

Putin's Russia: Violence, Power and Another 12 Years

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, MAR 20 2024

Twenty-five years ago, Russian president Boris Yeltsin chose his fifth and final prime minister, Vladimir Putin. In a decade marked by financial crisis, disastrous war, corruption, and Yeltsin's lengthy illness, the term of the prime minister was always limited. They were the target when anything went wrong in the Russian Federation, as it often did. The latest choice was not expected to last long either. A former head of the Federal Security Services, he had served earlier in a desk job in Dresden for its predecessor, the KGB, a position that ended abruptly with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the East German Communist state.

Putin may have remained obscure, but prior to his appointment as Prime Minister he managed to attach his career to the popular mayor of St. Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak. Putin was appointed deputy mayor, but Sobchak lost his campaign for re-election in 1997 and was later accused of corruption. He died suddenly of a heart attack in 2000. Putin's sudden rise culminated with the unexpected resignation of Yeltsin at the end of 1999. He became acting president until the elections of March 2000, and then won easily with only one serious opponent, Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov.

Putin restarted the war in Chechnya, which had ended with a treaty in 1997 that left the status quo in place. The new war was conducted ruthlessly. The Chechen capital Grozny was erased and several other towns were completely destroyed. The Chechens mounted an effective terrorist campaign outside of their territory. In October 2002, about forty Chechen terrorists attacked a Moscow theatre, holding some 700 people hostage. Russian special forces, on Putin's orders, stormed the theatre after gas was pumped into the auditorium. All the terrorists died, but so did over 100 attendees. Putin's ruthlessness was evident. There would be no compromise with terrorists. In 2004, the Chechen president Akhmad Kadyrov was assassinated. Putin wanted Kadyrov's son, Ramzan, who had switched sides in the war and offered his services to Putin, to succeed him but he had to wait three more years for him to reach the minimum age of 30.

Domestically, Putin was fortunate. After a disastrous decline in the late 1990s, oil and gas prices began to rise. The Russian economy recovered. Putin accepted the credit. He removed those oligarchs of the Yeltsin era who refused to stay out of politics; the others became part of his regime. He also gradually began to reassert Russian regional dominance. In several former Soviet republics this was the era of "color revolutions" with popular leaders replacing corrupt figures, often holdovers from the Soviet era. In Ukraine's Orange revolution protests, Viktor Yushchenko, a pro-European leader defeated pro-Kremlin Viktor Yanukovich after a rerun of the third round of the election.

To the south, Mikeil Saakashvili came to power in Georgia with similar goals. Putin's response was to work more closely with Belarus, a reliably ally under Aliaksandr Lukashenka, and to promote the Collective Security Treaty Organization as a counter to expanding NATO. Aside from Belarus, most of the Central Asian states were included. Alongside this, relations with the West began to decline. Though Putin had some common ground with US president George W. Bush – both were faced with terrorism linked to militant Islamic groups – he resented having to kowtow to the United States as the sole world policeman. He believed the West had fomented the color uprisings.

In 2008, after NATO forces colluded with the formation of Kosovo, Putin claimed that the territorial agreements that ended the Second World War had been violated. Russia openly backed two breakaway regions of Georgia – Abkhazia and South Ossetia – and invaded the small Caucasian state in the same year, occupying Gori and other

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towns. In that same year, Putin completed his second term as president, the maximum under the Russian Constitution, and switched positions with his Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, thirteen years his junior, a diminutive figure whom the West bizarrely regarded as a reformer and a liberal who would moderate Russian policies.

The period 2008–12, with Putin in the background, saw one major success. After an insipid presidency marked by foreign travel and symbolic concessions to Ukrainian nationalism, Yushchenko fell from power in 2010 receiving just 1.5% of the popular vote. Yanukovich, the former governor of Donetsk, was finally president. Still, there was strong opposition to Putin's return to power in 2012 (having amended the constitution to allow himself to do so), led by former deputy prime minister and governor of Nizhny Novgorod Boris Nemtsov. Mass protests took place in Moscow and several other cities. Putin was again triumphant, well ahead of Zyuganov and maverick nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy.

Russia faced another crisis in Ukraine in 2014. After Yanukovich decided not to sign the Association Membership with the EU in Vilnius, mass protests began in Kyiv's Maidan. Yanukovich tried to break them up by force on November 30, which catalyzed a mass movement. By February, Yanukovich had fled and over 100 protesters were dead. In March 2014, Putin began his invasion of Ukraine by occupying Crimea. Russia also backed a separatist revolt in the Donbas, Yanukovich's home area, with two small breakaway republics announcing their metamorphosis into "people's republics." They were largely unrecognized, even by Russia but they remained in place for the next eight years, after Ukraine's ramshackle army failed to recapture them.

Putin's third term also saw the assassination of Boris Nemtsov, who was walking outside the Moscow Kremlin with his Ukrainian girlfriend. A Chechen gang was the main suspect, possibly on the orders of Kadyrov. Russian agents had already assassinated several other troublesome figures: the courageous journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who monitored the Chechen war in diary form; and Russian defector Aleksandr Litvinenko, poisoned with polonium-210 in London by a former member of the FSB.

After 2014, Putin appeared to cast off any illusions that he was approachable, moral, or confined by the usual protocols of a world leader. He began to regard the West as degenerate and in decline, and democracy as a failed experiment. He became extremely rich through his links with oligarchs, and powerful through his siloviki (those authorized to use force against civilians), a holdover from his days as head of the secret police. A hierarchical structure emerged, Putin, his Security Council (including his powerful Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov), his United Russia party that controlled the Duma, and the masses.

Using social media, the Russian leadership disseminated a world perspective that anathematized the Americans, NATO, "Gay Europe," the West, which sought to control the world and reduce Russia to a second-rate power. There were some followers in unexpected places: admirers in the West, some of whom met regularly in discussions of the Valdai Club, some in academia who refused to shed their earlier admiration for Putin's strong leadership, Viktor Orban in Hungary, and eventually President Donald J. Trump in the United States.

By now Putin had developed a vision for his country and the future: a restoration of empire, the 'Russkiy Mir', that would include most of Ukraine, Belarus, and later other lands of the Baltic States, Georgia, and Moldova. But it must start with Ukraine, the sacred heartland of the Russian state and Crimea, where it all began in 988 with Prince Vladimr of Kiev (formerly known as Volodymyr of Kyiv).

To ensure a righteous foundation and a renewed sense of identity, Putin turned to the 'Great Patriotic War', the time when the Soviet Union had thrown back the Nazi hordes and liberated democratic Europe. The collaborators of that era were linked to his contemporary enemies: Ukrainian and Baltic nationalists. Russian historians began to revise a narrative of the war centred on the Holocaust of the Jews. In the new version, Russians were the main victims of Nazi Genocide. This delusional and twisted interpretation of the past pushed Putin into an expanded war in February 2022, one calculated to destroy the Ukrainian state founded in 1991. That attempt failed because the Ukrainian army was much stronger and backed by the population. But it is still in progress and has costs tens of thousands of lives.

The emperor is now crowned again for another six years. Legally he can remain in office until 2036, when he will turn

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84. By then Russia may be even larger, but with fewer people as population decline continues, advanced by wars and with resources depleted as oil and gas supplies dwindle. In such a scenario, Russia will continue to be ruled by a physically declining tyrant, still feared by his timid associates. They have seen what happens to those who cross his path. But Vladimir Putin is not immortal and, in that sense, his time in history is little more than the tick of a clock.

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