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Why the past looms large in Russia's relations with the west

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Dr Alexander Titov, Queens' University, Belfast

Great power status and social and political stability are the two main motifs in Russia's contemporary nostalgia for the Soviet past. This is what President Putin in many ways tries to achieve too - international recognition of Russia's special status and political stability through his version of a soft authoritarian regime, combining control over elections with wide individual freedoms in other areas. The motif of stability and order in the late Soviet Union is also *attractive* for the older generation who lived through the turmoil of the 1990s.

However, like other national nostalgias of this type, Soviet nostalgia is irrelevant to the modern world. Contemporary Russia is a fiercely consumption-oriented society, urbanised, well-educated, and relatively wealthy (certainly by its region's standards). Around 17 million Russian went abroad in the first half of 2017, something unimaginable in the Soviet era.

This is the exact opposite of the Soviet Union whose economic model was based on deliberate suppression of consumption - achieved through state distribution of goods, and the banning of private property, private enterprise and the free market. This allowed the Soviet state to extract maximum resources from the economy to fund priorities in industrialisation and military development.

And a classical 'guns vs butter' dilemma *familiar to Soviet leaders* is very much alive in Russia today. Putin's economic programme envisions big increases in spending on areas including healthcare, education, and transport infrastructure to tackle Russia's slowing economic growth.

This growth has been a key source of Putin's popularity - but it is also based on his image as a strong military leader. Substantial military investments over the last decade were designed to close the gap from the collapse in military spending in the 1990s and early 2000s.

There is a tendency to ascribe to Russia - its people and its rulers - some immutable qualities persisting through time. The idea that Russia doesn't change often used to justify its difference from the rest of Europe. Stalin is often portrayed as a 20th century version of Ivan the Terrible, Yeltsin's moniker was Tsar Boris after Boris Godunov who ruled Russia in the late 16th century. Any popular analysis of Putin has to start with mentioning his background in the KGB and the corresponding inference that his mission is to restore the USSR and launch a new Cold War.

While not denying certain continuity in Russian foreign policy, shaped by long-term factors as such geography, Russia has been changing internally and adapting to a dynamic international environment. Today, in addition to its traditional rivalry with the West and dealing with the legacy of the Soviet collapse in its immediate neighbourhood, Russia is exposed to two new threats - the arch of instability spurred by the rise of radical Islam on its southern borders, and the rise of China in the east. Russia has displayed a remarkable degree of acceptance of China's growing influence in Central Asia, long seen as Russia's own backyard.

Russia today is very different from the Soviet Union. In addition to the most obvious change from a utopian communism to a great power nationalism, Russian society is much freer now, while its economy and living standards are more similar to those in many EU countries. Its quest for status and security remains the same, but in a very different world.

