativity as a certain liberating clearing that prevents the closure of the new system, for the Putin presidency the revolutionary event is negated in its very negativity, but, since it was this event that made the existing system possible in the first place, it continues to haunt the system from within. The Putin period of meaningless 'stability' has also been a period of ceaseless trepidation before the specter of the event of postcommunism, which, after the end of history, keeps threatening its own eternal return.

Putin's disavowal of the event of postcommunism is particularly evident in the reform of national holidays during the Putin administration. This reform is marked by a manifest disavowal of the origins of the present political system, evident in the recent abolition of the Day of the Constitution (December 12) as a national holiday and the purposefully low-key approach to other symbolic dates of the present regime, e.g. June 12 (the Day of the Declaration of State Sovereignty, presently renamed in an ideologically sterile way as Russia Day) or August 22 (the

day of the defeat of the August 1991 coup, which is self-consciously ignored by the present authorities). Even more tellingly, in 2004 the Federal Assembly abolished the holiday of November 7 (the Day of the October Revolution, which in Yeltsin's times was retained as a state holiday, albeit with an asinine title 'Day of Consent and Reconciliation', which helpfully hints at a messianic dimension) and introduced a Day of National Unity on November 4. The symbolic implications of this change are tremendous: the anniversary of the *Revolution* is demoted from the status of a holiday (even under a new name) and the newly chosen holiday symbolises precisely a '*counter-revolutionary*' exit from the 'Time of Troubles' in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the restoration of order through the institution of the Romanov dynasty.

The fate of November 7 is perhaps the most illuminating example of the difference between the Yeltsin and the Putin presidencies. It would be absurd to suggest that in abolishing this holiday Putin revealed himself as somehow more 'anti-Communist' than Yeltsin. Even if that were possible, it would not be true in the case of Putin, who after all is responsible for the restoration of the Soviet anthem and other Soviet symbols and has repeatedly voiced his regret over the demise of the Soviet Union. What Putin seeks to efface in the abolition of November 7 as a holiday is not Soviet socialism but the October Revolution itself as an event in its paradigmatic purity. In other words, what Putinism marks as a threat is not the *positive content* of the Soviet order, in which he apparently finds much worth maintaining, but its origin in a revolutionary event of *pure negation*, which ruptured the history of Imperial Russia and instituted a regime that was radically heterogeneous to any of its predecessors. Thus, what is discursively abolished is not the period of Soviet socialism but its revolutionary origin, a moment of messianic suspension. Putin's regime effaces the messianic dimension of the revolutionary moment and affirms as the new object of celebration the exit from the revolutionary condition, choosing as the new holiday the date that is only two days away from the familiar day-off on November 7. In contrast, Yeltsin's renaming of the holiday as a Day of Consent and Reconciliation in 1992 sought to dispense entirely with the substance of Soviet socialism by focusing the 'celebration' on the rehabilitation of anti-Soviet resistance from the White Army to Soviet-era dissidents, but, in a gesture of singular significance, *retained the date* of November 7. While the reasoning behind this decision may have manifold motives, we may interpret it as an indicator of Yeltsin's unwitting fidelity to the pure event of the revolution, which, irrespectively of his opposition to its ensuing positive content, did not allow him to entirely efface the revolutionary moment.

In a perfect contrast with Putinism, during the 1990s the October Revolution remained valorised as a purely formal event, its formality well illustrated by its reduction to a mere calendar date. Utterly intolerant of the political content of the Revolution, Yeltsin nonetheless remained faithful to its event. While the Putin presidency is ready and willing to affirm select aspects of the Soviet

order but must disavow its revolutionary origin, Yeltsin could paradoxically affirm the revolution as a pure event which, when deprived of all its substance, is formally identical to the anti-communist revolution of 1991.<sup>26</sup> From this perspective, it would not be surprising if any future opposition to the Putin regime began to use 'November 7' as its constitutive signifier in the absence of any concern for establishing one's relation to the period of Soviet communism. In the present constellation, the October Revolution has been stripped of almost any substantive content and figures in the discourse solely as a *marker for the possibility of an event* (much as the French Revolution in the West European discourse, wherein its symbolic significance has long had little to do with its practically forgotten content). The sole significance of November 7 today consists in its function as an indicator of the fundamental political possibility that disrupts all temporal necessity, all teleological attribution of purpose to time and inaugurates a messianic time of the pure event.

If November 7 appears to be a potential marker of resistance to Putinism from a variety of ideological standpoints, it is because the central motif of the Putin presidency is the *fear of revolution as such*. It is from this perspective that we may understand the irrational and politically disadvantageous stand of the President on the 'colour revolutions' in the post-Soviet space, marked by a brazen support for the discredited and corrupt incumbent elites that were hardly ever 'pro-Russian'. Rather than point to cynical cost-benefit calculations or the unconscious persistence of the Soviet 'imperialist' disposition, Putin's negative stance on the 'revolutions' in the Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan rather reveals an apprehension before any political rupture, however simulative and ultimately 'uneventful', as has arguably been the case in all three 'revolutions'. The presidency is apprehensive of any interruption of the technocratic temporality of the 'eternal present' by what from the perspective of the suspension of the messianic could only be conceived as a 'time of troubles'.

It is in this 'fear of the event' that the Putin presidency has been particularly disappointing for many of its supporters. As a number of conservative commentators formerly positively disposed towards Putin have noted, Putin's own advent was perceived by many to be a genuine Event, a farewell to the timelessness of the 1990s, after which history could begin again. However, ironically, the 'event' of Putinism has been entirely exhausted by its own advent, since the entire period of the Putin presidency has been marked by the evasion of political identification and the

---

<sup>26</sup> From this perspective, the accusatory label 'neo-Bolsheviks', applied by the opposition to the liberal reformers of the early 1990s, including Yeltsin, may be appreciated as fully valid as a designation of the revolutionary political *form*, notwithstanding all the differences in substantive political content.

bureaucratic suppression of all those who happen to have such an identification, from the radical left to pro-Western liberals. Putin's invariably high approval rating may well be due to precisely this evasion of the political, i.e. Putin is tolerable because, and as long as, he does not do anything to disturb the societal 'being-such'. As we have argued above, the anticommunist revolution of 1991 was marked by a fundamental estrangement of the society from the political domain, a certain abandonment of power to its own devices, whereby it can revel in the majesty of its sovereignty on the condition that it does not exercise it. In their distinct ways, both the Yeltsin and the Putin presidencies fulfilled this condition. During the 1990s Russian politics was a spectacle of hegemonies and counter-hegemonies, reforms and counter-reforms, rises and falls, all of which were a priori thwarted in their ability to achieve any finality and therefore became of increasingly little interest even to their participants, not to speak of the population at large. In the Putin period, this spectacle gave way to an austere hegemony of nihilistic technocracy, which a priori forecloses the possibility of a political event.

While for Yeltsin all things could happen and be reversible in the messianic condensation of temporality, in Putin's times nothing major can or must happen due to the suspension of the very possibility of the event. In the 1990s all things took place without serious consequences, while nowadays nothing is allowed to really happen at all and stability is elevated to the status of the overriding political value. Against all the attributions of reformist credentials to the current administration, we may rather suggest that its legitimacy and support are rather grounded in a fundamental societal prohibition to intervene in its existence, to disturb the immanence of postcommunist 'profane life' outside the political order. Perhaps someday this will be known as the 'Russian idea' – a certain '*impotentialisation*' of power through a paradoxical synthesis of the acceptance of the majesty of sovereignty and the prohibition on its exercise.<sup>27</sup> This prohibition that in our view forms the 'unthought' and definitely 'unspeakable' foundation of Putinism has a direct relation to the end of history. In Agamben's argument, a truly post-messianic life is a life that is 'irreparable' or 'unsavable', not because repair or salvation is impossible, but because there is no longer anything to save or repair. In Putin's politics of immanent vacuity, there is indeed nothing that, strictly speaking, calls for saving or repairing, hence no fundamental change is any longer possible. Having purged the political space of all substantive, value-based antagonism and delegitimised any political teleology, Putinism declares that there is no longer anything worth fighting for, so that any actual 'fighting' becomes little more than a hysterical denial of the fact of the end of history – witness the official treatment of the instances of social protest on behalf of

---

<sup>27</sup> See Prozorov, "The Unrequited Love of Power: Biopolitical Investment and the Refusal of Care", *Foucault Studies*, vol. 4 (2006) for the more general argument on this strategy of 'emptying out' of power.

the extreme left, which indeed resembles a 'treatment' in the psychiatric context, whereby political activism is cast as a symptom of unpolitical traumas or grievances, from professional inadequacy to sexual frustration.

However, it is precisely this sterility or monotony of the present as an uneventful timelessness, which leaves open the possibility or the temptation of an event. If all events are forbidden to take place, this entails that the 'place' in question is left open for something else, for something that will happen in the future. The void of political meaning that remains unconcealed in the ateleological technocratic rule of the Putin presidency marks the existence of a space of the event that is presently vacant. For all the proclamations of stabilisation, consolidation and restoration, in the Putin period the future of Russia remains undecided and so is the question of whether Russia actually has a future. *The very suspension of the messianic opens a structural possibility for its arrival.* This explains the dominant 'sense of the age': in Yeltsin's times one craved stability, an end to the exhausting political spectacle in a triumph of a definite political orientation, while in Putin's times one can not but expect an event, one is increasingly hopeful for or, more often, fearful of something, anything that might happen. However, what could an event be after the end of history, other than yet another re-marking of the latter, whereby the end of history *keeps on coming*? Insofar as the Russian society remains reveling in the immanence of fundamental passivity, any event is going to be restricted to the narrow space of political spectacle, in which the basic opposition is between the Yeltsinite messianic suspension and the Putinite suspension of the messianic, between the secure instability of the 1990s and the unstable security of today. Perhaps, then, the value of our diagnosis of postcommunist temporality would consist in the displacement of the horizon of expectation as such: if we conceive of the future as an eternal return of the end of history, there appears little sense in posing the question of what is going to happen after Putin in any modality, be it hope or apprehension, desire or despair, curse or prayer. What is at stake in the irreparable nature of the post-messianic present is the realisation that whatever future we might have is entirely present in the present in which we live.

## HAPPILY EVERAFTER: HOW TO FORGET THE FUTURE

What are we to make of this understanding of the temporality of Russian postcommunism? Although it can easily be dismissed as philosophically abstruse and entirely unrelated to the actuality of contemporary politics, it is advisable to pause and take one's time prior to such dismissal of the problem of temporality. It would certainly be wrong to suggest that this question has been peripheral to the study of Russian politics. On the contrary, most accounts of Russian postcommunism remain grounded in a highly specific construction of postcommunist



temporality, i.e. the linear teleology of ‘transition’ to democracy, market economy, civil society and what not. While the discourse of ‘transitology’ has fortunately lost most of its ‘scientific’ appeal since the early 1990s, the assumptions of a teleological transition nonetheless haunt far too many studies of Russian postcommunism. Moreover, legitimate alternatives to teleological reasoning on temporality have been defined far too restrictively in terms of a static circularity, characteristic of a naïve quasi-cultural traditionalism, which posits the existence of a certain ‘eternal Russia’, whose manifestations we might find in contemporary politics. As we have argued elsewhere, this dualism of transitionalism and traditionalism is entirely incapable of grasping other possible forms of temporality. A number of studies in the more critical or ‘postmodernist’ orientation have attempted to break out of this dualism by accentuating contingency, indeterminacy and flux as inherent features of postcommunist transformation.<sup>28</sup> While perfectly correct, this affirmation of contingency should not be content with simply removing the question of temporality from the domain of inquiry. While contingency necessarily accompanies every revolutionary moment, there is an abundance of historical examples of the exit from the revolutionary condition that takes place precisely through the inauguration of the teleological time of depoliticised ‘normal politics’. The suspension of teleological time in the Russian experience of the 1990s is therefore a highly uncommon and thus historically remarkable mode of revolutionary politics that has been all but effaced by the sterile models of liberal-democratic transition. The post-transitionalist wave of studies of Russian postcommunism must therefore necessarily engage with this complex and contradictory period which remains, in many senses, a time like no other.

In a more philosophical sense, the 1990s and, as we have argued also the present moment in Russian politics exemplifies in a concrete manner the type of politics we associate with most radical political philosophy of our times, particularly Giorgio Agamben’s work on the coming community of worklessness, the politics of pure means and the messianic ‘happy life’ after the end of history. As all ‘first philosophy’, Agamben’s ontological thought is notoriously difficult to ‘apply’ in empirical studies – a problem that is made all the more difficult by the eschatological and even apocalyptic tone of his writings. At the same time, the experience of Russian postcommunism accords strongly with Agamben’s ‘prelude to a coming politics’, particularly insofar as the former entirely fulfils Agamben’s condition of possibility of the latter – the destruction of state sovereignty, which in our case is fulfilled in the demise of the Soviet state and the failure to constitute the post-Soviet Russian state as a sovereign state.<sup>29</sup> The 1990s as a

---

<sup>28</sup> See the various contributions to Harald Wydra and Alexander Woell (Eds.), *Myth and Democracy*.

<sup>29</sup> We have dealt with this question extensively in *Political Pedagogy*, chapter 4 and “Russian Conservatism”.

moment of the messianic suspension stand for the politics utterly deprived of all telos, a politics of means without meaning, since everything has already taken place, so that there is no need any more for grand historical projects of transformation. Indeed, the very concept of postcommunist *transformation* that we continue to rely upon is misleading – the entire point of the postcommunist period (as opposed to the momentary spark of anticommunist revolution in 1991) is that *nothing at all is transformed in it* and the very idea of transformation appears discredited on the societal level, abandoned for a purely immanent, inoperative existence. Putin's politics is particularly exemplary of this dismantling of teleology – as a number of analysts of radically different persuasions have noted, it appears that the only objective of the Putin presidency is, literally, to *hold out* through the two presidential terms and ensure the election of a successor whose only purpose will similarly be a mere holding out. However absurd, this is the only possible function for the sovereign in the ateleological, post-historical era – strictly speaking, *what else* would he do, *what for* and *on what grounds*? If one suspends the clichéd answers to these questions that immediately spring to mind, it appears to us that more thoughtful answers would take long to arrive.

From the transitionalist perspective and the more commonsensical understanding of political temporality in terms of 'progress' and 'development', the diagnosis of postcommunism as a period of messianic and counter-messianic suspension, the condensation of reversible futures in either 'change without end' or the 'end of all change' might appear to be empirically counterintuitive and normatively problematic, since it can only mean a farewell to 'progressive politics' as we know it. At the same time, why should the cessation of the progressive temporality of political history be viewed as a necessarily pessimistic scenario? To recall Agamben, the end of history understood as the suspension of teleology ushers in a time without meaning, divorcing human existence from the imperative of work and letting it be in the form of potentiality understood in terms of radical passivity. However apocalyptic and arcane this vision appears, Agamben notes that in the post-messianic time 'everything will be as it is now, just a little different'.<sup>30</sup> Rather than think the messianic in terms of a momentous transformation, Agamben suggests that its 'little difference' from teleological politics concerns the relation of human beings to their own existence rather than the introduction of some new content to this existence. The end of history drops all demands on the human being, disqualifying from the outset all values that up to the present have served as imperatives for sacrifice of the self and of others. Agamben's quasi-eschatological vision of a politics of life-as-such (also described as a politics of potentiality, a profane politics, a politics of 'whatever singularity' or a politics of absolute

---

<sup>30</sup> Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 53.

immanence) conjures a possibility of human existence in which nothing else is any longer *at stake*, in which the purpose of existence is entirely contained in its sheer factuality. From this perspective, there indeed is no purpose or possibility in progress or development, as the present can no longer be incorporated into a teleological vision of the future, for which we must sacrifice ourselves in the here and now. Neither is it possible to cast the present as a time of redemption of the past promises or the rectification of past errors. The end of history entails that time is no longer conceivable in the form of a *project* for the human being but is rather a condition of his existence. History ends when there is no longer an attempt to master time. In other words, the messianic end of history is the very opposite of the teleological ‘end of history’, prophesied by Fukuyama: the former appears only as the proof of the impossibility of the latter. History ends not when it arrives at a certain teleological end-state but when it becomes evident that it does not have such an end-state. In this sense, a messianic end of history is a double end, both an expiry of history in terms of its teleology and an expiry of the very teleology that made it meaningful to talk about the end of history in the first place. At stake is not merely the loss of a future open to competing teleologies and projects of transformation but the loss of that very loss itself, a certain *forgetting of the future*.<sup>31</sup> All that remains after the end of history is the present, the now in which we live and which is the only time in which it might finally be possible to live, once existence is released from its deployment as a project into an ‘ease’ of pure potentiality.<sup>32</sup>

For Agamben, the messianic dimension of potentiality is the dimension of freedom, which is only possible insofar as the human being has liberated himself from the ‘work’ of history, from the possession of or by an identity, from the capture or abandonment by sovereign authority. The messianic temporality provides a possibility if not an injunction to live as if order, identity and meaning did not exist, to live in exile or dispossession from all that seizes life and turns it into a work. In the messianic time one may live *in* the world and *use* it without possessing it, which would be equivalent to being possessed by it. The messianic logic of ‘as-if-not’, which we have demonstrated to be operative in the 1990s’ condensation of political temporality, when all things could happen as if they didn’t, also relates more generally to social life, which in the postcommunist period arguably unfolded as if politics and the state did not exist. Against conventional readings, which posit the requirement of meaning, identity and authority as fundamental to human existence, we might rather suggest that after the end of history the

---

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 102: “Redemption is not an event in which what was profane becomes sacred and what was lost is found again. Redemption is, on the contrary, the *irreparable loss of the lost, the definitive profanity of the profane*. But, precisely for this reason, they now reach their end – the advent of a limit.”

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26.

possibilities of life are rather conditioned by the renunciation of authority, identity and historical direction. In this case, the late- and post-Soviet experience of Russia may be offered as a concrete example of Agamben's messianic politics of the future, a politics of profanity, worklessness and imperfection. Whether this politics merits the name of 'happy life' that Agamben, following Benjamin, endows it with, is an entirely different question. However, to pose this very question it has been necessary to take the time to problematise postcommunist temporality in terms of the messianic 'end of history' and clear this space from the teleologies of transition and the circularities of 'the return'. In contrast to transitionalist and traditionalist accounts that lay a claim to knowing the future, which nonetheless never arrives, the Agambenian perspective mercilessly insists that today's ateleological and irreparable present is all there is and all we have. Happiness knows no delay or deferral. Against all future-oriented politics, which makes a promise of 'happy life' and thereby reduces 'actual life' into a project, we must assert that 'happy life' can only be sought and achieved in the profane present, that happiness can no longer wait.