The BEARR Trust annual lecture 2014

'The Myth of the Strong Leader in Russia' [1]*

by Professor Archie Brown

Summary of the lecture

There is a widespread tendency to admire a 'strong leader', and not only in Russia. But there are problems in equating successful leadership with an individual maximising power in his or her hands and dominating a political party, the cabinet and the policy process. The more decisions are taken by one individual leader, the less time that person has for thinking through the policy and weighing up the evidence. The more one leader is elevated above all others, the greater the loss of informed criticism and collective consideration within the government, as ministers stifle their objections to policy emanating from the top.

A head of government accustomed to prevailing comes to believe in his or her exceptional judgement and leadership qualities. Yet the very possession of institutional power means that this is not exercise of leadership in its purest form. That is to be found among individuals who do not have any patronage to dispense. Outstanding examples include Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and, in contemporary Britain, the 16-year-old Malala Yousafzai from the Swat valley of Pakistan.

In authoritarian systems, collective leadership is generally preferable to personal dictatorship. Oligarchy, in other words, is a lesser evil than autocracy. China both before and especially after the years of Mao Zedong's overwhelming personal ascendancy (from the late 1950s to his death in 1976) and the Soviet Union in the 1920s and after Stalin's death, as compared with the years of Stalin's dictatorship from the early 1930s to 1953, illustrate the point.

Russia has over the years been especially prone to rule by overmighty leaders. Enormous power wielded by one ruler has not only been accepted but even admired. In public opinion surveys Peter the Great more often than not emerges as the ruler Russians venerate above all others, whereas the

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* Archie Brown's latest book, *The Myth of the Strong Leader: Political Leadership in the Modern Age,* was published in April 2014 by Bodley Head.

tsar who ended serfdom, Alexander II, fares poorly. When in 2000 a survey led by Yuriy Levada asked Russians who were the most outstanding leaders of their country in the 20th century, the top five who emerged were different personalities in many ways, but the one thing they had in common was hostility to democracy. Stalin came top, followed by Lenin, Andropov, Brezhnev and Nicholas II in that order.

Mikhail Gorbachev came sixth although, whereas only 7 per cent of all respondents rated him as the most outstanding leader of the century, that rose to 14 per cent among citizens with higher education, the same percentage from that highly educated section of the population who chose Stalin as the greatest. Gorbachev in power neither did nor could dictate policy. For his first five years as party leader (until the creation of an executive presidency in March 1990) he could have been replaced at a moment's notice by the Politburo, followed by a vote in the Central Committee. Within the leadership, although he constantly broke new ground, he had to carry other members of the Politburo with him. He often succeeded but, as the transcripts of Politburo meetings show, he also had to compromise and sometimes make tactical retreats. The former head of Soviet space research, Roald Sagdeev, noted that even within groups outside the inner circle of the political leadership, Gorbachev attempted to persuade his interlocutors. This, said Sagdeev, was a break with tradition, for hitherto the bosses had 'never tried to change people's genuine opinions or beliefs but simply issued an instruction and demanded that it be followed'.

Gorbachev's close aide, Georgiy Shakhnazarov, has argued that it was precisely Gorbachev's deviation from the Russian notion of a strong leader which precipitated from 1989 a loss of his earlier popularity. He dates the decline in Gorbachev's authority to his chairing the new legislature, in effect acting as its speaker, from the spring of 1989. Millions of people saw on their television screens Gorbachev being criticised by unknown young deputies and taking this in his stride. They concluded, said Shakhnazarov, that nothing good lay in store for the country, since in Russia 'from time immemorial people have admired and even loved severe rulers'.

Yeltsin's initial popularity owed something to the fact that his commanding presence and impulsive political style fitted well with Russian notions of a strong leader. He was vastly more ruthless than was Gorbachev (who was averse to bloodshed), as he showed with the shelling of his own parliament in 1993 and in the prosecution of the war in Chechnya in 1994-96 and, again, in late 1999. He had to be talked out of cancelling the 1996 presidential election at a time when it looked unlikely that he could win. Yeltsin's rule was personalistic and he had no interest in democratic institution-building. His early popularity did not last and before the end of his presidency he had done more harm than good to the advance of democracy in Russia.

If the popularity of a country's leader were to be the main criterion of democracy, there would be few more democratic states today than Russia. At the beginning of June 2014 a Levada Centre survey showed that Putin's approval rating as president had reached a remarkable 83 per cent. Russia's response to the Ukrainian crisis (including the annexation of Crimea) has given a great boost to Putin's popularity. It is easier, however, to be popular if those who would point to the possible downside of your actions are given little or no access to the mass media and if political opposition is severely restricted. A regime of personalised power has been re-established in post-Soviet Russia. It began under Yeltsin and has become more pronounced in recent years.

Russia today remains far freer than the pre-perestroika Soviet state, but in some respects less free and democratic than in the last three years of the Soviet Union when political pluralism existed de facto and de jure from March 1990. Western policy is not entirely blameless for Russia's trajectory over the post-Soviet period. We, too, have pinned our hopes on the 'strong leader' – "'ol' Boris" as President Clinton affectionately referred to Yeltsin in the 1990s, and the early Putin – rather than paying close attention to what was and was not happening with Russian institutions and to Russian perceptions of our actions. Meantime, many Russians – including some who enthusiastically embraced democratic ideals just a quarter of a century ago – have once again placed their faith in the false god of the strongman.