

As the war drags on, Russia moves to anoint Putin as 'Great'

By Galina Korol | 2026-01-28

As the war drags on, officials and ideologues move to secure Vladimir Putin's historical legacy before its outcome is clear.



Russia's President Vladimir Putin (2R) and Malaysia's King Sultan Ibrahim (L) tour the Great Throne Room of the State Hermitage Museum during their meeting in Saint Petersburg on January 26, 2026. [Alexander Kazakov/POOL/AFP]



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He gets quoted in research papers, appears in films and cartoons, and now Russian officials want to "glorify" him in history books.

In early January, the state news agency TASS published an interview with Elena Malysheva, head of the National Center for Historical Memory under the Russian president and a member of the Public Chamber, in which she argued that Vladimir Putin deserves the honorific "Great," placing him alongside Ivan III, Peter I and Catherine II.

Malysheva said rulers earn that title through "titanic social, economic, and geopolitical shifts" and by assuming responsibility for the country's future. She described contemporary Russia as living through precisely such a historic moment.

"At first, you get the strong impression that this is satirical news from the news agency Panorama. But, as we see, reality in Russia no longer differs at all from fake satirical news," Alexey Baranovsky, a journalist and veteran of the volunteer Free Russia Legion, told Kontur.



Russia's President Vladimir Putin attends a wreath-laying ceremony at the monument 'Motherland' at the Piskaryovskoye Memorial Cemetery in Saint Petersburg on January 27, 2026, marking the 82nd anniversary of the liberation of Leningrad from Nazi blockade in World War Two. [Alexander Kazakov/POOL/AFP]

He called the initiative an example of "courtly servility" and argued that it fits neatly into the logic of a personality cult.

"The logical next step of this whole personality cult should be for [Putin] to be put in the Mausoleum instead of [Vladimir] Lenin or together with Lenin. Putin in the Mausoleum – that will be the quintessence, the cherry on the cake, and the apotheosis of the entire 'Russian world,'" he said.

A sanctioned idea

While the proposal is framed as historical analysis, its significance lies less in its substance than in its origin. The National Center for Historical Memory is a presidential body tasked with shaping the official interpretation

of the past. Statements of this kind do not emerge independently or without political approval.

Pavlo Hai-Nyzhnyk, a historian and senior researcher at the Institute of Political and Ethnic Studies at Ukraine's National Academy of Sciences, said the idea could not have been floated without the Kremlin's consent.

"These things are not proposed without [Putin's] knowledge. In similar states, such steps are generally taken only with the approval of the ruler. He doesn't want to be funny, but at the same time he wants to be great," Hai-Nyzhnyk told Kontur.

He argued that the timing was deliberate. Russia's initial promise of "Kyiv in three days" has collapsed into a prolonged war that has already outlasted the Soviet Union's Great Patriotic War, leaving the authorities in need of a symbolic outcome.

"[T]o stake out his place in history as a great ruler, to claim, in effect, that at this point the objectives of the special military operation have been fulfilled and that this is supposedly a victory -- in order to shield himself from the labels 'the one who lost in three days and failed to take [Kyiv]' and 'the one who truly lost.' And this is an additional injection of narcotics into the consciousness of Russians," Hai-Nyzhnyk said.

Such framing, he added, allows the Kremlin to present almost any outcome - including a frozen conflict or compromise - as a historic triumph.

Chosen comparisons

The historical figures invoked in Malysheva's remarks are not accidental, Hai-Nyzhnyk argued.

"Ivan III is the Grand Prince of Moscow, the collector of lands. Peter is the conqueror of Ukraine. Catherine is the final colonizer of Ukraine, who expanded serfdom and gained access to the sea. These three figures represent the plans that Putin had for Ukraine," he said.

Talk of Putin's "greatness" predates the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and has simply become more visible during wartime.

Igor Eidman, a Russian sociologist and longtime researcher of Putinism, said the cult of personality has been under construction since Putin came to power a quarter-century ago.

"The longer he rules, the stronger this cult becomes. It can already be compared to the personality cult of [Joseph] Stalin or [Adolf] Hitler," Eidman told Kontur.

He described the sacralization of the leader as a defining feature of totalitarian systems, citing Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, communist China and North Korea. Putin's Russia, he said, follows the same pattern.

The personality cult, Eidman argued, is a core component of the propaganda system rather than an isolated phenomenon.

"It is one of the pillars of the regime - along with chauvinism, xenophobia, imperialism and hatred of the West," he said.

In this system, the ruler does not simply govern the country. He embodies it.

Eidman pointed to Soviet precedent, noting that Stalin was officially hailed as the "Great Leader" of both the Soviet people and "all progressive humanity."

The same mechanism now applies to Putin, though in a more adaptable, contemporary form. When State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin declared in 2014, "If there is Putin, there is Russia; if there is no Putin, there is no Russia," it was not rhetorical flourish but cult language.

"Putin embodies Russia the state. This is how quasi-fascist, Putinist ideology works," Eidman said.

Fear and sanctity

The cult serves a practical purpose: erasing personal responsibility. When leader and state merge, failures and crimes dissolve into an abstract historical mission. War becomes destiny, repression becomes necessity, and poverty becomes the cost of greatness.

"[Russians] love greatness. They don't pay attention to the fact that they live in a geographically large, resource-rich country with oil and gas, yet at the same time they live in poverty. They need a sense of greatness and a feeling that there are enemies all around," said Hai-Nyzhnyk.

This, he argued, reflects a familiar authoritarian formula: even resource-rich states cultivate a "besieged fortress" myth to persuade citizens to sacrifice for expansion and war. The constant presence of an external threat stabilizes the regime.

The leader's physical body also plays a symbolic role. In 2022, investigations by Paris Match and the Russian outlet Proekt reported that during foreign trips Putin is accompanied by a Federal Security Service officer tasked with retrieving his biological waste to prevent health information from leaking. The practice was documented during visits to France in 2017 and Saudi Arabia in 2019.

Baranovsky contrasted this extreme isolation with European norms, where senior officials may commute by bicycle. In Russia, the social distance between ruler and society has always been pronounced -- but under Putin it has become exaggerated.

"It's professional paranoia, coupled with age-related changes. As he ages physically, all this madness will only get worse. He has astrologers, shamans and specially trained priests – the mix of the rich spiritual world of Vladimir Putin the Great," Baranovsky said.

Eidman agreed that paranoia and the cult reinforce each other, calling it a classic trajectory for totalitarian regimes.

"As soon as [the Russian president] loses power or dies, this cult will, of course, be debunked," he said.

