

Understanding Putin: how far will he go?

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Abstract:

The Russian government has cultivated a myth that President Vladimir Putin is the superhero, who will rescue Russia from the existential threat posed by the West. The Kremlin's political agenda thrives on the sense of wounded national pride in Russia, which has developed in the aftermath of a series of devastating events for Russians over the last three decades. According to Putin's current popularity ratings and public opinion polls regarding intervention in Ukraine, the Kremlin has so far been successful in marketing its apocalyptic saga. The main question is how much longer will the Putin administration be able to sell its myth?

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I. Background: deprived national pride

The sentiment of hurt pride in Russia helped Putin to rally the nation around his aggressive foreign policy course. Due to a series of distressing political developments, the last three decades have not been easy for Russians as a nation: the fiasco of the war campaign in Afghanistan, collapse of the economy and social disorder in the first years of Post-Soviet period and embarrassing events in the Chechnya theater have left a scar on Russian national pride. The rapid integration of the Central European and Baltic States into the Euro-Atlantic community and disregard of Russia's views on the Kosovo conflict have further contributed to aggravating the bitter feelings of Russians.



Putin Saving Russia by V. Mamatkazin. Allegedly hanging in the HQ of the ruling United Russia party

This feeling of wounded Russian pride explains why Putin's popularity ratings peaked in 2000 when he burned Chechnya to the ground to suppress the movement for self-determination, in 2008 when he invaded Georgia to support the movement for self-determination in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and now when he has annexed the territory of a sovereign state. In each of these instances, Putin's administration has played on a damaged sense of national pride for his personal ambitions.

II. Putin's rise to power

Putin was brought to power by Boris Yeltsin, whose main expectation was that Putin would continue the transition process to a capitalist market, while protecting the financial interests of Yeltsin and his closest associates. Yeltsin left the Kremlin, on New Year's Eve of 1999, handing the power over to the Prime-Minister Putin, who was appointed to that position only a few months earlier. However, Yeltsin's popularity ratings were very low and Putin had yet to win the presidential elections that were coming up in only nine months.



Putin and the Presidential administration knew that they needed to take immediate and radical steps to change the situation and agreed that the war in Chechnya would be the best rallying point. In later years, Boris Berezovsky confessed that the plan was to instigate Chechens to attack Dagestan and then retaliate with excessive force and take down the President of Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, Aslan Maskhadov. It all worked out, as immediately after a small group of

Chechen fighters attacked Dagestan, Russian military forces began bombing Chechnya to the ground. The famous rhetoric of the Kremlin at the time was that, if needed we will send them back to the Stone Age.

As Putin restarted the war in Chechnya, Russian media magnates such as Berezovskiy and Vladimir Gusinskiy started working on the public image of the new presidential candidate. Since the Russian audience did not know anything about Putin's past, pro-government media was free to build a fresh reputation for the new candidate. The story of a brave Putin, who won a glorious victory, soothed Russians' sense of wounded national pride and gave them hope for a better future. On 7 May 2000 Putin swore in as the President of Russian Federation.

III. War against Oligarchs

During the Soviet Union Putin was an officer in the KGB (Committee for State Security), which was the backbone of the Communist regime. After the dissolution of the USSR, Yeltsin transformed the KGB into the FSK (Federal Counterintelligence Service) in 1991, which eventually became the FSB (Federal Security Service) in 1995. Under the Yeltsin's administration, the FSB lost its reputation and was not instilling nearly as much fear as it used to under the Red flag. Officers in the FSB suffered from low wages and were barely able to make the ends meet. Lucky ones were able to successfully transition into the private sector, where they provided security for oligarchs, their families and businesses. [Oligarchs are a special breed of businessmen, who emerged during the chaos of transition period in the Post-soviet space. They amassed fortunes by winning the bloody race for privatization of the property of the Soviet Empire.]

Putin turned out to be the most fortunate of all KGB officers, as the oligarchs worked hard to ensure he was sworn in as president in order to protect their financial interests. However, the oligarchs who were expecting to be involved in Putin's decision-making when he became President, made a major miscalculation. As soon as Putin established himself in power and finished the war campaign in Chechnya, the president waged a war against the oligarchs. Putin presented all the businessmen— even the oligarchs who stood behind his shooting rise to power — with a clear choice: either they are with Putin or they are against him. As Berezovsky later commented, “essentially, I'm being forced to choose whether to become a political prisoner or a political emigrant.”¹

Some of the notorious Russian oligarchs, such as Roman Abramovic, Vagit Alekperov, and Vladimir Potanin backed down and were able to keep their multi-billion dollar businesses, while others such as Berezovsky, Gusinsky and Mikhail Khodorkovsky decided to stand up to the fight

¹ "Berezovsky No-shows for His Meeting with Prosecutors." *The Jamestown Foundation*. 15 Nov. 2000. http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=22557#.U3UFGPI_vSg

with the new president. Consequently, the offices and businesses of the rebellious oligarchs turned into the frequent subject of armed raids by masked men and government investigations. By 2004, Berezovsky and Gusinsky had fled the country and Khodorkovsky was serving a prison sentence.

Putin has very little tolerance for dissent. As an officer of former Soviet KGB, he believes in central authority and powerful state. The head of Kremlin oversaw the nationalization of almost all the assets of the chastised oligarchs, by purchasing their shares in state-run auctions. Among some of the most famous acquisitions of the Kremlin were Channel One, previously owned by Berezovsky and NTV previously owned by Gusinsky. However, the most expensive transaction was transferring Khadarkovsky's Yukos, then the largest oil company in Russia, to the accounts of state-owned Rosneft. Eventually, the Kremlin took control of most popular and the biggest businesses in Russia.

IV. Rise of the Siloviki

As Putin strengthened the central government and expanded its authority, he needed trusted appointees in key positions in government. For this, the President relied mainly on people with intelligence backgrounds, such as himself. Along with former officers of the KGB and FSB, Putin also gave preference to representatives of the GRU, SVR and, other military/intelligence institutions. Commonly referred to as the siloviki, these politicians with intelligence backgrounds are considered the backstage power-base of today's Russia. Some of the most prominent representatives of the siloviki include Putin's Chief of Staff – Sergei Ivanov, Deputy chief of staff – Vyacheslav Volodin, Deputy Prime-Minister – Dmitriy Rogozin, and Chief Executive Officer of Rosneft – Igor Sechin. Generally, the main two characteristics of Putin's presidency have been consolidation of power and rise of the siloviki.

In the early years of their rise to power, the siloviki were able to make a positive contribution to the development of Russia. Even though under Yeltsin Russia was far more democratic than it is today, the majority of Russians have bitter memories about the chaos during Yeltsin's presidency. Commonly known for their discipline and tenacity, the siloviki have brought the much needed law and order to Russia, which reflected positively on the lives of millions of Russians. However, as the years passed and Russia has changed, the Putin administration does not want to change.

The siloviki were trained to protect the interests of the Soviet Union, and even today, they are not shy to express their sympathies to the Communist regime. During his address to the Russian Parliament, in April 2005, Putin stated that, "Above all, we should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century. As for the Russian nation, it

became a genuine drama. Tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory. Moreover, the epidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself."²

Subsequently, Putin's administration reversed the democratic reform process in Russia and recovered the most infamous traditions of the Communist style leadership:

Cult of personality – Since Presidential election campaign of 2000, the Kremlin has worked hard on the Putin's image to present him as an impeccable man, who by default cannot make mistakes. Russians are used to see their president throwing ippons on the judo mat, flying on fighter-jets, diving under-water, hunting bare-chested. They can even drink vodka named "Putinka" and listen to a pop song about their President that sings, "I want a man like Putin, who's full of strength. I want a man like Putin, who doesn't drink. I want a man like Putin, who won't make me sad."³ A fundamental result of such personality-based politics is that, the president takes credit for all the successes of the country, but he is never responsible for any of its failures.

State controlled media – Trained to protect the interests of the former Communist regime, Putin believes in the power of propaganda. During his first years as President, he took control over Russian media giants, such as Channel One, Russia TV and NTV (the only TV channels that cover more than 90% of Russian territory), and he didn't stop there. Today, there are no independent TV channels in Russia. With the "perception is the reality" approach, Putin uses state controlled media to sell his own alternative reality for Russians.

No tolerance for opposition – Today, the political environment in Russia does not allow for the emergence of political opponents for the President. Through reforms in the legislature and tightening control over media, businesses and NGOs, the government has left little room for opposition to breathe.

Anti-west propaganda and conspiracy theories – In order to justify his tightening grip on power, Putin has to have enemies. Thus, the Kremlin has revived the Cold War era Anti-West propaganda, which helps Putin not only to consolidate power at home, but also to rally other anti-West countries.

Russian TV channels have been trying for years to convince the population of Russia and of neighboring countries in the post-Soviet space that the West is corrupt by nature. One of the famous programs, "Big American Hole," was aired on Channel One from 2008 to 2011. In the program, renowned Russian pundit Mikhail Leontyev was arguing that economic prosperity of

² Putin, Vladimir. "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation." *President of Russia*. 25 Apr. 2005.

http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/04/25/2031_type70029type82912_87086.shtml

³ "A Man like Putin." *PBS.org*. Web. 15 May 2014. <http://www.pbs.org/soundtracks/stories/putin/>

America is based on predacious economic manners which are reinforced by military aggression.⁴ Not surprisingly, most of these anti-West TV programs reference conspiracy theories. Some of them purport the idea that the United States supports terrorist groups from the North Caucasus with the ultimate goal of breaking up Russia into several parts, while others claim that the 9/11 was an American plot.⁵

Such TV programs are a continuation of the Kremlin's official policy course, which aims at discrediting the West. Hence, it's not only TV anchors that create anti-West sentiments in the public. At the time of heated debates around Iran's nuclear program, back in 2012, the Head of Russian State Duma Defense Committee, Admiral Vladimir Komoedov made a public statement that the US could launch a nuclear strike on Russia, after a war against Iran.⁶ On 1 May 2014, during Solidarity day celebrations member of Russian State Duma Vladimir Zhironovsky stated that "the main enemy of Russia is the West."⁷

Results of the recent international Gallup polls that surveyed more than 67,000 residents in 65 countries asking "Who is the greatest threat to world peace?" added more proof of how effective Kremlin's propaganda machine has been.⁸ Russians lead the world in anti-Americanism, as 54 percent of Russian respondents consider the US as the biggest threat to world peace, compared to the 24 percent world average. Due to the Kremlin's efforts, many Russians measure patriotism by anti-Americanism.

Patriotism in itself as a cohesive ideology is a positive attribute of any nation. However, inflated patriotism that relies on animosity towards pseudo-enemies should always ring an alarm. A quote by a prominent Russian satirist of XIX century, Saltikov Shedrin is famous in Russia these days: "if state officials start talking about patriotism, it means they want to steal something." So, while Putin has been feeding the public with Anti-West patriotism, the President himself has amassed a fortune that by some estimates makes him the richest man on the planet.⁹ In 2012 Russian opposition group Solidarity released an outraging video that demonstrated Putin's watch collection alone to be worth around \$700 000.¹⁰ It is worth mentioning that the Russian President's official annual income is only around \$100 000.

⁴ "Russian state TV pundit attacks US ambassador McFaul." *BBC Europe*. 18 January 2012
<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-16609390>

⁵ Ивашов, Леонид. "09/11: мировая трагедия и глобальная провокация." *Свободная Пресса*. N.p., 11 Sept. 2009. Web. 15 May 2014. <http://svpressa.ru/society/article/14016/>

⁶ "Глава комитета Госдумы по обороне: США вынашивают планы ядерной бомбардировки России «Искандеры» в Калининграде помешать этому не смогут ." *NR2 Ru*. Новый Регион 2, 24 Feb. 2012. Web. 15 May 2014. <http://www.nr2.ru/sevas/374591.html>

⁷ "V. V. Zhirinovskiy: The main enemy of Russia is the West." *LDPR News*. Official LDPR Web-site, 01 May 2014. http://ldpr.ru/events/zhirinovskiy_the_main_enemy_of_russia_is_the_west/

⁸ Bohm, Michael. "Why Russia Is No. 1 in Anti-Americanism." *The Moscow Times*. 24 Jan. 2014.

⁹ McClenaghan, Maeve. "Putin: The Richest Man on Earth?" *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*. 19 Apr. 2012. Web. 15 May 2014.

¹⁰ Radia, Kirit. "Putin's Extravagant \$700,000 Watch Collection." *ABC News*
<http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2012/06/putins-extravagant-700000-watch-collection/>

V. Events in Ukraine

Earlier, when mass protests in Ukraine resulted in the overthrow of Russian-backed President Viktor Yanukovich, Putin retaliated with military intervention in Ukrainian territory. State-controlled media in Russia presented the occupation of Crimea, as an act of self-defense against encroaching Western forces. Consequently, when Putin announced the annexation of Crimea, his popularity ratings were standing at 72 percent.¹¹

Entranced by the glorious sensation of Crimean takeover, Russians failed to realize that they lost Kyiv as a strategic partner for the foreseeable future. Yanukovich was a corrupt president and should not have been the guarantor of Russian-Ukraine strategic alliance. The permeating corruption of the Yanukovich administration is hard to deny, especially after protesters broke into the ex-President's mansion, which boasted an ostrich farm, nine-hole golf course, rare car collection and even a Spanish galleon built upon a barge in his own riverside harbor.¹²



Inside Mezhyhirya, Yanukovich's residence
© The Telegraph

Meanwhile, there are millions of other Ukrainians, who are not nearly as rich as Yanukovich, but still consider Russia a strategic ally and a brotherly nation. The Kremlin could have waited out for the public anger toward Yanukovich to cool down, support Kiev through democratic reform process and re-engage the new government in a mutually beneficial partnership.

Nevertheless, Putin did not even heed to one of his closest allies, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's suggestion that "Ukraine should stay a united, undivided, nonaligned state."¹³ Instead, Kremlin spewed fire and anger on Ukraine and fomented chaos and disorder in the country. Such a policy course will have lasting effects on Moscow's relations with not only Kyiv, but also Brussels and Washington. Russia has already lost its seat in the G8 summit and voting rights in the European Council, while Russia's economic development ministry has downgraded the country's growth forecast from 2.5 percent to less than 1 percent this year.¹⁴

The forthcoming economic challenges are likely to open a Pandora's box of domestic shockwaves in Russia. The last 15 years have been largely successful for Russian economy,

¹¹ Taylor, Adam. "We Treat Him like He's Mad, but Vladimir Putin's Popularity Has Just Hit a 3-year High." *Washington Post*. 13 Mar. 2014.

¹² Booth, William. "The Most Surprising Thing at Yanukovich's Estate? He Has Relatively Good Taste." *Washington Post*. 25 Feb. 2014.

¹³ "Whatever Happens, Belarus Will Stay with Russia - Lukashenko." *Pravda.ru*. N.p., 23 Apr. 2014.

¹⁴ Berman, Ilan. "What Putin Is Costing Russia." *The Wall Street Journal*. 20 Apr. 2014.

mainly due to high energy prices, Western attempts to substitute Arab oil for Russian oil and political stability under Putin administration. However, Moscow has yet to resolve domestic issues related to corruption, depopulation, and a weak manufacturing economy, which in turn translate into a tightening native labor pool, rising tensions with ethnic minorities, the outflow of brainpower and economic overreliance on crude exports. To tackle these issues, Moscow needed a strategic partnership with the West; instead, the Kremlin saw it as a zero-sum game and ended up with a lose-lose confrontation with the West.

One of the most reasonable explanations for such an antagonistic policy course could be that closer association with EU institutions would be detrimental for Putin's personal interests. Putin did not want to be the president of a European state, or he would stand out as the richest and eventually the longest lasting state leader in Europe. He wants to be the tsar of the Russian empire and that is why he did not let Medvedev to run for the second term and rushed back into the Presidential seat.

In pursuit of preserving his legitimacy at home, Putin chose to denounce the West, as the enemy, which subsequently turned him into the champion of authoritarian regimes around the world. The world's most infamous dictators, including Kim Jong-un of North Korea, Bashar Assad of Syria, and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, are among the ten authoritarian leaders who support Putin's annexation of Crimea.¹⁵ Such a policy justifies Putin's impediment of the democratic reform process and helps to preserve absolute power in Russia's political scene.

Personal ambitions explain Putin's invasion of Ukraine a day after the Winter Olympic Games were held in Sochi. It may seem strange that Russia spent \$52 billion in USD on the Sochi Olympics to build a positive image for the country and the next day Russian military forces went into Ukraine, tarnishing the international image of Russia; however, if you look at it from Putin's prism, the picture becomes clearer. "The two-week event was all about Putin's personal glory in the same way that the Berlin Olympics exalted Adolf Hitler," as Garry Kasparov, former World Chess Champion, put it.¹⁶

Relating Sochi Olympics to Berlin Olympics of 1936, Kasparov added that "Anyone who thinks that is an exaggeration is forgetting a very important factor. Hitler in 1936 was seen as a thoroughly respectable and legitimate politician."¹⁷ In fact, there are more similarities between Hitler and Putin. Hitler's Nazi political agenda was thriving on the sense of deprived national pride of Germans, who lost World War I. Putin came to power in Russia that was still recovering from the loss of the Cold War.

¹⁵ Countries that in support of Russia voted against *The UN Resolution Affirming Ukrainian territorial integrity and condemning Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula*: Armenia, Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua, North Korea, Sudan, Syria, Venezuela and Zimbabwe

¹⁶ Reitschuster, Boris. "Sochi Is to Putin What Berlin in 1936 Was to Hitler, Says Garry Kasparov." *The Guardian*. 08 Feb. 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/sport/2014/feb/07/sochi-vladimir-putin-hitler-berlin-garry-kasparov>

¹⁷ Reitschuster, Boris. *Ibid*

There was also a famous joke going around social networks, after German Chancellor Angela Merkel called upon Putin to pull his forces out of Ukraine. “An aide tells to Hitler: Mon Furor, I saw a dream that Russia invades Ukraine and Germany asks to stop the war.”

VI. Conclusion

It is hard to say whether Putin was expecting to get this far when he took the Prime-Minister’s seat in 1999. However, it is obvious that the further Putin goes, the more complex becomes the situation around him and more challenging is going to be his way out of it. Surrounding himself with friends and colleagues with similar world views, – he has deliberately or unwittingly – cut himself off from unwelcome information.¹⁸ However, the sooner he starts to think about the exit plan, the greater are his chances to survive the conundrum he has caused and the less damage will the regional peace and stability suffocate.

So far, Putin has been making enemies where he should have been making friends. He has been trying to go down in history as the Tsar who revived the Russian empire, instead of a president who brought democracy and higher living standards to Russians. Putin should not forget that the Soviet leadership that he is emulating failed because of rampant corruption, inability to compete industrially, and, most importantly, its inability to change. If the Kremlin does not change its policy course soon enough, tightening economic sanctions on Russia will reflect on the monthly incomes of average Russians and they will start asking questions that the Putin administration will not be able to answer.

¹⁸ Treisman, Daniel. "The Two Putins." *CNN.com*. 04 Mar. 2014.