

How to Think About Vladimir Putin

March 2017 • Volume 46, Number 3 • Christopher Caldwell

The following is adapted from a speech delivered on February 15, 2017, at a Hillsdale College National Leadership Seminar in Phoenix, Arizona.

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Vladimir Putin is a powerful ideological symbol and a highly effective ideological litmus test. He is a hero to populist conservatives around the world and anathema to progressives. I don't want to compare him to our own president, but if you know enough about what a given American thinks of Putin, you can probably tell what he thinks of Donald Trump.

Let me stress at the outset that this is not going to be a talk about *what* to think about Putin, which is something you are all capable of making up your minds on, but rather *how* to think about him. And on this, there is one basic truth to remember, although it is often forgotten. Our globalist leaders may have deprecated sovereignty since the end of the Cold War, but that does not mean it has ceased for an instant to be the primary subject of politics.

Vladimir Vladimirovich is not the president of a feminist NGO. He is not a transgender-rights activist. He is not an ombudsman appointed by the United Nations to make and deliver slide shows about green energy. He is the elected leader of Russia – a rugged, relatively poor, militarily powerful country that in recent years has been frequently humiliated, robbed, and misled. His job has been to protect his country's prerogatives and its sovereignty in an international system that seeks to erode sovereignty in general and views Russia's sovereignty in particular as a threat.

By American standards, Putin's respect for the democratic process has been fitful at best. He has cracked down on peaceful demonstrations. Political opponents have been arrested and jailed throughout his rule. Some have even been murdered – Anna Politkovskaya, the crusading Chechnya correspondent shot in her apartment building in Moscow in 2006; Alexander Litvinenko, the spy poisoned with polonium-210 in London months later; the activist Boris Nemtsov, shot on a bridge in Moscow in early 2015. While the evidence connecting Putin's own circle to the killings is circumstantial, it merits scrutiny.

Yet if we were to use traditional measures for understanding leaders, which involve the defense of borders and national flourishing, Putin would count as the pre-eminent statesman of our time. On the world stage, who can vie with him? Only perhaps Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey.

When Putin took power in the winter of 1999-2000, his country was defenseless. It was bankrupt. It was being carved up by its new kleptocratic elites, in collusion with its old imperial rivals, the Americans. Putin changed that. In the first decade of this century, he did what Kemal Atatürk had done in Turkey in the 1920s. Out of a crumbling empire, he rescued a nation-state, and gave it coherence and purpose. He disciplined his country's plutocrats. He restored its military strength. And he refused, with ever blunter rhetoric, to accept for Russia a subservient role in an American-run world system drawn up by foreign politicians and business leaders. His voters credit him with having saved his country.

Why are American intellectuals such ideologues when they talk about the “international system”? Probably because American intellectuals devised that system, and because they assume there can never be legitimate historic reasons why a politician would arise in opposition to it. They denied such reasons for the rise of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines. They do the same with Donald Trump. And they have done it with Putin. They assume he rose out of the KGB with the sole purpose of embodying an evil for our righteous leaders to stamp out.

Putin did not come out of nowhere. Russian people not only tolerate him, they revere him. You can get a better idea of why he has ruled for 17 years if you remember that, within a few years of Communism’s fall, average life expectancy in Russia had fallen below that of Bangladesh. That is an ignominy that falls on Boris Yeltsin. Yeltsin’s reckless opportunism made him an indispensable foe of Communism in the late 1980s. But it made him an inadequate founding father for a modern state. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, whose writings about Communism give him some claim to be considered the greatest man of the twentieth century, believed the post-Communist leaders had made the country even worse. In the year 2000 Solzhenitsyn wrote: “As a result of the Yeltsin era, all the fundamental sectors of our political, economic, cultural, and moral life have been destroyed or looted. Will we continue looting and destroying Russia until nothing is left?” That was the year Putin came to power. He was the answer to Solzhenitsyn’s question.

There are two things Putin did that cemented the loyalty of Solzhenitsyn and other Russians—he restrained the billionaires who were looting the country, and he restored Russia’s standing abroad. Let us take them in turn.

Russia retains elements of a kleptocracy based on oligarchic control of natural resources. But we must remember that Putin inherited that kleptocracy. He did not found it. The transfer of Russia’s natural resources into the hands of KGB-connected Communists, who called themselves businessmen, was a tragic moment for Russia. It was also a shameful one for the West. Western political scientists provided the theft with ideological cover, presenting it as a “transition to capitalism.” Western corporations, including banks, provided the financing.

Let me stress the point. The oligarchs who turned Russia into an armed plutocracy within half a decade of the downfall in 1991 of Communism called themselves capitalists. But they were mostly men who had been groomed as the next generation of Communist nomenklatura—people like Boris Berezovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky, and Mikhail Khodorkovsky. They were the people who understood the scope and nature of state assets, and they controlled the privatization programs. They had access to Western financing and they were willing to use violence and intimidation. So they took power just as they had planned to back when they were in Communist cadre school—but now as owners, not as bureaucrats. Since the state had owned everything under Communism, this was quite a payout. Yeltsin’s reign was built on these billionaires’ fortunes, and vice-versa.

Khodorkovsky has recently become a symbol of Putin’s misrule, because Putin jailed him for ten years. Khodorkovsky’s trial certainly didn’t meet Western standards. But Khodorkovsky’s was among the most obscene privatizations of all. In his recent biography of Putin, Steven Lee Myers, the former Moscow correspondent for the New York Times, calculates that Khodorkovsky and fellow investors paid \$150 million in the 1990s for the main production unit of the oil company Yukos, which came to be valued at about \$20 billion by 2004. In other words, they acquired a share of the essential commodity of Russia—its oil—for less than one percent of its value. Putin came to call these people “state-appointed billionaires.” He saw them as a conduit for looting Russia, and sought to restore to the country what had been stolen from it. He also saw that Russia needed to reclaim control of its vast reserves of oil and gas, on which much of Europe depended, because that was the only geopolitical lever it had left.

The other thing Putin did was restore the country’s position abroad. He arrived in power a decade after his country had suffered a Vietnam-like defeat in Afghanistan. Following that defeat, it had failed to halt

a bloody Islamist uprising in Chechnya. And worst of all, it had been humiliated by the United States and NATO in the Serbian war of 1999, when the Clinton administration backed a nationalist and Islamist independence movement in Kosovo. This was the last war in which the United States would fight on the same side as Osama Bin Laden, and the U.S. used the opportunity to show Russia its lowly place in the international order, treating it as a nuisance and an afterthought. Putin became president a half a year after Yeltsin was maneuvered into allowing the dismemberment of Russia's ally, Serbia, and as he entered office Putin said: "We will not tolerate any humiliation to the national pride of Russians, or any threat to the integrity of the country."

The degradation of Russia's position represented by the Serbian War is what Putin was alluding to when he famously described the collapse of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century." This statement is often misunderstood or mischaracterized: he did not mean by it any desire to return to Communism. But when Putin said he'd restore Russia's strength, he meant it. He beat back the military advance of Islamist armies in Chechnya and Dagestan, and he took a hard line on terrorism—including a decision not to negotiate with hostage-takers, even in secret.

One theme runs through Russian foreign policy, and has for much of its history. There is no country, with the exception of Israel, that has a more dangerous frontier with the Islamic world. You would think that this would be the primary lens through which to view Russian conduct—a good place for the West to begin in trying to explain Russian behavior that, at first glance, does not have an obvious rationale. Yet agitation against Putin in the West has not focused on that at all. It has not focused on Russia's intervention against ISIS in the war in Syria, or even on Russia's harboring Edward Snowden, the fugitive leaker of U.S. intelligence secrets.

The two episodes of concerted outrage about Putin among Western progressives have both involved issues trivial to the world, but vital to the world of progressivism. The first came in 2014, when the Winter Olympics, which were to be held in Sochi, presented an opportunity to damage Russia economically. Most world leaders attended the games happily, from Mark Rutte (Netherlands) and Enrico Letta (Italy) to Xi Jinping (China) and Shinzo Abe (Japan). But three leaders—David Cameron of Britain, François Hollande of France, and Barack Obama of the United States—sent progressives in their respective countries into a frenzy over a short list of domestic causes. First, there was the jailed oil tycoon, Khodorkovsky; Putin released him before the Olympics began. Second, there were the young women who called themselves Pussy Riot, performance artists who were jailed for violating Russia's blasphemy laws when they disrupted a religious service with obscene chants about God (translations were almost never shown on Western television); Putin also released them prior to the Olympics. Third, there was Russia's Article 6.21, which was oddly described in the American press as a law against "so-called gay propaganda." A more accurate translation of what the law forbids is promoting "non-traditional sexual relations to children." Now, some Americans might wish that Russia took religion or homosexuality less seriously and still be struck by the fact that these are very local issues. There is something unbalanced about turning them into diplomatic incidents and issuing all kinds of threats because of them.

The second campaign against Putin has been the attempt by the outgoing Obama administration to cast doubt on the legitimacy of last November's presidential election by implying that the Russian government somehow "hacked" it. This is an extraordinary episode in the history of manufacturing opinion. I certainly will not claim any independent expertise in cyber-espionage. But anyone who has read the public documentation on which the claims rest will find only speculation, arguments from authority, and attempts to make repetition do the work of logic.

In mid-December, the New York Times ran an article entitled "How Moscow Aimed a Perfect Weapon at the U.S. Election." Most of the assertions in the piece came from unnamed administration sources and employees of CrowdStrike, the cybersecurity firm hired by the Democrats to investigate a hacked computer at the Democratic National Committee. They quote those who served on the DNC's secret anti-hacking committee, including the party chairwoman, Debbie Wasserman Schultz, and the party lawyer,

Michael Sussmann. Then a National Intelligence Council report that the government released in January showed the heart of the case: more than half of the report was devoted to complaints about the bias of RT, the Russian government's international television network.

Again, we do not know what the intelligence agencies know. But there is no publicly available evidence to justify Arizona Senator John McCain's calling what the Russians did "an act of war." If there were, the discussion of the evidence would have continued into the Trump administration, rather than simply evaporating once it ceased to be useful as a political tool.

There were two other imaginary Putin scandals that proved to be nothing. In November, the Washington Post ran a blacklist of news organizations that had published "fake news" in the service of Putin, but the list turned out to have been compiled largely by a fly-by-night political activist group called PropOrNot, which had placed certain outlets on the list only because their views coincided with those of RT on given issues. Then in December, the Obama administration claimed to have found Russian computer code it melodramatically called "Grizzly Steppe" in the Vermont electrical grid. This made front-page headlines. But it was a mistake. The so-called Russian code could be bought commercially, and it was found, according to one journalist, "in a single laptop that was not connected to the electric grid."

Democrats have gone to extraordinary lengths to discredit Putin. Why? There really is such a thing as a Zeitgeist or spirit of the times. A given issue will become a passion for all mankind, and certain men will stand as symbols of it. Half a century ago, for instance, the Zeitgeist was about colonial liberation. Think of Martin Luther King, traveling to Norway to collect his Nobel Peace Prize, stopping on the way in London to give a talk about South African apartheid. What did that have to do with him? Practically: Nothing. Symbolically: Everything. It was an opportunity to talk about the moral question of the day.

We have a different Zeitgeist today. Today it is sovereignty and self-determination that are driving passions in the West. The reason for this has a great deal to do with the way the Cold War conflict between the United States and Russia ended. In the 1980s, the two countries were great powers, yes; but at the same time they were constrained. The alliances they led were fractious. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, their fates diverged. The United States was offered the chance to lay out the rules of the world system, and accepted the offer with a vengeance. Russia was offered the role of submitting to that system.

Just how irreconcilable those roles are is seen in Russia's conflict with Ukraine two years ago. According to the official United States account, Russia invaded its neighbor after a glorious revolution threw out a plutocracy. Russia then annexed Ukrainian naval bases in the Crimea. According to the Russian view, Ukraine's democratically elected government was overthrown by an armed uprising backed by the United States. To prevent a hostile NATO from establishing its own naval base in the Black Sea, by this account, Russia had to take Crimea, which in any case is historically Russian territory. Both of these accounts are perfectly correct. It is just that one word can mean something different to Americans than it does to Russians. For instance, we say the Russians don't believe in democracy. But as the great journalist and historian Walter Laqueur put it, "Most Russians have come to believe that democracy is what happened in their country between 1990 and 2000, and they do not want any more of it."

The point with which I would like to conclude is this: we will get nowhere if we assume that Putin sees the world as we do. One of the more independent thinkers about Russia in Washington, D.C., is the Reaganite California congressman Dana Rohrabacher. I recall seeing him scolded at a dinner in Washington a few years ago. A fellow guest told him he should be ashamed, because Reagan would have idealistically stood up to Putin on human rights. Rohrabacher disagreed. Reagan's gift as a foreign policy thinker, he said, was not his idealism. It was his ability to set priorities, to see what constituted the biggest threat. Today's biggest threat to the U.S. isn't Vladimir Putin.

So why are people thinking about Putin as much as they do? Because he has become a symbol of national self-determination. Populist conservatives see him the way progressives once saw Fidel Castro, as the one

person who says he won't submit to the world that surrounds him. You didn't have to be a Communist to appreciate the way Castro, whatever his excesses, was carving out a space of autonomy for his country. In the same way, Putin's conduct is bound to win sympathy even from some of Russia's enemies, the ones who feel the international system is not delivering for them. Generally, if you like that system, you will consider Vladimir Putin a menace. If you don't like it, you will have some sympathy for him. Putin has become a symbol of national sovereignty in its battle with globalism. That turns out to be the big battle of our times. As our last election shows, that's true even here.