Among the many signs that the democratic impulse in Russia is beating a gloomy retreat these days is the appearance in restaurants and cafés of the “Putin toothpick.”

This requires a word of explanation, perhaps. On March 14th, Russians will go to the polls to choose a President, and they will almost certainly reëlect Vladimir Putin with the biggest landslide since the days of the Supreme Soviet and single-candidate elections. The polls show Putin running (with little evident exertion) between seventy and eighty per cent; none of his Lilliputian competitors have cracked five. Putin is so popular, so vaunted for his image of strength and stability, that the atmosphere of national reverence combines elements of the Soviet and the erotic. Later this month, in time for Putin’s reëlection, a female trio called Singing Together will release the album “A Man Like Putin”; the title track is a pop fantasy about a dream boyfriend—“full of strength and free of drink, who wouldn’t hurt me or desert me.” The song was such a hit that a city in Siberia ordered singing toys—monkeys, raccoons—that play it.

Enter the Putin toothpick. Last week, on Russian television, Yekaterina Chizhova, a representative of a St. Petersburg company called Prosperi, went on the air, swooning, “Finally, we have a President we can be proud of.” Comrade Chizhova then discussed her product: “flosstiks” that come in packets, with the President’s portrait emblazoned on the front. Prosperi also makes the same product available under the portrait of Koni, Putin’s black Lab, who, as all Russians know, gave birth on the eve of last December’s parliamentary elections (a sweep for the pro-Putin slates). Koni’s picture is accompanied by the slogan “Our Koni Is a Mother Hero” (the official title granted to highly fertile women by a Soviet state anxious to raise the country’s birth rate).

The Yeltsin years were rife with lingering features of the Soviet experience, but not this kind of glorification. Putin’s portraits have become indispensable decorations in government offices. Books about him have begun to resemble the lives of the saints rather than critical biography. Legislators, athletes, artists, and movie stars routinely appear on state television with words of unctuous praise for him. There is not the slightest indication that Putin is displeased with the adulation. When he was asked how he felt about the portraits of him hanging in the offices of Russia’s countless state bureaucrats, Putin shrugged and said that he saw nothing wrong with it: a President is a state symbol, like the flag or the anthem.

And yet Lenin, Stalin, or Brezhnev toothpicks would have been unthinkable in the past. Only important places—cities, streets, libraries, universities, steel mills, stadiums—were deemed worthy of bearing such names. The regime lived by the canon, in which the leader belonged to the world of the grand and the elevated, and was detached from the small and the mundane. Even ruble bills that bore Lenin’s portrait came to be seen as unworthy. “Remove Lenin from money” was a line by Andrei Voznesensky, a celebrated young poet in the nineteen-sixties.

In fact, Putin toothpicks evoke the sort of anti-Soviet jokes that were popular in the late Brezhnev era,
when private political humor was no longer regarded as a state crime. For example, in 1970, the hundredth anniversary of Lenin’s birth, people made jokes that imagined Lenin “souvenirs.” Sitting in their kitchens, they would laugh about the sale of a perfume called the Odor of Lenin or a triple bed using the slogan Lenin s Nami—“Lenin Is with Us.” As it happens, a Putin-bearing tool for picking one’s teeth is actually quite a funny concept, given that, in Russian, when you say something’s “stuck in your teeth” it means that you’re sick of it.

Prosperiti certainly didn’t mean for its toothpicks to be taken as a cynical joke. But these days, along with the Soviet-style glorification of Putin, his name and image are sometimes used in ways that make it hard to tell whether the President is an object of worship or of ridicule. The old Soviet attitudes toward state authority may be coming back, but the new market mentality isn’t giving ground. Unlike the ideological Communist state, where the leader was an icon, in today’s Russia the President, like his dog, is a celebrity. And celebrities make good brands.

Prosperiti, however, needs to pay keener attention to political details if it is to deify President Putin properly and patriotically. Under Putin’s portrait is a flag, a tricolor in red, white, and blue. But the order is out of whack, making it seem as if he were the leader not of Mother Russia but of little Holland. In a true cult of personality, the Prosperiti executives would have been tried as “Dutch spies” and shot.