

# Reviewing Putin and His Regime



“The Liberal Ideal Has Outlived Its Purpose.”

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# The Putin Approach

10/10/2019

By Robbin Laird

Mark Galeotti has written a primer on Putin.

If one were to read only one book on Putin and his rebuild of Russia, this would be the book. It is short, articulate, and extremely hard hitting and clear.

What he identifies throughout his primer is what one might call the Putin style or the Putin approach to the building and use of power. He argued that the common perception of Putin as a chess master is simply wrong; he is a judo master. Judo was what saved him as a young man from teenage challenges, and has persisted throughout his life in giving him not only vitality but providing a core focus to how to deal with adversity.

*In fact, there is no evidence that Putin plays chess, and in any case, it is not his sort of game. Chess is a contest of inflexible rules, transparency and of an intellectual competition where the options are strictly constrained. Everyone starts with the same pieces, and everyone knows what a pawn can do and when it's their turn to move. Putin doesn't want to limit his options like that.*

[1](#)

Galeotti then underscores the importance of judo and training to fit judo matches for Putin in his defining his approach to power.

*He does know judo, however. A black belt, he has been honing his skills since starting as a teenager, and his approach to statecraft seems to reflect this. A judoka may well have prepared for a rival's usual moves and worked out countermoves in advance, but much of the art is in using the opponent's strength against him to seize the moment when it appears.*

[2](#)

Translated into geopolitical terms, Putin is an opportunist.

As I have argued elsewhere, he has shaped a narrative for the restoration of the Russian state and the role of Russia in world affairs.

Along with a narrative there is an approach to power, which can best be seen as opportunism seized as he assesses an evolving situation.

*Putin is an opportunist. He has a sense of what constitutes a win, but no predetermined path towards it. He relies on quickly seizing any advantage he sees, rather than on a careful strategy. As a result, both he and the Russian state he has shaped are often unpredictable, sometimes even acting in contradictory ways, especially regarding foreign policy.*

*Many apparent short-term ‘successes’ prove to be long-term liabilities, having been neither thought through beforehand or followed through afterwards. But this helps explain why we are so often unable to predict Putin’s moves in advance – he himself doesn’t know what he’ll do next. Instead, he circles us in the ring.*

*He is aware that overall and when united, the West is so much more powerful than Russia, with twenty times its gross domestic product, six times the population, and more than three times as many troops. But he’s waiting for us to make a mistake and give him what looks like a good chance to strike.* <sup>3</sup>

Applied to the events of the past few years. Galeotti judges Putin’s approach as looking for weaknesses and opportunities with the West, and the acting upon them.

But he argues it would be wrong to accuse Putin of a deliberate strategy in any particular event, but rather as seizing opportunities to implement what I have argued is the Putin narrative about the restoration of Russia and its authoritarian state.

*Instead, Putin’s state generally responds to opportunities. A British prime minister calls for a referendum on leaving the European Union; American Democratic Party officials practise poor computer security; people in the West begin to lose faith in their political systems and elites; opaque financial structures allow ‘dark money’ to distort economies and corrupt politics; social media bypasses the traditional press. Russia created none of these opportunities, but has demonstrably tried to exploit them. In effect, we in the West define what Putin’s state does to us, while he is simply taking advantage of the failures, broken promises and stress points in our systems.* <sup>4</sup>

Putin’s style of authoritarianism rests on building a network of key players who are capable of acting out the narrative which he has shaped about the authoritarian state and its role in the Russian tradition.

He is not so much directing specific actions rather than orchestrating.

*Putin the judoka-tsar lords it over an army of smaller judokas, all of whom are looking for a chance to get on.* <sup>5</sup>

Putin appears in the analysis of Galeotti very much in the image of Machiavelli’s prince where a core recommendation by Machiavelli to the Medicis is to cultivate an image of power which your enemies respect and even fear, but not to get captured by the image you project.

This projection of image becomes a key instrument of power to which other’s respond even more than whatever actions the Prince might contemplate.

*(Putin) thinks a great power should get to waive the rules and should not have to consider itself bound by international laws and norms. This is a pipe dream, especially for a country that is only a great power in its own imagination, but in many ways this is the point: politics and power are all about perception.*

*By acting as if Russia is a great power, Putin hopes to persuade everyone else either that this is true, or at least that it is not worth trying to challenge the idea and that they should stop trying to 'keep Russia down'.*

*At 1.7 metres tall, Putin is of below average height, but with his over-the-top tough-guy persona, he tries to project a rather more formidable image.<sup>6</sup>*

Galeotti provided an example of how this works from a story he told about a conversation he had with a Western journalist about Putin.

*Consider a deeply frustrating conversation I had with a Czech journalist in 2017, right before the Russians held a major military exercise called Zapad , or 'West', in conjunction with their ally, Belarus.*

*At the time, a massive wave of hysteria was washing over the Western analytic community, partly generated by its own paranoia (and also by some alarmist pundits looking for some media attention), but encouraged by the Russians' own strategic trolling.*

*It was said that it would involve more than a hundred thousand troops (in reality, the number was not even half that), that it was really a plan to occupy Belarus and replace its president with a Russian puppet (nope), that it was a pretext to invade the Baltic states (again, no), and that it was a dry run for an all-out invasion of northern Europe (really, no).*

*At the height of the frenzy, this Czech journalist asked with a straight face what price Putin would accept for a peace treaty.*

*First of all, I pointed out, as far as I knew we were not officially at war. Secondly, what kind of a price was he talking about?*

*He started a list: recognising Russia's annexation of Crimea, forcing neutrality on Ukraine, and withdrawing NATO forces from front-line states.*

*I confess that I was astonished: Putin would not believe his luck if any of those massive and unjustifiable concessions were offered, especially on the basis of a long-scheduled and essentially defensive military exercise and some dramatic television footage of tanks rumbling across the Belarusian plain.*

*This journalist, who was neither a moron nor a rookie, was articulating a minority opinion, but one that can often be encountered across the West: the sense that Putin is so dangerous and powerful that it is best to try and buy him off rather than confront him.<sup>7</sup>*

The Putin style is combined with the shaping of a narrative, a subject which I have treated at length elsewhere.

Galeotti underscores what he sees as Putin's key objectives.

*Putin has committed himself to restoring both the central authority of the state and also Russia's status as a great power, but this is not simply an exercise in geopolitical archaeology, rediscovering and restoring ancient glories. Rather, it is envisaged as creating something new.*<sup>8</sup>

### **What is this something new that Putin is focused on creating and sustaining?**

*In his State of the Federation speech in 2012, he said that 'to revive national consciousness, we need to link historical eras and get back to understanding the simple truth that Russia did not begin in 1917, or even in 1991 ... We have a common, continuous history spanning over a thousand years, and we must rely on it to find inner strength and purpose in our national development.'*

*He wants to cherry-pick the bits of history that fit his narrative of a Russia that has been perennially battered and belittled by foreigners, yet strong when it stands together – so the Soviet victory in 1945 is included, but Communism isn't, for example.*

*Russian history is strewn with the bodies of defunct empires and heroes of the day; like Dr Frankenstein, Putin wants to create something new from the bits and pieces gathered from those corpses.*<sup>9</sup>

### **But there clearly is a downside of this narrative for the West.**

Putin is playing on the country's preoccupation with its insecurity and the need to both embrace and reject foreign influences.

This clearly leaves Putin more interested in making the world safe of authoritarianism than in working with the West to generate a more robust Russian economy or society capable of global competition.

He is focused more on protecting the “narod” for the foreign threats and protecting the “narod” who used to live in the Soviet Union but now live in the near abroad states which have embraced independence and sovereignty and several of which have joined the Western alliances.

There is also the major challenge of what Putin understands in a world that is dramatically changing. Authoritarian regimes are not known for their robust internal debate based on profound engagement with the outside world.

### **Putin is no different and this poses a challenge of understanding what Putin thinks he sees, rather than what we think we see.**

*Like so many authoritarian leaders, Putin has over time become less and less willing to listen to alternative perspectives. As one former Russian spy told me, the intelligence agencies have learned that 'you do not bring bad news to the tsar's table'. As with everything under Putin, politics around intelligence is competitive to the point of cannibalism.*<sup>10</sup>

The image cultivated of Putin is of the tough guy, judo master.

**But rather than being a street fighter, Putin is a cautious decision maker.**

*In practice, though, he is cautious and risk-averse. He is only happy to play the maverick when he thinks he can predict the outcomes.*<sup>11</sup>

With regard to Putin's vision and approach to reshaping Russia's role in the world, Galeotti has argued that his view is based in history of what a great power should be and then has staked out a path to get where he wants to go.

The problem is that the Russia of today lacks a great deal of what would take to be a great power in 21<sup>st</sup> century terms, in terms of the kind of economy and society Russia would need to have.

He has lived through the collapse of empire and the desire for a phoenix rebirth of Russia through the prism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And his strength has come from his ability to channel his own life's history into a narrative for the Russian 'narod.'

**Clearly one of the challenges posed by Russia going forward is the threat of a successor taking the system building by Putin and using its resources in a more aggressive manner and going from having authoritarian regimes as allies in the restoration of Russia to becoming something else globally.**

The book is concise; the insights significant.

#### *Footnotes*

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2. Galeotti, Mark. We Need to Talk About Putin (p. 14). Ebury Publishing. Kindle Edition.
3. Galeotti, Mark. We Need to Talk About Putin (p. 15). Ebury Publishing. Kindle Edition.
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## **Characterizing the Putin Narrative: The Code of Putinism**

10/12/2019

By Robbin Laird

As I have argued earlier, Putin has shaped a narrative over time about Russia, its state and its society and its role in the world. This narrative has been shaped by words and actions by the President over time and expresses his version of 21<sup>st</sup> century authoritarianism and how a “great authoritarian power” can shape its role in the world.

Brian Taylor in his book *The Code of Putinism* provides an interesting characterization of the Putin narrative writing process in terms of what he labels the code of Putinism. The table below captures his argument of what he sees as the essential elements of Putinism.

**Table 1-1 The Code of Putinism**

<i>Ideas</i>	<i>Habits</i>	<i>Emotions</i>
+ statism, including great power statism	+ control	+ respect/disrespect and humiliation
+ anti-Westernism and anti-Americanism	+ order	+ resentment
+ conservatism/antiliberalism	+ unity/antipluralism	+ vulnerability/fear
	+ loyalty	
	+ hypermasculinity	

What Putin has built is an approach which emphasizes the defense of conservative values, Russian orthodoxy, a strong central regime in “vertical” control of the country, and over time playing off of Western developments in the post-Cold War period as providing a threat to Russia and its interests, requiring a Russian “reset” but not the one that Mrs. Clinton had in mind when she articulated this objective during her time as Secretary of State in the Obama Administration.

There was reset for sure, but it was about the Putin regime challenging what many Western analysts call the “rules-based” order in favor of one looking more like a return to great power politics of the 20<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Although in the Putin narrative, the United States is painted as the adversary who has driven Russian to protect its interests by armed intervention in Europe and in the Middle East, actually the biggest challenge to Putinism comes from Europe and the “near abroad” countries wanting to be part of a broader European effort for modernization, than joining a new Russian club of autocrats.

Although, the evolution in parts of Central Europe towards 1930s types of authoritarianism might provide the opportunity for a Russian club to emerge, notably as China and Russia are sponsoring a viable 21<sup>st</sup> century authoritarian effort.

Putin has positioned Russia to “punch above its weight” in global affairs.



“The code of Putinism has at its core the notion that Russia must be a strong state and a great power, and it is highly suspicious of the United States and the global system it promotes and upholds. Feelings of humiliation and resentment in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse further fuel this drive to restore Russian power.

“Putin’s Russia is not seeking global hegemony, but it does want to upend the Western-dominated order that promotes democracy and human rights and insists on the right of Russia’s neighbors to choose their own foreign policy course independent from Russian tutelage. It wants to be treated as an equal great power deciding the key issues in global security, respected and deferred to by the other great powers, especially the United States. Putin wants, to borrow a phrase, to make Russia great again.”<sup>1</sup>

**Russia under Putin sees its agenda of restoration of its proper place in the world comes into direct conflict with the Western world’s view of itself.**

The problem is that the West sees the current international order as broadly legitimate and interprets Russian assertions of its perceived interests as a challenge to peace and stability. Russia wants great power diplomacy as practiced in Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, something the West sees as no longer viable in the twenty-first century.

Putin has been quite clear about how he would like the Western approach to change. He favors a consortium of great powers working together to shape the way ahead for the global order, which, of course, means tearing up a considerable part of the liberal democratic approach to global order.

Russia as a respected great power, one of a new Big Three (the US, China and Russia), consulted on all major international questions, and deferred to on issues within its sphere of influence—this is the goal of a Putinist foreign policy. This is what “winning” would look like for the code of Putinism, the purpose of strenuous efforts to punch above Russia’s weight.<sup>2</sup>

Taylor underscores that many global actors reject such an approach out of hand.

“Many states in the international system aren’t prepared to return to a Concert of Nations concept. Most importantly for Russia, this vision is no longer viable for Europe.... Not only do the major western European powers resist a return to a spheres-of-influence world but so also do the smaller states whose fates would be decided by the great powers.

“Experts have observed that the countries in the former Soviet space in which Russia has used military power without a host government invitation since the end of the Cold War—Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine—are also among the most resistant to Russia’s effort to keep them in its orbit. As one former US diplomat put it, “the harder Russia squeezes its neighbors, the more they will turn to Euroatlantic institutions as a refuge.”<sup>3</sup>

**The challenge for the West though is that Russian interests cannot be ignored with regard to the evolving European order, nor can Russian reshaping of political geography accepted either.**

“The concession Putin wants—recognition of a sphere of influence in the former Soviet space—is one the West almost certainly will refuse to give. More dialogue is certainly called for, but after the Ukraine crisis, both sides are more suspicious than ever.

“And, it is worth emphasizing, NATO expansion arguably is not even the most vexing issue for Putin and his group—colored revolutions in neighboring states increased feelings of vulnerability and encirclement in the Kremlin at least as much as NATO enlargement did. The challenge of a new European security architecture ultimately is more political than military.”<sup>4</sup>

**Looking beyond Putinism, the question is how will Russia evolve and deal with the fundamental challenges which have been the downside of the restoration of Russian order shaped by the Putin narrative?**

Taylor cites one Russian analyst’s characterization of the “five circles of hell” which Putinism has created and which his successors will need to deal with.

These five circles are: 1. An inefficient economic system built on crony capitalism capitalism and state business; 2. A central political system in which all key institutions outside the presidency—political parties, the parliament, civil society—have been “destroyed”; 3. A federal political order in which the regional elite has been “castrated” in favor of weak and talentless leaders installed from the center; 4. A foreign policy in crisis, marked by confrontation with the West and partnership with a China that will want some returns from its investment in the relationship; 5. A weak state, in which the government and bureaucracy are incapable of regularized governance and decision-making because of habituation to “manual rule.”<sup>5</sup>

Taylor argues that the question of the evolution of Russia after Putin will intersect and interact with the major changes going on in the West as well. Putin has put down his marker on stopping NATO and EU expansion; but the question of how the West evolves, in terms of the next phase of EU development, how the major states in the West will deal with economic, political, diplomatic and military challenges, will shape the way ahead for Russia as well. But the reverse is also true.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century authoritarian powers are directly impacting on Western development, and the least significant aspect of doing so is cyber intrusion in elections. The broader engagement within the economies and interest group structures in the West is far more significant.

The code of Putinism, in contrast, embraces conservative and illiberal values of tradition, hierarchy, and order. On Russia Day in 2017, Putin emphasized the “significance of our own roots and traditions,” the need to maintain a “strong, self-sufficient, independent country,” and the centrality of “the power of the state in securing political stability, unity of purpose, and the consolidation of society.”<sup>29</sup> Putin, skeptical of ever reaching accommodation with the West, increasingly has sought to undermine the image of the West and its liberal values, both at home and abroad, and he seems to have notched some major successes in this effort.<sup>6</sup>

## Footnotes

1. Taylor, Brian D.. The Code of Putinism (pp. 166-167). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.
2. Taylor, Brian D.. The Code of Putinism (p. 191). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.
3. ITaylor, Brian D.. The Code of Putinism (p. 191). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.
4. Taylor, Brian D.. The Code of Putinism (p. 192). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.
5. Taylor, Brian D.. The Code of Putinism (p. 207). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.
6. Taylor, Brian D.. The Code of Putinism (pp. 208-209). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

# Understanding Mr. Putin: The Operative in the Kremlin

10/06/2019

By Robbin Laird

Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy of the Brookings Institution have written an interesting assessment of the leader of the Kremlin who will reach his 20-year mark in the Presidency of the Prime Ministership of the Russian Republic next year.

During this 20-year period Putin has led the effort to rebuild the Russian shape and to craft an approach to 21<sup>st</sup> century authoritarianism.

A hallmark of an effective authoritarian regime is longevity and continuity.

This contrasts directly with the liberal democracies whose dynamics of change see the rotation, circulation, replacement, or regeneration of governing elites on a regular basis.

Discontinuity can be a hallmark of such a process compared to the continuity of an authoritarian regime.

This means that Putin has seen several U.S. Presidents come and go since 2000 and has shaped his narrative playing off of the discontinuities and continuities across these US Administrations.

Change has been even more dramatic when dealing with his proximate European partners/competitors.

Obviously, having continuity while your competitor/partner/adversary does not gives one certain advantages.

At the same time, one faces the challenge as an authoritarian leader in really understanding what is changing and what is not in the West. Given how authoritarian regimes control not just their publics but their own information flows, not grasping the reality of change but pursuing your image of change can be a problem.

**And there is always what might be called the Machiavellian challenge: the danger that the ruler who has shaped a narrative or image which he has done to generate power, is trapped by that image, and confuses perception with reality.**

There is little doubt that Putin has entered the trap that Machiavelli has described.

He has generated a powerful narrative of the centrality of a strong state to the Russian idea and approach to the 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges and as a key way to restore the respect Russia “deserves” from the West.

And he has increasingly used the Western “threat” to justify Russia’s conflict with and distancing from the West, and the belief that Russia is morally superior to the West as well.

The problem is that the sense of uniqueness and victimhood can become a trap, which puts blinders on with regard to opportunities to work with various Western states as the West reworks its 21<sup>st</sup> century approach to global power.

**The West is not collapsing but it is in the throes of a major restructuring; one can leverage the fissures evident in the conflicts, but Russia could engage in the restructuring to reshape its own system as well, but this is a prospect not inherent to the Putin approach.**

The authors shape a composite image of Putin in power in terms of various dimensions of his experience and leveraging of that experience to shape what I have referred to elsewhere as the Putin narrative.

They argue that a number of key dimensions in understanding Putin can be identified: the statist, the history man, the survivalist, the outside, the free marketer, and the case officer.

**2014 becomes a key culminating point with the seizure of Crimea, and the very clear expression of mature Putinism.**

*ON MARCH 18, 2014, still bathed in the afterglow of the Winter Olympics that he had hosted in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, Russian president Vladimir Putin stepped up to a podium in the Kremlin to address the nation.*

*Before an assembly of Russian officials and parliamentarians, Putin signed the documents officially reuniting the Russian Federation and the peninsular republic of Crimea, the home base of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet. Crimea had seceded from Ukraine only two days earlier, on March 16.*

*Crimea had seceded from Ukraine only two days earlier, on March 16. The Russian president gave what was intended to be a historic speech. The events were fresh, but his address was laden with references to several centuries of Russian history. Putin invoked the origins of Orthodox Christianity in Russia. He referenced military victories on land and sea that had helped forge the*

*Russian Empire. He noted the grievances that had festered in Russia since the 1990s, when the state was unable to protect its interests after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. At the center of his narrative was Crimea. Crimea “has always been an inseparable part of Russia,” Putin declared. Moscow’s decision to annex Crimea was rooted in the need to right an “outrageous historical injustice.”<sup>1</sup>*

Later in the book, the authors address the key question of what the Ukrainian crisis is all about, beyond the question of recovering Russia for the Russians.

**They suggest that Putin is underscoring the need for a reworking of the entire Western-Russian relationship, a relationship which had been skewed to the West’s advantage with the unfortunate collapse of the Soviet Union.**

*As he laid out in his August 2014 speech in Crimea, Putin seeks a “New Yalta” with the West in political and security terms. As he defines Moscow’s sphere of influence in this new arrangement, that sphere extends to all the space in Europe and Eurasia that once fell within the boundaries of the Russian Empire and the USSR.*

*Within these vast contours, Putin and Russia have interests that need to be taken into account, interests that override those of all others. For Putin, Russia is the only sovereign state in this neighborhood. None of the other states, in his view, has truly independent standing—they all have contingent sovereignty.*

*The only question for Putin is which of the real sovereign powers (Russia or the United States) prevails in deciding where the borders of the New Yalta finally end up after 2014. Unlike the old Yalta of the post–World War II Soviet period, Putin’s New Yalta does not extend to economics.*

*Putin wants preferential, even protectionist, provisions for the Russian economy, but he does not espouse the creation of rigid opposing economic blocs or autarky. That simply will not work in today’s global economy.<sup>2</sup>*

**The “new Yalta” is a work in progress from Putin’s point of view.**

**But while that is in process, the West and Russia are in a state of war.**

*They will be fighting a new war that is fought everywhere with nonmilitary as well as military means. Ultimately, in pursuing his goals as the Statist, Putin remains a pragmatist. In figuring out how to prevail in this war, Putin knows that Russia does not have the economic or military resources for the old Soviet (and Russian) mass-army, total mobilization approach to defending its interests.*

*Given the contemporary balance of forces, Russia will always lose in such a conflict. The United States, NATO members, and other de facto U.S. allies have a collective GDP more than ten times that of Russia's as well as more conventional arms. Putin needs to avoid a good old-fashioned twentieth-century war (even a small one) and accomplish his goals without resorting to total mobilization.*

*Twenty-first-century wars involve targeted nonmilitary efforts. They are the least disruptive to the normal functioning of the Russian economy even though they can also be very damaging.<sup>3</sup>*

**And after characterizing the nature of conflict going forward from Putin's perspective, the authors argue that the Ukrainian crisis is a key marker in the way ahead.**

*As far as what Vladimir Putin might do next, it seems rather clear: He will keep Ukraine boiling, and he will probe and poke, and prepare for contingency operations elsewhere in the neighborhood. Putin will rely on asymmetry and the element of tactical surprise, whenever and wherever he strikes next, for maximum effect.*

*Beyond Ukraine, all of Eastern Europe, the former Soviet bloc, has vulnerabilities from the Case Officer's perspective. Baltic states such as Estonia have shaky border agreements with Russia; they also have many Russian speakers without citizenship, as well as economic ties to Russia. All can be used to good effect.*

*Old Cold War methods can be deployed across the region that fall short of the threshold of triggering an armed response from NATO.<sup>4</sup>*

**And what should the West do to counter the Putin agenda and the Putin approach?**

*Putin's operational aims will continue to be to find the weaknesses in Western defenses, to goad and intimidate Western leaders and publics, and to make sure everyone knows he will make good on his threats.*

*The onus will now be on the West to shore up its own home defenses, reduce the economic and political vulnerabilities, and create its own contingency plans if it wants to counter Vladimir Putin's new twenty-first-century warfare<sup>5</sup>*

#### *Footnotes*

1. Hill, Fiona. and Clifford Gaddy, Mr. Putin (Geopolitics in the 21st Century) . Brookings Institution Press. p. 3.
2. Hill, Fiona. and Clifford Gaddy, Mr. Putin (Geopolitics in the 21st Century) . Brookings Institution Press. pp. 393-394.
3. Hill, Fiona. and Clifford Gaddy, Mr. Putin (Geopolitics in the 21st Century) . Brookings Institution Press. pp. 394-395.
4. Hill, Fiona. and Clifford Gaddy, Mr. Putin (Geopolitics in the 21st Century) . Brookings Institution Press. p. 396-397.

5. Hill, Fiona. and Clifford Gaddy, Mr. Putin (Geopolitics in the 21st Century) . Brookings Institution Press. p. 397.

# The Economic Engine for Putin's Russia: The Kleptocracy Downside

09/26/2019

By Robbin Laird

As Putin reshaped Russia in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the key focus was upon restoring state power, and the ability of the state to leverage the Russian economy to restore Russian power, global standing and respectability.

A key focus of his attention was upon gaining control over the energy sector, and ensuring that the commodities based economy would serve state interests.

What this also meant was that rebuilding the economy to support diversified economic growth was not a priority, and, indeed, would suffer with the commodities driven consolidation which would then feed the needs of state power and the return of Russia to Putin's vision of Russian greatness.

To do so, Putin would rely on his network of key allies from Petersburg and beyond who helped him shape the phoenix rise of the Russian, but not the Soviet state.

**As Putin put it: "Anyone who doesn't regret the passing of the Soviet Union has no heart. Anyone who wants it restored has no brains."**

Putin with his network of key allies have rebuilt the state through controlling the proceeds of Russian Energy Inc. so to speak, but the spin off of those efforts, although useful to build the new Russian state, have left in its wake a weakened economy unable to re-generate itself via what in a capitalist society would be considered normal means of growth and entrepreneurship.

It is hard to generate 21<sup>st</sup> century dynamics of entrepreneurship when you have focused on building a new authoritarian state, which is funded by a raw material economy.

In her seminal book, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia*, the late Karen Dawisha provided a courageous and hard-hitting overview on the nature of the Soviet economy providing the engine for Putin authoritarianism.

**And in so doing, she underscored a key aspect of short sidedness with regard to Western analyses of Russian in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.**

*In the academic world, there was a similar trend in writing about Russia. Books continued to frame Russia as a democracy, albeit one that was failing or in crisis. Like other scholars of*

*Russia, I have spent a significant portion of my career thinking and writing about how the post-Communist states might make a transition toward democracy.*

*Initially Western government and academic circles believed that institutions could be established in practically any country that would guide it along a democratic path. Most of the new central European countries had early elections, established non-Communist governments, and never looked back. Our uncurbed enthusiasm even extended to Russia. But then the quality of democracy in Putin's Russia just kept getting worse.*

*Still there was little shift in academic direction, as much of the literature approached the Putin era as a democracy in the process of failing rather than as an authoritarian project in the process of succeeding.<sup>1</sup>*

What Dawisha provides with her analyses is a clear focus on the intersection of three trends: Putin's rise to power; the return of the Russian state; and the key role of the Putin team in leveraging economic assets to enrich themselves and to re-enforce the power of the new version of the Russian state.

*By 2014, as he marched into Crimea, Putin had clearly decided that he could maintain his power by ignoring the independent middle class, entrepreneurial interests, and the cultural elite. Instead he could rely on oil and gas extraction economically and on increased use of propaganda domestically to rally state workers and provincial populations.*

*The main theme of this information war was anti-Americanism, the fight against "fascism" in Ukraine, the renewal of Russian greatness, and the distinctiveness of Russian values—as shown by the campaigns against Pussy Riot (the all-female punk rock band) and gay rights.*

*The Kremlin has persistently portrayed the collapse of the Soviet Union as a defeat imposed on Russia by the West. And state-controlled media frames Putin not as the putative head of the party of "crooks and thieves," as the opposition politician Aleksey Navalnyy branded the ruling party United Russia prior to the 2011 Duma elections, but as the liberator of Russian lands and the head of a great civilization morally superior to gay-dominated and degraded Western culture.<sup>2</sup>*

The impact of this legacy will be significant on what comes next for Russia.

Not only in terms of how to rebuild the economy but with which partners and in which direction?

With the rise of the 21st century authoritarian approach, there are more options rather than simply working with the capitalist West, but it is not easy to see how Russia would keep to its nationalistic independent path if it were to do so.

It could embrace some form of federalism and allow the regions to work with the proximate economies or partners and to allow for a more flexible economy nationally.



It could work to build out its own part of the European Union with those states not happy with France and Germany and seeking to reform the European Union in a direction more favorable to Central European values rather than German dictated European values.

But the underlying challenge is simply put: the over-reliance on revenues from oil and gas to fund the state and to limit the future of the Russian society.

*While Putin uses the revenues from oil and gas to fund large capital projects, from the multiple state residences to the Sochi Olympics, or allows his cronies to take it abroad, the population must contribute significantly to the budget through a combination of income taxes, high value-added taxes, and high duties on imported consumer goods. But the population also contributes a “tax” by paying bribes.<sup>3</sup>*

The impact of the corruption within the Putin system clearly has its impact on the West as well. For the Russians involved in the control of the energy economy find the Western rules based system and the Western banking system a key element in protecting their interests as well.

And there is the question as well of the cross-cutting impact of corruption on the West as well as the new authoritarians have burrowed into the fabric of Western society as well.

The EU has worked hard to stanch the tide of corrupt behavior from Russia that is finding its way into the very heart of Europe and its institutions, but there are obviously politicians and public officials who are willing to partner with Russia in these transactions.<sup>4</sup>

Dawisha argued that with a decline in the economy and in Putin’s personal stature among the Russian middle class, it was likely that control will depend increasingly upon coercion. The actions of Putin during his current term as President seem to confirm her forecast.

She concluded her book with this judgment:

*Putin responded to Western sanctions in 2014 by telling Russians it will be good for them, it will make them more self-reliant. It will stimulate business. But he’s been in power fourteen years, and what has he done to stimulate business? What was he waiting for?*

*The biggest threat to the success of ordinary Russians occurs not, as he claims, from Western business investments in Russia, but rather when Russia’s all-powerful overlord, or one of his cronies, demolishes a village to build a palace, steals the money intended for health reforms, stymies innovation by maintaining state ownership of patents, or sends waves of tax, fire, and health inspectors as part of a shakedown.<sup>5</sup>*

A key aspect of Dawisha’s book and her research was to document the Putin approach which was set in motion from the beginning of his time in power.

A notable example of her work was focusing on an early document from the first Putin Administration which focused on his approach to administrative reform.

The purpose of this reform was to recentralize the state and to build out what would become the Putin approach to the new Russian state.

This document was identified and published with comments by a prominent Russian journalist but later the document was delinked from the news site and included on the excellent Miami University, Ohio website of Russian documents from the Putin period.

#### *Footnotes*

1. Dawisha, Karen. Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia? (pp. 6-7). Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition.
2. Dawisha, Karen. Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia? (p. 318). Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition.
3. Dawisha, Karen. Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia? (p. 322). Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition.
4. Dawisha, Karen. Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia? (pp. 341-342). Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition.
5. Dawisha, Karen. Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia? (pp. 341-350). Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition.

## **The Putin Thread and the Phases of Putinism Since 2000**

09/30/2019

By Robbin Laird

Steven Lee Myers has written a comprehensive perspective on the rise and reign of Vladimir Putin.

The book is a highly recommended read and what I am going to do in this review, is to lay out how one might look at the various Putin threads shaping the challenges for the West and what one might identify as the various phases of Putinism since 2000.

These characterizations are my own, but will include comments by Myers throughout the assessment to provide the reader with a good sense of Myers analysis as well.

Vladimir Putin began his professional life in the 1980s as the Soviet Union was engaged in a significant power struggle with the West. Ronald Reagan came to power with a clear and deliberate interest in taking on the Soviet Union and curtailing its power.

And as the 1980s played out, with the Euro-missile crisis as a key theater of conflict in Europe, Vladimir Putin moved from his post in Leningrad to one at Dresden.

He learned German and speaks it fluently and while in East Germany shaped a network of relationships with the STASI which he carried forward in part past the collapse of the Soviet Empire.

While in Dresden, he engaged in a range of KGB activities, but clearly a key part of what the KGB was about in that period of time was recruiting agents in the West and hoping to understand and influence Western Europe in ways that would widen the gap with the United States.

Putin learned first hand, the KGB approaches and techniques to how to understand Germany and to seek ways to influence Germany to become less “Western.”

This of course was met head on by the German reunification process through which the Chancellor of West Germany, Helmut Kohl, refused to contemplate a special relationship whereby the new Germany would not be fully integrated into the Western institutions.

And as the Bush Administration would lead the reunification effort the discussions with Gorbachev revolved around Germany and its place in Europe. The [Treaty](#) which established the united Germany guaranteed German sovereignty which included its ability to belong to and support the Western Alliances, the European Union and NATO.

*The Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany was signed in Moscow, Soviet Union, on 12 September 1990, and paved the way for German reunification on 3 October 1990.*

*Under the terms of the treaty, the Four Powers renounced all rights they formerly held in Germany, including those regarding the city of Berlin. Upon deposit of the last instrument of ratification, united Germany became fully sovereign on 15 March 1991.*

*The treaty allows Germany to make and belong to alliances, without any foreign influence in its politics. All Soviet forces were to leave Germany by the end of 1994. Before the Soviets withdrew, Germany would only deploy territorial defense units not integrated into the alliance structures. German forces in the rest of Germany were assigned to areas where Soviet troops were stationed.*

*After the Soviets withdrew, the Germans could freely deploy troops in those areas, with the exception of nuclear weapons. For the duration of the Soviet presence, Allied troops would remain stationed in Berlin upon Germany's request.*

*Germany undertook to reduce its armed forces to no more than 370,000 personnel, no more than 345,000 of whom were to be in the Army and the Air Force These limits would commence at the time that the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe would enter into force, and the treaty also took note that it was expected that the other participants in the negotiations would “render their contribution to enhancing security and stability in Europe, including measures to limit personnel strengths.”*

*Germany also reaffirmed its renunciation of the manufacture, possession of, and control over nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, and in particular, that the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty would continue to apply in full to the unified Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany).*

*No foreign armed forces, nuclear weapons, or the carriers for nuclear weapons would be stationed or deployed in six states (the area of Berlin and the former East Germany), making them a permanent Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone.*

*The German Army could deploy conventional weapons systems with nonconventional capabilities, provided that they were equipped and designed for a purely conventional role. Germany also agreed to use military force only in accordance with the United Nations Charter.*

*Another of the treaty's important provisions was Germany's confirmation of the by now internationally recognised border with Poland, and other territorial changes in Germany that had taken place since 1945, preventing any future claims to lost territory east of the Oder-Neisse line.*

*The treaty defined the territory of a 'united Germany' as being the territory of East Germany, West Germany and Berlin, prohibiting Germany from making any future territorial claims.*

*Germany also agreed to sign a separate treaty with Poland reaffirming the present common border, binding under international law, effectively relinquishing these territories to Poland.*

*This was done on 14 November 1990 with the signing of the German-Polish Border Treaty.*

*Furthermore, the Federal Republic was required by the treaty to amend its Basic Law so as to be constitutionally prohibited from accepting any application for incorporation into Germany from territories outside the territories of East Germany, West Germany and Berlin.*

*Although the treaty was signed by West and East Germany as separate sovereign states, it was subsequently ratified by united Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany).*

**Thus, the first thread of Putin's experience shaping the Russia of 2019 was his learning about the East-West conflict through the German prism and experiencing first hand in Dresden the fall of East Germany.**

**The second thread was living through the turbulence of the 1990s and the significant uncertainty about Russia, its economic and political systems and its role in the world.**

*Lyudmila felt her husband "had lost touch with his life's real purpose."<sup>15</sup> His career as a KGB officer stood at a crossroads. He joined a mass repatriation of intelligence operatives from abroad, not only from Germany but from all of Eastern Europe and other far-flung battlegrounds of the Cold War, like Afghanistan, Angola, Mongolia, Vietnam, Nicaragua, and Yemen. They were defeated, dejected, and effectively out of work, displaced refugees of a crumbling empire.<sup>1</sup>*

Given how dominant the Soviet empire was upon Moscow itself in terms of its operations, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the implosion of Russia itself. And this led to significant economic suffering and dislocation as well for the “narod” or the people. This shared experience has been central in shaping Putin’s perspectives and his ability to resonate with the “narod” to fill a longing for order, growth and respect abroad.

In the early 1990s, Putin works for the reformist mayor of Leningrad, which was to become its original name Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak, the mayor of St. Petersburg and democratic reformer, gave Putin his start in public life.

*Mr. Sobchak emerged as a leading member of Russia’s democratic movement in the late 1980’s, together with Boris N. Yeltsin, who became Russia’s first elected president in 1991.*

*In that same year Mr. Sobchak became the first elected mayor of Leningrad, Russia’s second-largest city. After the collapse of a Communist-backed coup that summer, Mr. Sobchak renamed his native city St. Petersburg, the name it bore when it was Russia’s imperial capital.*

*With his legal knowledge and lucid, eloquent speeches, Mr. Sobchak was one of the best-known spokesmen for the democratic movement, at home and abroad.*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2000/02/21/world/aa-sobchak-dead-at-62-mentor-to-putin.html>

Sobchak would come under attack and be voted out of office in 1996, but during his term in office, Putin became a key functionary supporting Sobchak’s efforts to enhance the power of Petersburg in the Russian system. But when Sobchak was voted out of power and then forced to flee Russia to Paris because of corruption charges Putin was out of a job.

But the network, which Putin forged in Petersburg, would remain loyal to him throughout his political life and would become the core Putin team when he later became President.

Through a difficult period in the mid-1990s and with the Yeltsin democratic but turbulent period of change, Putin struggled forward but would eventually come to Yelstin’s attention and become identified by the ailing President as a man to work with.

He involved Putin in his administration in key matters.

Notably, Putin became head of the Main Control Directorate in the government in March 1997. This appointment made him as well deputy chief of staff in the presidential administration.

In his new post, Putin would travel across the country and would work in close contact with the general prosecutor’s office and the successor organization to the KGB, the Federal Security Service.

*A week after he assumed the job, a new presidential decree gave the directorate broader authority to investigate abuses in government spending throughout the country at a time when governors, state enterprises, and monopolies were taking advantage of the political and*

*economic chaos to leech money out of the nation's coffers. Putin's task was to restore order, to end the most rampant schemes that were dragging the government and the economy ever downward. The work exposed him to the corruption that gnawed at the country, but also to the political risks of exposing those in power.<sup>2</sup>*

Then in May 1998, Yeltsin moved Putin into his third new job in the Kremlin in less than two years.

*This time Yeltsin appointed him the first deputy director of the presidential administration, putting him in charge of relations with the country's eighty-nine regions. The job was a natural extension of his work at the Main Control Directorate, where he had amassed files of corruption and malfeasance by regional officials. Russia is nominally a federation of its regions, and though the Constitution of 1993 gave the president broad, centralized authority, many operated as independent fiefs. By virtue of their local elections, the regional leaders also had independent political authority and thus posed potential threats to Yeltsin's preeminence<sup>3</sup>*

Next, Yeltsin would appoint him head of the successor organization to the KGB, the Federal Security Service, in 1998. This meant that Putin was moving through the ranks of the Yeltsin Administration even as the Administration was facing its death march.

A key foreign policy development at this time directly concerned President Yeltsin and would form a key event in the launch of the Putin narrative.

*The renewed turmoil in Chechnya unfolded as Russia was facing a war waged by the Soviet Union's archenemy, NATO, against the country's Slavic brothers in Serbia. After the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, Serbia turned its nativist fury on the once-autonomous Muslim region within its own borders, Kosovo. At the end of 1998, Serbia's president, Slobodan Milošević, launched a campaign to crush separatist militias in the region; within months, the campaign looked more and more like the ethnic cleansing that had occurred in Bosnia only a few years before. Europe and the United States, shamed by their dithering over the earlier killing, responded aggressively.*

*The prospect of a NATO military intervention to protect Kosovo infuriated Russia in ways American and European leaders failed to appreciate. Serbia and Russia shared Slavic roots, religion, and culture, but Russia's concerns went deeper. The conflict in Serbia inflamed Russia's wounded pride over its deflated status since the collapse of the Soviet Union.*

*The new Russia lacked the ability to shape world events, which made the American-led actions even harder to swallow. Yeltsin berated President Clinton, insisting that an intervention was forbidden by international law, only to be ignored.*

*Russia resented the fact that the United States and its expanding NATO alliance were acting as if they could impose their will on the new world order without regard to Russia's interests.*



*Even worse, the conflict in Kosovo had striking parallels to the one in Chechnya, and even Russians not prone to paranoia could imagine a NATO campaign on behalf of Chechnya's independence movement.*<sup>4</sup>

The ailing Yeltsin would turn to Putin to make him acting Prime Minister on August 9, 1999 and then would turn the Presidency over to him in his surprise resignation at the end of 1999. Putin was then in the position to run for the Presidency in March 2000.

It is only at this point, does the outside world begin to experience the launching of the Putin narrative, something that would evolve and grow over the years, but was clearly rooted in the first two threads of Putin's career.

Myers highlighted the shift from Yeltsin to Putin evidenced in Putin's New Year surprise at the turn of the millennium.

Putin then carried out his own New Year's surprise.

*He and his successor at the FSB, Nikolai Patrushev, along with their wives and a popular singer, secretly flew to Dagestan....When they landed in Dagestan's capital, Makhachkala, they climbed into military vehicles under heavy escort and drove two and a half hours back into Chechnya. It was nearly dawn when Putin greeted the Russian troops there.*

*"They looked tired and a little disoriented—as though they wanted to pinch themselves," Lyudmila recalled. "Were they dreaming?"<sup>52</sup> It had been a quiet night in Gudermes, but only twenty-three miles away, Grozny endured one of the heaviest nights of bombing to date. Putin, dressed in a turtleneck, again handed out medals and ceremonial knives. "I want you to know that Russia highly appreciates what you're doing," Putin told the soldiers mustered there. "This is not just about restoring Russia's honor and dignity. It's about putting an end to the breakup of the Russian Federation." The Yeltsin era was over.*

*The Putin era had begun.*<sup>5</sup>

### **The third thread was the Putin rebuild of Russia and engagement with the west from 2000 to 2007.**

In this period, Putin focused on ways to rebuild state power, and to position himself to control the core energy commodities in Russia to fund the rebuild of the state and setting in motion the objectives for the new Russia.

Putin had shaped his energy strategy during his time in Petersburg, "when Putin forged his bonds with the cadre of aides and businessmen concentrated around the Mining Institute where he had defended his thesis. By the middle of the 1990s, Putin was meeting regularly for informal discussions on the country's natural resources under the aegis of the institute's director, Vladimir Litvinenko, who had presided over Putin's dissertation. The ideas that Putin and his friends, Igor Sechin and Viktor Zubkov, formulated in their discussions and academic work became the basis for a strategy of restoring the state's command over Russia's vast oil and gas resources."<sup>6</sup>

The rise of energy prices would allow Putin to fund the pensions, which had collapsed for the former Soviet citizens and begin to rebuild the Russian infrastructure. At the same time, the dramatic attack by Islamic terrorists on New York was seized as an opportunity to work with the West. Putin was the first foreign leader to call President Bush after 9/11 to offer his support.

And Putin overruled his military advisors in permitting the US to use Russian transit points to engage in military operations in Afghanistan.

*As defense minister, Ivanov watched the prospect of an American intervention on Russia's periphery with alarm. Three days after the September 11 attacks, Ivanov ruled out "even the hypothetical possibility of NATO military operations on the territory of Central Asian nations."*

*Putin, though, felt that the United States now understood the threat of Islamic terrorism and was gratified. He traveled to Germany two weeks later and addressed the Bundestag, beginning his remarks in Russian and then shifting to "the language of Goethe, of Schiller and of Kant." "Today we must state firmly and finally," he said, "the Cold War is over!"*

*The German chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, reciprocated by declaring that the world should moderate its criticism of Russia's military operations in Chechnya (even as he pressed Putin privately to intervene in the most prominent military trial involving war crimes by Russian soldiers).*

*When Putin returned to Moscow on September he went to the Ministry of Defense, a hulking white building on the Bulvar Ring in the city's center and ordered the commanders to work with the Americans. He overruled Ivanov, who quietly dropped his public opposition to the American operations in Central Asia.<sup>7</sup>*

In turn, Putin expected to have a free hand in the Chechen civil wars, which he characterized as a war against terrorism as well.

The Iraq war would provide a further turning point as well.

*For two years Putin had sought a new relationship with the United States through his friendship with Bush, but Russia had received little return on the investment. Chirac, who had personally greeted him at the airport in Paris, had as much to offer Russia and tended not to muddy cordial relations with criticism of rights abuses in Chechnya or elsewhere.*

*Putin did not break with Bush outright, but Iraq was a turning point.*

*To him, the war revealed the true ambitions of the United States. In his view, it wanted to dictate its terms to the rest of the world, to champion "freedom" and use unilateral means to impose it, to interfere in the internal affairs of other nations.<sup>8</sup>*

But with pushback from both the Bush and Clinton Administrations, Putin reassessed how he would deal with the West. What he wanted was a seat at the table in the fight against global terrorism, and recognition that Russia was a global power.



This meant that while rebuilding state power, and working to overcome the chaotic Russian economy, and providing for a higher standard of living for the “narod,” Putin was working to protect Russia from being pressured by the much richer and more powerful West.

The Clinton Administration seized the opportunity, in Putin’s perspective, to expand NATO while the Germans would lead the expansion of the European Union. Viewed in the West as actions of the new sovereign states from the Soviet empires, from Putin’s perspectives the United States was leveraging the process to undercut the return of Russia to the world stage and to deflect the Russian sovereign effort to define their own unique Russian destiny.

In a famous 2007 presentation to the [Munich Security Forum](#), Putin would put clearly and bluntly in front a Western audience how he saw the global situation and Russia’s agenda in dealing with that situation.

*Today we are witnessing an almost uncontained hyper use of force – military force –in international relations, force that is plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts. As a result we do not have sufficient strength to find a comprehensive solution to any one of these conflicts.*

*Finding a political settlement also becomes impossible.*

*We are seeing a greater and greater disdain for the basic principles of international law. And independent legal norms are, as a matter of fact, coming increasingly closer to one state’s legal system. One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations.*

*Well, who likes this?*

*Who is happy about this?*

*In international relations we increasingly see the desire to resolve a given question according to so-called issues of political expediency, based on the current political climate.*

*And of course this is extremely dangerous. It results in the fact that no one feels safe. I want to emphasise this – no one feels safe! Because no one can feel that international law is like a stone wall that will protect them. Of course such a policy stimulates an arms race.*

*The force’s dominance inevitably encourages a number of countries to acquire weapons of mass destruction. Moreover, significantly new threats – though they were also well-known before – have appeared, and today threats such as terrorism have taken on a global character.*

*I am convinced that we have reached that decisive moment when we must seriously think about the architecture of global security.*

*And we must proceed by searching for a reasonable balance between the interests of all participants in the international dialogue. Especially since the international landscape is so varied and changes so quickly – changes in light of the dynamic development in a whole number of countries and regions...*

*I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernisation of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe.*

*On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended? And what happened to the assurances our western partners made after the dissolution*

*of the Warsaw Pact? Where are those declarations today? No one even remembers them. But I will allow myself to remind this audience what was said. I would like to quote the speech of NATO General Secretary Mr Woerner in Brussels on 17 May 1990. He said at the time that: “the fact that we are ready not to place a NATO army outside of German territory gives the Soviet Union a firm security guarantee”.*

*Where are these guarantees?*

*The stones and concrete blocks of the Berlin Wall have long been distributed as souvenirs. But we should not forget that the fall of the Berlin Wall was possible thanks to a historic choice – one that was also made by our people, the people of Russia – a choice in favour of democracy, freedom, openness and a sincere partnership with all the members of the big European family.*

*And now they are trying to impose new dividing lines and walls on us – these walls may be virtual but they are nevertheless dividing, ones that cut through our continent. And is it possible that we will once again require many years and decades, as well as several generations of politicians, to dissemble and dismantle these new walls?*

When the United States and NATO had responded to Serbian atrocities committed in the Balkans, then President Yeltsin was furious with the NATO bombings. And there were potential conflict points between Russians operating in the region and Western forces.

Putin would take that experience and translate that into the Russians actions in Georgia in 2008, to enter into direct conflict with Georgia and to seizure Georgian territory for the their local ally. This led to direct conflict with the Bush Administration, but in Putin’s view, Bush backed down, which began a key process which Putin pursued going forward, stopping the expansion of the Western alliances eastward.

In 2008, Putin was facing the end of his second term and was barred from running for a third term. He backed his aide, Dmitry Medvedev, to run for the Presidency, which he did and won. Putin then became his Prime Minister who clearly was given more power than a normal Prime Minister, notably with regard to global affairs.

**The fourth thread of the Putin experience reshaping Russia during his time as Prime Minister, from 2008 to 2012.**

Here is focus was upon deepening his control over the 11 time zones and enhancing the system of vertical power control. But at the same time, the coming to power of the new US President Barack Obama was viewed as an opportunity for a Russian reset, and one which the Russians could look to leverage as well.

**In other words, the internal and external aspects of Russian policy were being worked in harmony in the modernization of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Russian authoritarian system.**

And Putin was waiting in the wings for his return to the Presidency, this arrangement provided him with significant space to be involved but not responsible directly for Presidential policies.

In other words, it was an opportunity to be powerful and to prepare for the next round of being President of Russia.

A quite revealing story is provided by Myers about Obama in relationship to this situation.

*The denigration of Medvedev's legacy extended to foreign affairs as well.*

*Within days of his inauguration Putin signaled that the "reset" championed by the Obama administration had ended.*

*He brusquely informed the White House that he would not attend the G8 summit that would be held near Washington later that month, a rebuff not just to the United States but also to the leaders of the other nations he had once courted. He sent Medvedev instead on the pretext that he would be too busy forming the new government.<sup>9</sup>*

But in spite of this Obama decided to reach out to Putin via Medvedev.

*"On all these issues, but particularly missile defense, this can be solved, but it's important for him to give me space," Obama told Medvedev.*

*"Yeah, I understand," Medvedev replied. "I understand your message about space. Space for you..."*

*"This is my last election," Obama explained.*

*"After my election I have more flexibility."*

*"I understand. I will transmit this information to Vladimir."<sup>10</sup>*

**The fifth thread of the Putin experience has been the maturing of the Putin system during his final presidential terms, starting in 2012 until the projected end of his current term in 2024.**

This is how Meyers described the Putin legacy as he began his Presidential term in 2012.

*In 2000, Putin had taken his first oath of office against a backdrop of economic and political uncertainty and war in Chechnya. His second inauguration, more subdued, took place in the shadow of that war, amid the tightening of political freedoms and the dismantling of Yukos, but also in the midst of an economic revival that had trickled down to more Russians than at any time in the country's history.*

*Medvedev took the oath in 2008 at a time of hope that Russia had overcome its turbulent history and would pass power to a new generation of leaders, soon perhaps to leaders who knew only modern Russia, not the Soviet Union. Now Putin returned to take the oath a third time, pledging to faithfully serve and protect the country for six more years.*

*But he and the country had changed. He had returned to power by dividing the nation, by stoking fear of the enemies within that wanted to seize power and reverse all that had been accomplished since he first swore the oath. He had returned to power because he made himself the only real choice at the ballot.*

*He no longer seemed to be president for all Russia but only for the Putin majority. For the opposition, it was a bitter pill to swallow<sup>11</sup>*

Clearly for Putin, Ukraine's desire for reform, for potential membership in the European Union and NATO was a red line, which he fully was willing to engage in kinetic and non kinetic means to stop.

*Putin had grudgingly accepted NATO's plans to expand, but now NATO seemed to loom over Ukraine. Like many in Russia's security establishment, he had been trained to subvert and, if necessary, fight NATO, and a sense of enmity lingered.*

*Officials often cited reassurances that Mikhail Gorbachev believed he had been given during the reunification of Germany after 1989 that NATO would not expand to the east (though leaders of the United States and Europe insisted that no such reassurance had ever been made).*

*It was humiliating enough that the Baltic nations had joined NATO, but influential American and European officials were now openly advocating the inclusion of still more former Soviet republics, including Georgia and Ukraine.<sup>12</sup>*

**The Crimean intervention would form the bedrock for the fifth thread, playing off the threat from the West to reinforce the authoritarian state and Russia's global mission.**

This perspective has provided a key foundation for how Putin is shaping his authoritarian legacy, one in which he befriends other authoritarians, while playing off of Western conflicts on the trans-Atlantic, European Union and general splits between North and South Europe. The goal is to widen Russian options and to enhance its power diplomatically, economically and militarily going forward.

In the wake of Ukraine's Orange revolution, underscored the way forward for Russia in dealing with Ukraine and the West.

*Ukraine's election, coming in the wake of Beslan, proved to be a turning point for Putin and for Russia. His initial instinct to bring Russia into closer cooperation with the West, if not an actual alliance, had faded as steadily as his political and economic power had grown.*

*When he delivered his annual address to the Duma and Federation Council in April, he appealed for a new national unity against those who would challenge the state, inside or outside Russia.*

*He began with a preamble that the country needed to consider "the deeper meaning of such values as freedom and democracy, justice and legality," and went on to utter a sentence that to many confirmed the worst about Putin's instincts: a lingering nostalgia for the glory of the Soviet Union.*

*"First of all," he said, "it should be recognized that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century. For the Russian people, it became a real drama. Tens of millions of our fellow citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory. The epidemic of disintegration also spread to Russia itself."*

*Putin did not wish to restore the Soviet or Communist system—anyone who wants to, he had said, has no brain—but for the first time he began casting his leadership in a broader historical context.*

*He meant to restore something much older, much richer and deeper: the idea of the Russian nation, the imperium of the "third Rome," charting its own course, indifferent to the imposition of foreign values.<sup>13</sup> Myers, Steven Lee. The New Tsar (pp. 277-278). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.*

The seizure of Crimea was simply an act generated by the red line perspective and the setting in motion of mature Putinism.

By playing on Western fissures but hoping to deflect how agendas of Western states which might show solidarity rather than unity to intrude in Russian affairs, Putin is looking to expand his options.

But the fundamental realities remain – Russia is too dependent on state-controlled energy industries to have the flexibility to build a 21<sup>st</sup> century economy.

*In his first term Putin had moved slowly to set the economy on its feet, benefiting enormously from the unexpected surge in the price of oil (which in turn affected the price of natural gas), but his second term represented a significant shift, one that coincided with the departure of some of his liberal advisers and the consolidation of the Kremlin's control over the branches of government, as well as over the media and business. Now, with the country increasingly solvent, he began to redistribute the proceeds to a new generation of tycoons in waiting, those who had not had the privileged, insider track to amass fortunes in the 1990s.<sup>14</sup>*

**Indeed, Putin’s legacy is to ensure that his successors will have to deal with major challenges in this domain along with the political and social conflicts which these will generate.**

As Myers summarizes the legacy:

*For Putin, the personal had become policy. The pragmatism of his first two terms as president had long before ended, but now the upheaval in Ukraine signaled a fundamental break in the trajectory that he had followed since Yeltsin unexpectedly handed him the presidency at the dawn of the new millennium.*

*For fourteen years in power, he had focused on restoring Russia to its place among the world’s powers by integrating into a globalized economy, profiting from and exploiting the financial institutions of the free market—banks, stock markets, trading houses—to the benefit of those tycoons closest to him, of course, but also Russians generally.*

*Now he would reassert Russia’s power with or without the recognition of the West, shunning its “universal” values, its democracy and rule of law, as something alien to Russia, something intended not to include Russia but to subjugate it. The nation became “hostage to the psychosomatic quirks of its leader,” the novelist Vladimir Sorokin wrote after the annexation. “All his fears, passions, weaknesses, and complexes become state policy.*

*If he is paranoid, the whole country must fear enemies and spies; if he has insomnia, all the ministries must work at night; if he’s a teetotaler, everyone must stop drinking; if he’s a drunk, everyone should booze it up; if he doesn’t like America, which his beloved KGB fought against, the whole population must dislike the United States.”<sup>15</sup>*

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## **The Putin Narrative: The Rebirth of the Russian State**

09/24/2019

By Robbin Laird

Putin is part of the generation of Russians which lived through the modern version of the “time of troubles” within Russia.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the entire interconnected system of political power and the imperial economy went with it.

When one visited Russia in the early 1990s, it was a bit like visiting a frontier country, with its own version of the Wild West, but it was not always clear who were the Cowboys, the Sheriff, the Bad Guys or the Indians.

The demise of the Soviet Union was hastened by the August Coup in 1991 whereby hard line Communists who opposed Gorbachev’s reform program, which included the new union treaty which delegated much of the central government’s power to the republics. The USSR was voted out of existence by the Supreme Soviet on December 26, 1991.

With the formation of the Russian Republic, Yeltsin the politician who defended Gorbachev in the August Coup, was elected the first President of the new Russian Republic in June 1991. He would oversee the dynamics of chaos, and change in the Russia of the 1990s.

During the final period of Yeltsin’s presidency, he was often ill and suffered from alcoholism. In a surprise move in 1999, he promoted a young relatively unknown Russian who was not a politician, Vladimir Putin, to become Prime Minister, a position from which he would become President.



In an article by Angus Roxburgh published in [August 12, 2019](#), the author looked back at Putin coming to power.

*When Boris Yeltsin appointed Vladimir Putin prime minister on [9 August 1999](#), few Russians knew much about him. In early television appearances he came across as mousy, shy and awkward, a man unaccustomed to the limelight from which his previous career in the KGB had shielded him.*

*But within weeks he revealed a character trait that would become the defining feature of his rule – ruthlessness. His first memorable phrase was his threat to wipe out terrorists “even if they’re in the shithouse”, and within weeks he had launched a terrifying war against separatists in [Chechnya](#) that would leave tens of thousands of civilians dead.*

*Twenty years on, as Russia and the west teeter towards confrontation, it is hard to remember that Putin started out as an avowedly pro-western leader. George W Bush and [Tony Blair rushed to glad-hand him](#), and Putin himself stood in the Bundestag proclaiming at length and in fluent German that Russia’s destiny was in Europe.*

What Putin would create is the rebirth of the centralized Russian state or perhaps better put, the latest version of a powerful state in Russia.

A significant part of his state building effort was shaped by forging a narrative about Russia and its place in the world, which resonated with many Russians who suffered through the decade of the 1990s, and its chaos and wanted a more stable environment.

And Putin’s state would deliver both enhanced stability and an improved way of life than the one experienced during the Wild West period of the 1990s.

A recent book by Shaun Walker, a British journalist and Russian scholar, provides a comprehensive look at the narrative building process pursued by Putin. His first visit to Russia was in 2000 so his time in Russia and his time analyzing Russia coincides with the Putin years. In that sense, he is less focused on the Soviet experience and the turbulence of the 1990s, which has shaped the perceptions of older generation “Sovietologists.”

Walker argued that Putin’s mission has been to fill the void left by the 1991 collapse and forge a new sense of nation and purpose in Russia. He underscored that Putin would selective leverage aspects of the Russian and Soviet past to shape a new nation for simply building Soviet Union 2.0 was not going to work.

*To facilitate this renaissance, Putin faced the enormous task of creating a sense of nation and national pride among Russians.*

*At his inauguration, on 7 May 2000, Putin explicitly laid out the mission ahead of him as he saw it: ‘I consider it my sacred duty to unite the people of Russia and to gather citizens around clearly defined tasks and aims, and to remember, every minute of every day, that we are one nation and we are one people. We have one common destiny.’*



*But what was this common destiny, and what was this new 'first-tier' Russia meant to look like?*

*Should it be a neo-Soviet superpower, and strive to resurrect as much as possible of the Soviet past?*

*Or was the Soviet period, in fact, a horrible error and thus the new Russia should be a continuation of the tsarist empire, with its triple ideology of Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality?*

*Was Russia a bastion of 'traditional values' in opposition to a decadent West?*

*A 'Eurasian' power that could bridge the gap between East and West?*

*Or simply a 'normal' European nation, albeit one of dramatically bigger size than the others and with a more traumatic past, that could in time integrate with the democracies of the continent's western half?<sup>1</sup>*

**The Putin narrative has evolved over time, and he has leverage global events to shape what he sees as Russia's new destiny.**

Over his time in power, the West has gone from being selectively attractive to becoming a force to interact with and to be reshaped as he is reshaping Russia itself.

**He is not so much anti-Western as seeking ways to shape the West to become a more commodious partner in Russia's return to the world stage.**

Because he is judo master, not a chess master, he has played off of opportunities to work towards these objectives, rather than following some sort of master plan.

Putin's clearly identified sense that the Russian state should speak for Russians is one of the most challenging parts of the Putin narrative. He argued that the collapse of the Soviet Union meant that Russians were living in the Soviet Union one day and woke up the next living in another country.

Given the legacy of Hitler with regard to a similar statement, which asserted that the Third Reich should speak for all Germans, it is not surprising that the new European states such as the Baltic states or Poland, would find such a statement very disturbing.

**And when followed up by the actions in Chechnya, Georgia and Ukraine, this perspective seems more than a bullet point in a briefing.**

Clearly, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the prospects for Ukraine to become a member of the European Union and even perhaps NATO was a flash point for Putin where the new narrative of the Russian nation was to be joined by the action of seizing the Crimea and "returning" it to Russia, or in this case, the new Russian republic.

Put in another way, the narrative about Russia and its legitimate rights to shape its own ethnic destiny and its role as a Euro-Asian power was backed by actions. And the seizure of Crimea, was very popular in Russia to say the least.

The Putin narrative underscores that revolution and state collapse is inherently bad and the linking of the protection of Russians “abroad” with the role of the state is a core ideological challenge to modern Europe.

*The Soviet state had always faced a tricky conundrum: its ideology glorified revolution and revolutionaries, but its actions had to stifle any actual protest impulse in its citizens. Putin’s narrative faced no such paradox. It fetishised stabil’nost’, which meant revolution and state collapse was inherently bad, whether in 1917, 1991, on Maidan in Kiev, or in some future hypothetical Russia.*

[2](#)

**In building out his narrative, he has focused more on the American challenge than upon the European one, although in many ways the European one is more profoundly challenging to his sense of Russian order.**

*It was absurd to compare, as Putin did, Kosovo, which became an independent nation after a sustained campaign of ethnic cleansing, and Crimea, which was gobbled up by its bigger neighbour on the basis of theoretical and greatly exaggerated threats. Equally, whether or not the US invasion of Iraq was illegal had no bearing on whether or not the Russian annexation of Crimea was illegal. And yet Putin had a point.*

*The behaviour of the United States and its allies in the aftermath of 9/11 made it much easier for Russia to dismiss the moral high ground of American politicians.*

*In the post–Cold War world, the US had been free to act more or less as it pleased, with few checks or balances. An illegal war in Iraq with awful human costs and terrible longer-term consequences did not result in international sanctions against George W. Bush, Tony Blair, or their respective countries.*

*Why, then, should the largely bloodless annexation of Crimea have those same countries crying like hyenas?*

*Putin had complained about American exceptionalism in Munich back in 2007, and many times since. Now, he had done something about it.*

*As well as the general howl of protest against American unipolarity, the Crimea gambit also addressed the specific strategic concern of preventing Ukraine from tilting decisively towards the West and potentially kicking Russia’s Black Sea Fleet out of Crimea.<sup>3</sup>*

There is little question that Putin’s narrative and his actions to put into play key building blocks for that narrative had restored state dominance, and placed the Russian state back onto the world stage.

And not simply as regional power as the Obama Administration would dreamingly characterize Putin's Russia.

But it is neither a great power as Trump and his Pentagon would have it either.

*Putin had largely succeeded in his mission to create a sense of nation and rally Russia around a patriotic idea.*

*But instead of transcending the trauma of the Soviet collapse, his government exploited it, using fear of political unrest to quash opposition, equating 'patriotism' with support for Putin, and using a simplified narrative of the Second World War to imply Russia must unite once again against a foreign threat.*

*Even if protests against the current obscene levels of corruption become a serious threat for Putin, or one day even lead to a change of government, the patriotic rhetoric of his years in charge is likely to endure.*

*These ideas have formed the basis for the upbringing of a whole new generation of Russians, and they will continue to influence the collective Russian psyche long after Putin finally departs from the Kremlin. Russia's glorious past has become a national obsession, but a prosperous future still seems a long way off.<sup>4</sup>*

**But what Putin's narrative clearly is a key part of the rise of 21st century authoritarianism, a narrative which interacts with other authoritarian narratives as much in discordant as convent tones and messages.**

It is difficult to be the global Christian orthodox power building the global tent for Russians and supporting the Iranian narrative or the Chinese one for that matter.

But they can work towards the broader goal common to all — making the world safer for authoritarians.

Putin made it clear from the outset of his coming to power, that he would focus on creating a new Russian state for the new conditions which would be effective and strong to restore the respect to which Russia was due in his view from the global community.

As Putin underscored in his [December 30, 1999](#), turn of the millennium speech:

*It will not happen soon, if it ever happens at all, that Russia will become the second edition of, say, the US or Britain in which liberal values have deep historic traditions. Our state and its institutes and structures have always played an exceptionally important role in the life of the country and its people. For Russians a strong state is not an anomaly which should be got rid of. Quite the contrary, they see it as a source and guarantor of order and the initiator and main driving force of any change.*

*Modern Russian society does not identify a strong and effective state with a totalitarian state. We have come to value the benefits of democracy, a law-based state, and personal and political freedom. At the same time, people are alarmed by the obvious weakening of state power. The public looks forward to the restoration of the guiding and regulating role of the state to a degree which is necessary, proceeding from the traditions and present state of the country.....*

*We are at a stage where even the most correct economic and social policy starts misfiring while being realised due to the weakness of the state power, of the managerial bodies. A key to Russia's recovery and growth is in the state-policy sphere today.*

*Russia needs a strong state power and must have it. I am not calling for totalitarianism. History proves all dictatorships, all authoritarian forms of government are transient. Only democratic systems are intransient. Whatever the shortcomings, mankind has not devised anything superior. A strong state power in Russia is a democratic, law-based, workable federative state.*

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## Putin and the West: Shaping the Putin Narrative

10/09/2019

By Robbin Laird

For Vladimir Putin, the West is a key part of Russia's past, present and future.

As an intelligence officer who spent time in East Germany prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union and as a fluent German speaker, he has a period of his life where he experienced directly the impact of the West on the Soviet bloc.

The problem is that his historical experience is really a time capsule and not a down payment on understanding the 21<sup>st</sup> century liberal democratic world. The generation of the 1980s and the generations coming to adulthood in the 2020s have really very little to do with one another.

And a critical problem for any authoritarian leader is to get outside his comfort zone to understand what he does not know. And as authoritarian regimes put down strong roots, and the information flows to the boss get narrowed down, the challenge is enhanced of shaping new understandings and new concepts of behavior.

What Putin has done as Europe has changed with the expansion of the European Union and having struggled to encompass the former East European communist states as well as the migration from North Africa and the Middle East, is to interpret this dynamic as somehow threatening his autocratic rule. It is not as if the former satellite states are now sovereign states able to make their own decisions; for Putin these are states within the influence zone of Russia, and Russia as a great power has the right to veto what they want to do.

And the expansion of NATO eastward is frequently interpreted as the movement of American power eastward and an aggressive alliance moving closer and closer to Soviet (I am sorry I meant Russian borders). The fact that the NATO which faced Putin until his actions in Crimea in 2014 was a shadow of itself, with very little concrete capability for direct defense, let alone invading Russia, is simply not an important point to the Putin narrative.

For Putin, what the West, read largely as the United States, has shaped a stranglehold on Russia, a Russia which should be considered a great power and be consulted in discussing the fate of the former Soviet states. Russia in Putin's view is a great power which needs to be embedded in Western decision making about the future of Eastern Europe, and in a way, that would accommodate Russian interests.

This might make sense to the West if Russia was in the throes of some kind of democratic change, in which Russia would become a collaborative partner rather than a threatening bully. But the seizure of Crimea, would be a key move by Putin to take control of the Western dialogue and to reshape his relationships with the West. And in this case, it is more the European Union than NATO which is the threat which Putin positioned himself against. Ukraine as a partner to the European Union with its distorted systems of values in Putin's view was simply not acceptable.

With the Crimean seizure, the West has responded, and Europe and the United States are reshaping their capabilities in the direct defense of Europe. But this effort has little or nothing to do with the Cold War. In the Cold War, two ideological systems clashed with one another; with the return of Russia in the context of the rise of China, it is a contest of 21<sup>st</sup> century authoritarian state enabled capitalism versus liberal democratic variants of capitalism.

It is about values, culture, and also how the state can direct its economy to serve its purposes versus Western systems in which the state role is much different and significantly less directive with very little thought to an overall strategic posture.

Tony Wood has written an interesting book entitled [\*Russia Without Putin\*](#) which provides insights into how to interpret Putin and his role in Russian history. "Tony Wood lives in New York and writes on Russia and Latin America. A member of the editorial board of *New Left Review*, he is the author of *Chechnya: The Case for Independence*, and his writing has appeared in the London Review of Books, the Guardian, n+1 and the Nation, among other publications."

Wood argues that the sweep of history since the collapse of the Soviet Union has seen a Yeltsin and Putin phase but that these are part of the same history. This history is the establishment of Russian style capitalism and an authoritarian state. His book is many ways a broadside against

those in the West who would wish to use the stereotypes of the Cold War to paint a picture of a Russian adversary that requires being treated similarly to the Soviet Union itself.

We would certainly agree that what we are facing is not the Cold War Soviet Union, but a Russia which has been built in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But Wood goes further than this and paints a picture of Putin as having been rejected by the West and reluctantly seeking a Russian alternative to collaboration with the West. Having been spurned by Western dynamics, Putin has sought ways to reinforce Russia's independence and to guarantee its sovereign future.

“For much of the post-Soviet era, the Russian elite – Putin very much included – were committed to an ideal of alliance or even integration with the West. Over time, however, it became increasingly clear that this was a one-sided fantasy, and Russia's elite gradually abandoned it, swapping dreams of integration for a more strident defence of Russian interests.”<sup>1</sup>

For the Putin regime, the goal has been to shape or be part of the shaping process for the post-American liberal democratic order. With the decline of the ability of the United States to manage a global liberal democratic order, there are new opportunities to shape global events to Russia's favor.

“But what follows the shift from that order, is not so clear and not necessarily to Russia's advantage. If the US-led global order is replaced by enhanced Chinese dominance, there is clearly both opportunities and challenges for Russia in that situation.

“From Moscow's perspective, a Chinese-dominated world would be unlike the US-dominated order in one especially crucial respect: Russia would now share an extensive land border with the single superpower. If the PRC became the US of the twenty-first century, would Russia become its Mexico – economically integrated with and strategically subordinated to the giant next door?”<sup>2</sup>

Wood highlights that Russian power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is limited compared to the combined wealth and military capabilities of its competitors.

“The tremendous disparity in power and resources between Russia and the West translates directly into their uneven military capacities. Russia is currently the world's second-largest exporter of weapons, and still has one of the largest armies in the world in terms of personnel, though many of the troops are teenage conscripts. Yet in 2015, for example, Russia devoted about a tenth as much money to its armed forces in absolute terms as the US did, and only slightly more than the UK; in per capita terms, it spent somewhat less than Germany or Greece.

“All told, its 2015 military budget came to around 8 per cent of the total for NATO as a whole, almost 70 per cent of which was spent by the US alone.<sup>8</sup> What enables Moscow to pose a military threat to its neighbours at present is not so much the scale or strength of its armies as its readiness to use force quickly and decisively.”<sup>3</sup>

**Wood feels that this approach is more tactical than strategic, and is leading Russia into an even more difficult situation.**

“But this is more a trap than an advantage, a short-term tactical manoeuvre that has significant strategic downsides in the long term. The possibility that Moscow will use force against them has already driven Russia’s neighbours further into NATO’s embrace, and propelled a new round of the arms race for which Russia is still more poorly equipped than in Soviet times.”<sup>4</sup>

And that underscores the salience of a central aspect of the Putin approach: It is crucial to leverage the differences among its competitors to shape its role in the world and to protect its interests.

This means that the use of military power will be guided by the regime’s interpretations of its interests, which in turn will be exercised in the context of events involving conflicts among its competitors as well.

As for a potential future for Russia in such a world?

“In an anarchic world system, meanwhile, the dilemmas presented by China’s gravitational pull would also apply, but Russia’s strategic options would be more varied – as would the dangers it would potentially confront. In theory, it could act as a kind of ‘swing power’, aligning with Washington, Beijing or another state to tilt the scales against any given opponent.

“By forming such alliances, it could carry out its own version of nineteenth-century great-power balancing. Or might it function as a kind of global buffer zone between China and the West, its strategic weight deriving from abstention from the great-power conflicts ahead?”<sup>5</sup>

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## **The Putin Narrative: Reviving the Russia Idea Across 11 Time Zones**

10/04/2019

By Robbin Laird

Although the Obama Administration referred to Russia as a “regional power,” with 11 time zones reaching from Europe to Asia, Russia is clearly geographically a unique Euro-Asian entity.

What Putin has done through his years in power has been to leverage the geography of Russia and its population’s historical memory to shape a narrative that is focused on the Russian destiny to be a great power, this time as a player shaping the next phase of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



In their unique book entitled *In Putin's Footsteps*, the granddaughter of Nikita Khrushchev and her co-author provided an assessment of Putin's Russia in terms of the impact of geography. They have travelled across the expanse of Putin's Russia and done extensive interviews throughout the country to provide a sense of how geography has shaped the Russian identity.

“Russia is a mutant, an oxymoron of geography, a self-enclosed empire defined by its central government and its rule over an extensive territory on which dwell dozens of peoples speaking many languages. However, Russian is the mother tongue of eight out of ten Russian citizens, and the lingua franca of virtually everyone.”<sup>1</sup>

What they found travelling across the country was that despite the various differences evident in the different regions in Russia, Putin has been able to tap into the various authoritarian traditions in Russian history to shape a modern authoritarian narrative.

This narrative highlights the importance of Russia as a unique geographical entity which enables the various regions to combine under strong state rule to play a unique role in the world.

With a strong state able to control a vast geography the Russians are able to shape their own destiny in spite of the asserted opposition of the global democracies to its way of life.

Putin and his team have cherry picked elements from Russian history to shape a narrative, which highlights the synergy between a strong state and centralization with the Russian way of life, and the unique Russian sense of civilization.

*The keys to understanding Russia's geopolitics, its people and its leaders, have been the nation's faith—the stress on the communal rather than the individual in either Christian Orthodoxy or communist brotherhood—and its giant territory and what it holds.*

*With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia shed satellite nations in Eastern Europe and republics in the Baltics and Central Asia.*

*Abroad, it then began to be seen not as the center of a Eurasian civilization, but as an extension of the West.*

*The Putin decades, however, have changed that perception as Russia, once again, began to reimagine itself in civilizational, not just national or geographical, terms. The country that Barack Obama dismissed as a “regional power” after the Crimea annexation looks set to rival the United States. Not least because Russia, like the United States, occupies a “region”—a continent, actually—verging on two oceans.<sup>2</sup>*

In shaping the narrative, Putin and his team have co-opted elements of history which would seem to suggest their opposites. With his third term as President, which began in 2012, the regime was increasingly intolerant of diverse viewpoints, but has worked to shape a process of osmosis where alternative historical views become incorporated in the increasingly official view of the world.



The authors in visiting the Perm-36 Museum, which was once a Gulag labor camp, and is located just outside the village of Kuchino 60 miles northeast of the city of Perm. When the museum was established it was to underscore the excesses of Stalinism and of the kind of ruthless authoritarianism, which has pervaded Russian history.

*The fate of the Perm-36 museum is, unfortunately, typically Russian.*

*Opened in the 1990s when Boris Yeltsin was eager to expose the horrors of Soviet totalitarianism, the establishment for two decades was affiliated with Memorial, a human-rights organization dedicated to keeping alive Russia's history of political repression.*

*At the time, Perm-36 was more than just a museum; its mission was to inspire social consciousness. The site was a special one—it survived Khrushchev's Thaw and was operational as a political prison into Brezhnev's 1970s. The expositions contextualize how Perm-36's inmates lived with displays found in its white-walled barracks, a hall used for meetings and showing films, a forge, a sawmill, and a repair shop.*

*A green watchtower overlooks its rusting barbwire perimeter, beyond which stretch empty fields and scraggly forest.*

*After Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, the connections between Soviet repression and the modern Russian state's current aggressive nationalism became too obvious to ignore. The museum was almost closed; its annual gathering devoted to human rights, Polorama (Sawmill), ceased to convene after complaints of dubious sincerity from former prison guards and nationalistic Stalinists about its supposedly "antipatriotic" stance.*

*The Kremlin, however, decided that closing the Gulag site would only give ammunition to Putin's critics.*

*So, instead the government took over Perm-36 as a historical project under the auspices of the Russian Ministry of Culture and replaced the museum's Memorial founders with new state appointees.<sup>3</sup>*

**And with the seizure of Crimea, the Putin narrative of associating the authoritarian tradition with the defense of the Russian way of life became reinforced.**

*But following the Euromaidan protest movement in Kiev that led to the 2014 overthrow of Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich, a Putin ally, Russia annexed Crimea with a stealth invasion.*

*Announcing the annexation in March 2014, Putin insisted "in people's hearts and minds, Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia."*

*He thereby vilified Khrushchev—by whose action Russia was not "simply robbed, it was plundered."*

*The speech set up a dichotomy that now stands at the core of Russian identity: strong-hand rulers like Putin or Stalin—those who collect Russian lands—standing against reformers like Khrushchev or Mikhail Gorbachev, who give them away. Kievan Rus, too, was eventually torn apart—Great Russia versus Small Russia (“Malorossiya,” an old Russian name for Ukraine).<sup>4</sup>*

According to the authors, the double-edged eagle of the Russian flag highlights Russia’s coherent incoherence whereby revolutions are used to justify authoritarian power and authoritarian power is seen to justify the Russian empire.

Russia is “coherently incoherent”—in other words, suffering from a split personality disorder. It is driven by its history. It is, for the most part, homogeneous politically, despite its geographic and even ethnic diversity.

*Putin, no fan of revolutions, has kept alive, at least in bronze effigy on squares across the country, Vladimir Lenin, the Father of Revolutions...The Lenin statues stand for continuity, for the century during which Russia, in its Soviet incarnation, was a strong country, a superpower that made the world tremble.*

*Some Stalin images and statues—the bust in Yakutsk, for example—have been thrown in, to firm the memory and aspiration of that superpower status. Then there are the two monuments to Prince Vladimir we saw. The old one in Kiev, commemorating the Ukrainians’ own Prince Volodymyr. Another one in Moscow—the new statue, erected in 2016 on Putin’s orders and designed to stick it to the Slavic, formerly fraternal country to the south.*

*Even Ivan the Terrible (who famously “gathered”—or retook—Russian lands occupied by the Mongols in the Middle Ages) has been memorialized, with a statue of him raised in Oryol, a town about three hundred miles south of Moscow. These statues may well be understood as monuments to Putin himself—they represent strong leaders, leaders gathering age-old Russian territories and standing against enemies foreign and domestic.<sup>5</sup>*

### **What will become of the Putin legacy going forward?**

*Putin, however, surely would like to enter the history books not as a dictator, but as the leader of a country he has guided out of impoverished backward chaos into modernity and relative wealth.*

*Modern Russia, he must know, cannot afford isolation, with one aspiring satellite, Serbia, and one alliance of convenience with China, along with a number of unsavory clients in Central Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America.*

*If Russia does become a monolithic imperial state, it will betray its true ambition—to fulfill its European aspirations of finally joining the modern world and becoming a part of the West.<sup>6</sup>*

**But this might well come at the cost of the 11 zone empire for the question clearly is raised by the Putin legacy: Does Russia need to give up its empire which is used to both justify authoritarian rule and to provide the resources for the centralized state to develop further?**

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# From Stalemate in Europe to Breakout in the Middle East: Putin's Global Engagement

10/15/2019

By Robbin Laird

With the Western reactions to the seizure of Crimea, Putin was blocked from further incorporation of the "near abroad" directly in the Russian republic.

He certainly has generated continued pressure on the "near abroad" states and is leveraging the turn to the right in new member states in the European Union, like Hungary to position himself for ways to enhance his ability to pressure the European Union states, more generally.

**But the major moves after Ukraine in 2014, clearly has been the intervention in the Syrian Civil War.**

Here he has backed a long time Soviet ally, the Syrian government, and used various military means to punish the opponents of Syria having painted the intervention as Russia's contribution to the war on terrorism.

Given that the Russian intervention in Chechnya was characterized the same way, the Syrian intervention fitted into a long-standing Putin narrative about Russia and its legitimate role in the world.

As part of the payment for the Russian intervention, Russia now has a permanent air and naval base in the Eastern Mediterranean which provides an important access point into the region, and as European dynamics unfold in the Western Mediterranean,

Putin is looking to establish more Russian presence there, with the possibility of Russia becoming a major player in the fate of the Mediterranean region.

We argued at the time of the initial intervention that this was a significant strategic turning point for Putin's approach to global engagement.

*The Russian intervention in Syria crosses a strategic threshold. Russia has used a small but decisive air and naval force to side with Assad to protect his regime and specifically Damascus.*

*So far the introduction of a relatively small number of combat aircraft in comparison to U.S. and Allied airpower has operationally secured a new air base –Hemeimeem — and equally important bolstered their ability to expand the Syrian naval port of Tartus in the Eastern Mediterranean.*

*In doing so, they have used airpower decisively in a way the U.S. has not, and have expanded their ability to influence outcomes in the region. While the Russians are delivering a relatively high tempo of air sorties from a small force and delivered weapons against targets, the U.S. tempo of sorties and weapons delivered against targets has been reduced to a trickle.*

*The Russians are backing a sovereign government, with that government's approval.*

*This means that U.S. actions prior to the Russian engagement, whereby aiding "rebels" and inserting special forces was part of the effort takes on a new meaning. U.S. actions now face the threat of Syrian government or Russian attacks protected by international law, custom and practice. In other words, the Russians are in a military partnership with Syria their joint forces have every legal right to direct combat action against all enemies including the U.S. military.....*

*Significantly under-appreciated Russian diplomatic and political initiative is a new agreement with Israel. Putin invited the Obama-shunned Israeli leader Prime Minister Netanyahu to Moscow in September to forge a deconfliction agreement between Israel and the Russians. The Israeli diplomatic mission to Moscow included senior Israeli military officials. Consequently, both political and military issues were on the table from the start and the agreement has provided the basis for Israel expanding its capability to defend its interests in Lebanon.*

*Since then Jordan, America's closest ally behind Israel has also signed such an agreement.*

*And during this Russian Israel strategic and military process President Obama pulled Secretary Kerry and Ambassador Power out of the UN Speech being given by Prime Minister Netanyahu.*

*It appears that the legacy of President Kennedy is long gone "Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate."*

*In other words, decisive Russian military actions is more in line with 21st century insertion forces than the ever evolving Counter-Insurgency (COIN) nation building military mantra. Since the Powell characterization of the "if you break it you fix it doctrine," the U.S. military has been*

*on the path of operations on the ground to reshape political and economic systems, regardless of the inability of an outside power to do so.*

*In contrast, regardless of the size it is the intangible of combat decisiveness that forms the basis for the Russians expanding their diplomatic role in the region. Russia is being recognized by the key players in the region as a force to contend with....*

*Putin clearly has looked at the limited air campaign in Libya, the no-reaction to the Benghazi strikes, and our slow motion air campaign against ISIS and has concluded that a much shorter, decisive and brutal air campaign will get the kind of political diplomatic results he wants.*

*Put in other terms, while the Obama Administration and the neo-cons remain wedded to the COIN and slow-motion air campaign approaches of the past, the Russians are breaking out a new approach to achieve diplomatic power to reassert Russia's role in the region.<sup>1</sup>*

**Of course, the Syrian conflict has led to an outpouring of refugees into the Mediterranean region and into the European Union.**

And there is little doubt that the migratory pressures from North Africa and Middle East have been accelerated by the results of Russian action in Syria, something which provides an indirect contribution to ramping up the direct defense challenge to Europe as well.

In a 2018 published book by the Russian analyst, and head of the Carnegie Center in Moscow, Dmitri Trenin, the author provides an insightful assessment of what Putin is up to in the Middle East with the Syrian intervention.

Trenin underscored the core significance of the Russian military intervention in Syria in terms of what it meant for the Russian military as a tool of Russian foreign and security policy.

“The Russian military operation in Syria is not only the biggest combat employment of Russia’s armed forces abroad since the Afghan war; it represents a very different kind of warfare in comparison to anything Russia had practiced before.

“First, this is an expeditionary war: Russia is fighting in a country with which it has no common border.

“Second, this is predominantly an air war: Russian ground forces are not fighting, though the navy is occasionally engaged.

“Third, this is a coalition war: in order to achieve the war’s aims, Russian airstrikes have to be exploited by the non-Russian forces operating on the ground.

“Fourth, this is a limited war very closely tied to the diplomatic process.”<sup>2</sup>

Put in other words, the intervention places Russia into the diplomatic game in a volatile region where Russian interests are clearly involved, not the least of which in terms of Russia's energy business.

But it also provides a learning event for sorting through how to interactively use new and older Russian military capabilities to support Russia's version of crisis management, which is a key element of what direct defense for Europe entails as well.

The political objective of the Russian intervention was clear from the outset. According to Trenin:

“Although the Russian military operation in Syria was billed from the start as “anti-terrorist,” it was mostly directed against Assad's various armed opponents rather than the Islamic State group. This was fully consistent with the immediate objective of the Russian military operation in Syria: to stabilize the Assad regime, which was besieged by the forces of the opposition, not those of IS.<sup>3</sup>

**The intervention has clearly placed Putin in a more central position within the region, which has reach outside of the Middle East as well.**

According to Trenin:

“Moscow also emerged from its military engagement in Syria as the player with the most connections in the region. During the war, President Putin stayed in close touch with virtually all regional leaders, including those of Turkey, Iran, Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan, and Lebanon.

“Russia managed to avoid the risk of falling into the cracks of Middle Eastern divides: Shia versus Sunni; Saudi versus Iran; Iran versus Israel; Turkey versus the Kurds, and so on.

“It is this ability to promote one's interest in a conflict-infested environment that is particularly useful for a country aiming to be a global player. It is negotiating those divides that would test Russia's ability not only to promote its own interests, but also to deliver public goods—a mark of a true great power in the twenty-first century.”<sup>4</sup>

Trenin's interpretation of Putin's engagement in Syria is in part that the crisis allowed him a chance to breakout from European stalemate to reassert Russian flexibility in political-military-diplomatic activity through the venue of the Syrian crisis.

As Trenin put it:

“It is not just a return to an important region, but a comeback to the global scene after a twenty-five-year absence. This breakthrough for Russia's foreign policy has contributed to the ongoing change of the global order—away from U.S. dominance and back to some sort of a balance of power among several major players, including Russia.

“Moscow has demonstrated that a combination of a clear sense of objective, strong political will, area expertise and experience, resourceful diplomacy, a capable military, plus an ability to coordinate one’s actions with partners and situational allies in a very diverse and highly complex region can go a long way to help project power onto the top level. This was exactly what Putin was aiming for.

“His main foreign policy objective has been to bring Russia back to the top level of global politics, and he chose the Middle East as the area for that breakthrough.”<sup>5</sup>

#### *Footnotes*

1. <https://sldinfo.com/2015/11/the-russian-re-set-how-the-syrian-intervention-alters-the-conflict/>
2. Trenin, Dmitri. *What Is Russia Up To in the Middle East?* (p. 54). Wiley. Kindle Edition.
3. ITrenin, Dmitri. *What Is Russia Up To in the Middle East?* (p. 69). Wiley. Kindle Edition.
4. Trenin, Dmitri. *What Is Russia Up To in the Middle East?* (pp. 84-85). Wiley. Kindle Edition.
5. ITrenin, Dmitri. *What Is Russia Up To in the Middle East?* (pp. 134-135). Wiley. Kindle Edition.

## **Putin in the Context of Russian History: Shaping a Way Ahead**

10/15/2019

By Robbin Laird

Putin in living through and shaping a way ahead after the chaos of the 1990s has rebuilt the Russian state and reasserted Russia’s role in the world.

And from 2008 onward Putin shaped an increasingly confrontational relationship with the West as part of his building of his power base and defining the new role for Russia in the world.

And as he has done so, the rise of China has matured, which has meant that Putin highlighting Russia as a Euro-Asian power aligns his regime with the reconfiguration of global politics associated with the rise of China.

In effect, the post-Cold War world was shaped thematically as the twin pillars of capitalist globalization and the ascendancy of liberal democracy. This was the narrative inherent within Western policies. As the European Union grew in significance, the role of the United States was being recalibrated, even if the American leaders might not be aware of it.

But in reality, this narrative was being undercut by a crucial dynamic involving Russia and China.



Both are capitalist powers, with what one might call a Russo-Capitalist system and a Sino-Capitalist system. Private enterprise plays a key role in both societies and their companies play global roles, but in both states, the national political leadership has ensured that the state gets not just its say in the broader impact of their variants of globalization, but are both focused on how to reshape the global system to more compliant with 21<sup>st</sup> century authoritarian “capitalist” globalization states.

In Russian history, Alexander Nevsky, a mid-thirteenth century Novgorod Prince, had to deal with twin threats, the German Christian crusaders to the West and the Mongols to the East. He chose to work to defeat the Germans to preserve the Orthodox identity of the Russians and to pay tribute to the Mongols in the East. In some ways, this may be the future which Putin is preparing the Russians for.

Dealings with the West are confrontational/cooperative, designed to ensure that Westernization does not overwhelm the Russian identity. And the European Union and its trade deals and promotion of “European values” is the major threat with the military led NATO alliance by the United States the secondary challenge, as the United States struggles to define its role in the world after being engulfed in the Middle Eastern land wars and working through its cold civil war domestically.

In his perceptive overview on Russian history in which he puts the Putin period in the longer historical context, Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, has provided a way to place Putin in the broader historical context and to assess what might happen after Putin. For Trenin, the vast geography of Russia and the challenges within and without have lead to a long historical process of Russian redefinitions of itself.

“Paradoxically, plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose. There is a bedrock. They say that in Russia everything changes in 20 years, and nothing in 200. This points to a remarkable resilience of some of the core features of the nation’s existence, its self-image, and its worldview. Russia is like a phoenix: it repeatedly turns to ashes only to be reborn in some new guise.”<sup>1</sup>

The Putin regime is the latest iteration of the Russian phoenix. Putin comes after the turbulent 1990s introduce the Russian version of capitalism, and he leads the effort to reduce the chaos of the 1990s and to build a more stable Russia. But Trenin argues that he does this not by building a new state, but a new regime, which works through Putin’s personal networks to re-establish centralized control via his regime. Putin has become the “godfather of Russian capitalism”

“Putin has become the godfather of contemporary Russian capitalism, with its state corporations, tame tycoons, and crass inequality. Yet he is also a transitional figure. The regime that he has built will probably not survive after he is gone. The secret of Putin’s Russia is that it is a regime posing as a state.”<sup>2</sup>

When Putin came back to the Presidency for his third term, which followed that of Medvedev, in 2012, the President would soon shape a way ahead to break out of the post-Cold War order. Putin’s seizure of the Crimea which followed earlier actions in Georgia in 2008 was deliberated designed to let Europe know that Russia was not going to allow the West to continue to do its

version of map making, namely, allowing sovereign governments on Russia's borders join the European Union or NATO if this was going to threaten the Russian view of itself.

According to Trenin:

“This breakout did not come from nowhere. Russia's relations with the West had been strained for years prior to the Ukraine crisis. The root cause of the conflict between Moscow and Washington was the inability of the two Cold War antagonists to agree on an acceptable security relationship between them once their four-decades-long confrontation was over.

“The United States, convinced that it had won the Cold War, expected Russia to accept its new role as Washington's subordinate in world affairs. Russia, thinking that the Cold War had been ended by joint agreement, aspired to the position of joint leader with the United States of the new order. When Moscow realized this was not possible, it resolved not to submit its own national interests to those of Washington. To yield to that, however, was for Washington akin to abdication of its global hegemony.”<sup>3</sup>

Putin for his part reached out to the West and expected Russia to be treated as an equal power. But Western leaders had a very different assessment of the state of Russia and its global role.

“The results of these conciliatory moves, however, fell short of the Kremlin's expectations. Already from 2002, the Bush administration became focused on Iraq and lost interest in a strategic partnership with Russia. The European Union offered Russia “common spaces” but no institutional link. NATO agreed to a new supposedly inclusive format of relations with Russia, but it did not provide for the joint decision-making that Moscow coveted.

“The reason given for these limits on partnership was Russia's slow progress toward a democratic polity based on the rule of law, and even backsliding to authoritarianism (after the 2003 Yukos case). The deeper rationale was perhaps fear, not unfounded, that Russia's full membership in Western institutions would dilute US leadership and even lead to a fragmentation of the West: the Franco-German-Russian joint opposition to the 2003 US-UK invasion of Iraq had acted as a bit of a wake-up call.”<sup>4</sup>

But it was the Orange Revolution in Ukraine which would force Putin's hand. Although much of the Western and Russian rhetoric focuses on the United States as the “enemy” which triggered Putin's actions, the European Union and its actions which even more significant in Putin's view.

“In Europe, Moscow and Brussels engaged in a geopolitical competition over the EU's offer of an association agreement with Ukraine. Moscow, which was trying to include Ukraine into its own economic bloc, the Eurasian Economic Union, sought to become a third party to the Kiev-Brussels talks, which the Europeans rejected. Russia then pressured Kiev to suspend its economic association bid with the EU. This in turn provoked mass demonstrations in the Ukrainian capital, which the police tried to put down with the use of force. Police violence led to more protests, which resulted in a permanent demonstration in Kiev's main square, the Maidan Nezalezhnosti, during the winter of 2013-14.”<sup>5</sup>

**In the wake of the 2014 events, in effect, Putin has cultivated the image of itself as a 21<sup>st</sup> Eur-Asian power and with its intervention in Syria, one which can act in the Middle East to support its authoritarian allies as well.**

In looking beyond Putin, Trenin's characterization of Putin establishing a regime, not a state is a key consideration. He argues that one aspect of what post-Putinism might look like would be establishing a state which dealt with a number of the issues which Putin has pushed aside, such as significant inequalities.

“Present-day Russia has reinstated authority, but not really the state as such. In its place, the elites have installed a governing system that absolves them of responsibility while serving their interests. This triumph of the elites over the state is historically un-Russian as the elites, for all their privileges, have always been servants of the state, and it is hardly sustainable in the long term.

“The state will likely be back, but what kind of a state? Ideally, it should be a driver of development and progress, and a partner for business and civil society. Such a state could play the leading role in transforming and upgrading the Russian economy, technology, and society itself. For this, the future Russian state needs to be a meritocratic system built on equality before the law, an independent judiciary, self-governance, and national solidarity. Of course, there are other, less appealing alternatives.”<sup>6</sup>

He postulated what he calls a Russian Federation 2.0 as a possible outcome of the dynamics of change post-Putin.

“The policies of Russia's future leaders are more likely to lean to the left domestically and toward closer relations with non-Western countries, including China, internationally. Putin's never-to-be-satisfied desire to be “understood” by the United States might be seen by his eventual successors as being akin to appeasement.

“In extremis, Alexander Nevsky's hard choice of submitting to the East to fight off the West could be made again. For Russia, it has always been more important to save its soul than its body. The optimal geopolitical construct, however, would be something like a Grand Eurasian equilibrium with Berlin, Beijing, and Delhi becoming Moscow's principal foreign partners.”<sup>7</sup>

He argued that there is a clear need to avoid a direct confrontation with the West in order to sort through an effective way ahead with regard to its domestic future, notably with regard to the over-reliance on energy resources, and other natural resource commodities to fuel economic growth.

“In the near and possibly medium term, the most important foreign policy task will be avoiding a Russian–American military conflict. In the early twenty-first century, the Moscow–Washington relationship is no longer the most important element of global politics, but it could turn out to be the most dangerous one.

“If that war can be avoided, and some form of an understanding reached, based on a revised view in the United States of its global role (essentially: from a global hegemon to a primus inter pares), and on Russia’s settling into its own new role of a great power of a new type (essentially: national independence rather than regional dominance), the world system will be more stable, and Russia will get a chance to focus on its domestic development.”<sup>8</sup>

#### *Footnotes*

1. Trenin, Dmitri. Russia (p. 3). Wiley. Kindle Edition.
2. Trenin, Dmitri. Russia (pp. 14-15). Wiley. Kindle Edition...
3. Trenin, Dmitri. Russia (p. 165). Wiley. Kindle Edition.
4. Trenin, Dmitri. Russia (p. 166). Wiley. Kindle Edition.
5. Trenin, Dmitri. Russia (p. 171). Wiley. Kindle Edition.
6. Trenin, Dmitri. Russia (pp. 178-179). Wiley. Kindle Edition..
7. Trenin, Dmitri. Russia (pp. 183-184). Wiley. Kindle Edition.
8. Trenin, Dmitri. Russia (p. 184). Wiley. Kindle Edition.

## **The Return of Direct Defense in Europe: The Putin Thread**

09/16/2019

By Robbin Laird

I worked a great deal on Soviet-European relations in the 1970s and 1970s.

This included a significant amount of effort on the prospects for German unification which was the topic of a working group set up in the mid-1980s at the Institute of Defense Analysis.

I am currently working on a book with my co-author dealing with the return of direct defense in Europe and how to deal with the Russian challenge.

Clearly, in terms of the Russian challenge, the key thread in the post-2014 period is the life, politics and agenda of Vladimir Putin.

He comes to Europe in the mid-1980s and his views are forged in East Germany and the Soviet Union and lives through the turbulent years of collapse and recovery in Russia of the 1990s.

He believes strongly in the return of Russia to the world stage, and to a Russia which is an alternative to Western policies and values. He has also risen to power with the resurgence of Russian orthodoxy as well, which provides the national identity for many Russians who have seen the return of Russia.

For Putin, shaping a resurgent Russian agenda has been at the heart of his efforts. The military has provided tools for this effort, but have not driven this effort.

Angela Stent's recent book *Putin's World* provides a very comprehensive look at Putin's approach to power and the largely flawed Western powers attempts to understand the Putin agenda for the return of Russia to the world stage. She provides a comprehensive look at the rise of Putin's agenda and the largely irrelevant Western attempts to deflect or more accurately incorporate that agenda.

Not surprisingly she is very critical of President Trump and does underscore the conflicting agendas within his Administration. But the more compelling challenge does not lie with the United States or Donald Trump, it is about the evolution of Europe itself.

With a Germany clearly demonstrating little or no leadership with regard to direct defense, and wishing to preserve its options in dealing with Russia, the question becomes how will the evolution of Europe interact with and be shaped by and influence the evolution of Russia itself?

We are facing sooner rather than later the post-Putin world, and the Putin world has been one of Russia being governed by a regime rather than a state, as one analyst has noted.<sup>1</sup>

Her book largely ignores the core part of Europe which has provided a very strong political-military response to Putin, namely, the states building defense capability in the Polish to Nordic arc. It is a book about the major European powers, the UK, France and above all Germany.

It is not difficult to be critical of President Trump for his diplomatic approach but he has led an effort to rebuild the US military and has reinforced American capabilities to work with those states in Europe wishing to defend themselves.

**She argues in her conclusion that we need a more realistic policy to deal with Russia.**

*In the absence of a broader agreement between Moscow and the West, Russia will continue to nurse its growing list of grievances against the US and Europe.*

*The West's task for the rest of Putin's tenure is to exercise strategic patience while containing Russia's ability to disrupt transatlantic ties as it strengthens its defenses against Russian incursions. It must consistently and robustly push back against Russian interference in Western elections.*

*But it must also be prepared for new challenges as Putin focuses on building up Russia's artificial intelligence capabilities and deploying its considerable cyber prowess.*

*Yet the US and Europe also should be prepared to reengage more actively with Russia should the Kremlin step back from its current confrontational policies and moderate its anti-Western stance.<sup>2</sup>*

But from my point of view, rather than focusing on Trump, we need to ask ourselves how the American and leadership got it so wrong about Russia from George W. Bush, to Clinton, to Obama Administration's?

The question of how to frame the key questions for shaping a realistic and effective way ahead to compete with the 21st century authoritarian powers is crucial.

It is not about the “end of history” and the engine of progress.

It is about how democracies can survive and thrive while the 21st century authoritarian powers expand their influence within their societies and compete globally, while we continue to deny ourselves the significant opportunity of targeting the internal publics within these authoritarian societies.

We will clearly be dealing with both post-Trump and post-Putin powers sooner rather than later, so how would we shape a more realistic agenda to deal with the 21st century authoritarian powers, of which Russia is not even the most powerful?

And not only did leaders in this period mentioned get Russia wrong, that is clearly even in second place to our mis-understanding about how to deal with the new China and its authoritarian global agenda.

And given that these two states are fueling a global rise of authoritarianism, we are not a period of normal diplomacy for sure.

What we are seeing is a major reworking of the Western agenda in terms of the constitutional crises in the United States, Europe and the UK. Clearly, Putin is playing off of these crises, but the continued economic weaknesses of Russia, with growing levels of dissent interacting with an increasingly diversified West, might actually pose a more significant challenge for Russian transition than a unified West.

There are clearly various political alternatives in the West as it diversifies which post-Putin leaders can identify with and work with.

And there is always the prospect that key Western states will directly work within Russia to undercut the authoritarian regime.

Political warfare is not just a one way street.

#### *Footnotes*

1. Dmitri Trenin, *Russia* (Polity, 2019), p. 15. “The secret of Putin’s Russia is that it is a regime posing as a state.” This point was provided to me by Dr. Allen Lynch of the University of Virginia.
2. Stent, Angela. *Putin’s World* (p. 361). Grand Central Publishing. Kindle Edition.

# The Putin Legacy: What is Next for Russia?

09/22/2019

By Robbin Laird

Putin is in his last term as President of Russia after an incredible and even improbable run, which began nationally when the ailing Yeltsin appointed him Prime Minister on August 9, 1999.

Putin then has gone to redefine Russia in the post-Cold War period, and shaped a comprehensive narrative which one might call making Russia Great Again.

And in re-shaping Russia in his authoritarian image, Putin has shaped a narrative which is rooted in Russia being the victim of the West, led by the United States, and in returning to its roots to become a key authoritarian Eur-Asian power.

**Putin both contributed to and has been abetted by the rise of 21<sup>st</sup> century authoritarianism.**

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Chinese becoming members of the World Trade Organization, globalization and democratization seemed to be evolving hand in hand.

**But rather than globalization leading to democratization, it has been shaped significantly by the 21<sup>st</sup> century authoritarian powers who have used that process to enhance their ability to operate within and without against the key powers driving the liberal democratic order.**

Each approach has been different, whether the narrative is Iran, Russia, China, Venezuela, and other less prominent players.

As Putin has shaped his narrative of how Russia could return to great power status and then shaping his approach with his closest mates, opportunities which have presented themselves along the way have been useful venues in which to reshape global geo-politics. The Georgian War, the Chechen Wars, the seizure of Crimea and other events have been used by the Judo master to shape a rise of Russia to greatness, at least as Putin and many Russians see it.

**But contained within Putinism are the seeds of its own destruction.**

Although a nationalist, Putin is cautious.

But will his successor be as cautious as he, or will he shape a more directly aggressive approach to the West?

Alternatively, will his successor recognize the weaknesses of Russia and seek to work with those states and societies in the West which would help Russia out of its economic dilemmas in return for well what exactly?



Could a successor emerge with a much bigger version of Russia and its future, and use adventures like Syria to shape European and GCC efforts to work together to reshape the Middle East, why the United States is embroiled in its cold Civil War?

Will the Russian relationship with China turn conflictual as the Chinese turn to dominating Siberia and the Far East?

Put in other terms, Putin has provided a transition from the turbulent, post-Cold years, which were considerably more democratic than now but also pushed many Russians into poverty.

Putin used the early 21st century and its rise in energy prices as a way to pay for the revival of Russia and in the throes of so doing built out his narrative. Putin is a geopolitical actor, in every sense of the word.

All one has to do is to watch the [video interviews](#) which Oliver Stone has done with Putin to see a modern Leni Riefenstahl lionizing Putin. These videos are a must see to watch the geo-political actor in full display.

A key element of the narrative built by Putin has been to highlight great moments in Russian history around which authoritarian leaders have made Russia a powerful global actor and one to be respected. In this narrative build, nothing plays a greater role than remembering World War II or what the Russians call the Great Patriotic War. The way this has been done though is the problem or the challenge for Russia's future.

There is no doubt that the citizens of the Soviet Union suffered mightily from World War II or fought heroically against the Nazis. That part Putin remembers and highlights.

**But what gets lost is an equally important point – how the mistakes made by an authoritarian leader can lead to the destruction of his people.**

What gets lost in the Russian memory about World War II was Stalin's key role in making it happen in the first place. His role in both allowing the rise of Hitler and then focusing Hitler's interest on attacking the Soviet Union are very clear.

Stalin blocked the German communists and socialists from working together which certainly enhanced the ability of the Nazis to come to power.

Of course, the war starts because of the pact between Hitler and Stalin dividing Poland.

And just as significant, Stalin destroyed the officer class in the Soviet Union and then decided to fight Finland in what became known as the Winter War. The Soviets got their clocks cleaned and only by bringing back some of the older officer corps did the Soviets finally defeat Finland.

And the result in terms of [Hitler's perceptions](#)?

*The Soviet's poor performance in the Winter War led Hitler to believe that Stalin's military could be quickly defeated if attacked. He attempted to put this to the test when German forces launched [Operation Barbarossa](#) in 1941.*

The Russian tradition contains many examples of the negative side of authoritarianism for the Russian people but one is not likely to find that either in "Leni" Oliver Stone's interviews with Putin nor in the Putin narrative as well.

University of Virginia professor Allen Lynch has provided a very insightful look at the Russian future, moving forward from the Putin legacy. In his article entitled "What Russia Will Be?" the author provides four scenarios for the future of Putin's Russia.

Lynch starts by identifying the key elements of what one might call the Putin system.

*The Russian system that Putin has built and consolidated is based on the following key elements.....:*

*The public administration—including the electoral machinery and national broadcast media—has been captured by the Putin network and converted into an extension of executive preference. Elections have thus become highly managed affairs with the appearance of popular legitimacy but a minimal chance that the government might change hands through such means.*

*When Putin took over, first as Prime Minister in August 1999 and then as President on January 1, 2000, the "Russian Federation," such as it was, resembled at best a confederation rather than a unitary state or even a federation. Since then, Putin has systematically reduced the capacity of "federal" units (including those defined by ethnicity) to escape monitoring from Moscow.*

*This began in 2000 with the appointment of seven supra-regional viceroys (most from the military or intelligence services) reporting directly to Putin and includes most recently, in summer 2017, the reduction of Tatarstan's administrative autonomy. Russia today more nearly resembles a unitary state than the "federation" that remains in its official name: There are no irrevocable sovereignties under Putin's rule.*

*The national political order is based on Putin's charismatic authority rather than legal tradition or a reputation for institutional competence. Comparisons with imperial-era loyalty of peasants toward the Czar—"if only the Czar knew!"—are not far-fetched. An extreme example of Putin's personalismo may be seen in the status of Chechnya, whose relations with the rest of Russia are mediated through a personal bond between Putin and Chechen warlord Ramzan Kadyrov.*

*Putin's presidential network has established direct or indirect control over half or more of the Russian economy, including most of the lucrative natural resource sectors. At the same time, the Russian economy remains stuck in the mold of a natural resource, rentier political economy, with declining long-term economic performance.*

*Putin has made sure that this political economy, even while deteriorating, is managed prudently. The bankruptcies of both the Soviet economy and the Russian economy after the collapse of oil prices in 1986 and 1998, respectively, have seared themselves into Putin's political memory.*

*He ensured that Russia's public coffers had sufficient revenues to survive the oil shocks of 2008 and 2014. Russia's national debt as a percentage of GDP (12.6 percent in 2017, compared to an EU average of 81.6 percent for that year) is minimal in comparative terms, while Russia has maintained impressive trade surpluses over many years (\$103 billion in 2016).*

*From this perspective, Putin's Russia is no mere "mafia state": Were it simply that, there would not have been available the public resources needed to survive the two massive financial shocks over the past ten years.*

*Such fiscal prudence has also allowed Putin to rebuild the Russian military in a manner that corresponds to Russia's aspirations to be a regional power of consequence, as operations in Crimea (2014) and Syria (2015-present) have shown.<sup>31</sup> Russia's military, together with the Orthodox Church, the most trusted institution in the country, remains loyal supporters of Putin.*

*With a discredited liberal wing, the alternatives to Putin for the foreseeable future are all along the right-wing axis of xenophobia (especially against the West), chauvinism, and anti-Semitism (although Putin himself is no anti-Semite and has not encouraged it). Putin has exploited these forces to his benefit but he is not in thrall to them. Yet absent Putin, these would become the dynamic, populist forces in Russian politics.*

*Relatedly, all Russian elite clans, including those with access to organized armed force (regular military, border troops, police, intelligence, and Putin's own personal praetorian guard of some 350,000 troops), acknowledge Putin's indispensable, and possibly irreplaceable, role in the political economy. After the 2008 war in Georgia, which revealed multiple shortcomings in the functioning of the Russian Army,*

*Putin oversaw a wholesale replacement of the armed forces' upper echelons, leaving in place a leadership that is both more competent (as witnessed in the Crimean and Syrian operations) and beholden to Putin. As an intelligence professional, he has the trust of the militocracy as a whole; as an intelligence professional turned head of state, Putin also controls all of the personal files—and resulting kompromat—on the elites, and they know it. They thus serve, and enrich themselves, at his sufferance.*

The first snapshot looking forward in the final years of the Putin leadership would be continued economic deterioration of Russia while avoiding economic collapse.

The second snapshot would be to see the centralizing efforts of Putin backfiring. Because regional flexibility has been undercut by Putin's system of vertical integration, explosions in the periphery could have a rapid Russian system wide impact.

The third snapshot would further economic deterioration spiraling into economic bankruptcy.

The fourth snapshot was to see the return of the Westernizers a constant force bubbling under the surface in late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Russia, but remaining a force even in Putin's Russia. And it should always be remembered that Putin's kleptocracy relies on the Western banking system and the rules' based liberal order to protect their money abroad.

Lynch concludes that it is time to shape a Western perspective which understands that Russian authoritarianism of one form or another is most likely to stay and we need to sort out ways to cope with it as well as rethinking ways to shape Russian policies which are not going to be our own.

*For example, the cost of holding the indefinite future of U.S.-Russia relations hostage to Crimea seems wildly excessive given the contingencies stretched out over time that could imperil both nations. Short of the headlong collapse of the Russian state—which would actually be a disaster for U.S. and global security—there is no plausible route to severing Crimea from Russia.*

*So why not consider a trade greased by the salve of a professional diplomacy: de facto U.S. acquiescence to the reintegration of Crimea into Russia in return for Russia's leaving the rest of Ukraine alone, pending a suitable and achievable compromise over Ukraine's geostrategic status and internal language and identity issues.*

*If Russian-Ukrainian relations remain a powder keg when Putin has left the scene, Americans may well come to regret that they passed on exploring an outcome that Putin could agree to.*

Even if one disagrees with this specific policy issue, what Lynch has underscored is a key nature of dealing with the Russian challenge today.

How to deal with rise of 21<sup>st</sup> century authoritarianism in the context of Western disunity, which will not go away any time soon?

Can shaping states with clusters of defense or economic interests in the West giving real meaning to the European alliances, NATO and the EU, provide a better leverage point on the evolution of a Russia, whose regionalization might well be a better outcome for the West?