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How Russians see Russia and what makes their leaders

Key Points

- Russia's malign, anti-West/anti-US behavior will continue, in large part, due to the ambitions of Russian leaders, but also due to the core values and beliefs of the Russian people.
- Comprehending how Russians see themselves and their place in the world is vital for understanding the sources and legitimacy of Russian leaders and their actions.
- Vladimir Putin is well-chosen and prepared by the Russian Politburo for steering the post-Soviet Russia into the new era. He enjoys national support which grants him almost limitless power internally and legitimacy to strategize externally to achieve his visions of a powerful and great Russia.
- Putin's Russia seems very capable in negating NATO's deterrence efforts. For decades, the West planned to deter hard power and coercion, but Russia's leader found another way to succeed. He successfully uses a 'fait accompli' strategy that does not threaten NATO directly in order to enjoy freedom of action and lack of retribution from NATO or the West.
- NATO and Western nations should develop new ways to effectively counter Russian opportunism and 'tool-boxing'.

Introduction

Russia's malign activities continue. Regardless of how much the West would like to trust and believe in a Russia that is reliable, cooperative and willing to follow common rules and laws, Putin's state remains a significant global spoiler; it continues to 'surprise' the international community on occasion with violent actions or malign activities. The most recent Russian attacks on Ukrainian shipping in the Kerch Strait have further kindled the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and prove that Russia behaves according to President Putin's direction, without fear of punishment or retribution. The world continues to watch Russia's actions, but limits its reactions to condemnations, 'concerned' language, and suggesting 'strong actions,' but offers nothing more than words in response to repetitive acts of violence and flouting international norms. Even sanctions on Russia seem hollow and futile when considering the ongoing business the Western world continues making with Russia. Russia's rise begs the question: how is it possible that a country which seemingly collapsed just two decades ago and is plagued with corruption, summons enough might internally and faces so little real resistance externally that it can challenge the world order and unilaterally dictate the geopolitical reality?

This document focuses on the Russian people and their sense of place in the world order. Furthermore, the paper analyzes the nature and sources of political power in Russia, as well as some 'diagnosed' patterns, techniques and strategies used by Russian leaders.

To feel Russian

In December 1991, the Soviet flag went down at the Kremlin and was replaced with the tri-color Russian Federation flag. This moment rests in the hearts and psyche of many Russians as the starting point to their great trauma of the 1990s. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the population had high expectations and hopes of prosperous lives similar to those of their Western counterparts. But reality was different for millions of Russians. High hopes and enthusiasm were not enough to create a democracy for people who had lived under totalitarianism and absolute monarchy for more than a millennium. Economic reforms put in place by ex-Soviet leaders Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin did not help the country nor did they help a majority of its people. As a result, Russians felt betrayed, humiliated, and forced into a corner by the West. Incoming western values, encountering tough post-Soviet reality, were advancing too slowly and ineffectively and therefore receded into the background of a collapsing country. Paradoxically, the post-Soviet Union period of unprecedented freedom became disorienting and destabilizing for the Russian people.¹

With the end of the planned economy came obscene riches for a select few oligarchs, and a plunge into poverty for many. A new middle class also appeared. However, belonging to this vital socioeconomic group did not provide millions of Russians with anticipated improvements to their lifestyle and quality of life. Instead, a majority of Russians had to struggle to adjust to this new, foreign and brutal reality. As the economy declined and their once great nation lost its prestige, depression also became a reality for many Russians. Depression reached deep into Russian hearts, merging with feelings of uncertainty, insecurity, injustice, betrayal, humiliation, and anger. Russian people tend to be sentimental, emotional, and affectionate, so this environment steered them into strange, unpredictable directions. Many chose to pursue and adopt principles of the Soviet society, regard less of whether they belonged to the older generations, who lived and suffered under the previous regime, or belonged to younger generations. Ironically, the younger generations started becoming even more “Sovietized” as they did not carry the scars of the Soviet Union’s cruelty.

The power of national pride revived the ideals of patriotism in Russian hearts and supplanted the will to implement Western economic determinism. Economy is paramount, but sometimes ideals matter even more, therefore a free market narrative and a (false) promise of wealth, better living standards and consumer goods started fading away while being steadily replaced by articulated positive moral and uplifting dreams of a better future. As a result, Russians turned to their historic identity, tradition, religion, and the restoration of national dignity to thwart the logic of the market. This setting brewed a society full of disappointment, humiliation, sentiments, and hopes found among the ashes of the Soviet Union.

Nonetheless, the people of Russia have always been receptive to strong leadership. Even the Bolshevik Revolution prevailed because key leaders successfully steered the people against the old lords. It was not much different in the 1990s when the tough reality of a collapsed nation required strong leadership. However, there was no immediate answer. The country considered Gorbachev a traitor and desecrator of holy Mother Russia, and Yeltsin became the target of many jokes after repeatedly appearing drunk in public, a sentiment for new leadership emerged within the Russian population with the desire for a new, strong, and well-respected leader.

Remedy

History is replete with Russian leaders who inspired confidence in overcoming national weaknesses and disabilities with aspirations of bringing their country and its people to positions of respected great power. In the 16th century, Ivan IV ‘the Terrible’ united many efforts and solidified the zone of Muscovite Duchy’s influence. This effort continued in the 18th century through Peter the Great, – the creator of the Russian Empire in the 18th century and Catherine the Great, the country’s longest ruling female leader who revitalized, strengthened and enlarged Russia, making it recognizable as one of the greatest European powers. Joseph Stalin, apart from the unprecedented crimes he committed against his own nation and its neighbors, furthered Russia’s status in the

¹ Why many young Russians see a hero in Putin: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2016/12/putin-generation-russia-soviet-union/>

ranks of the great global powers. Russian people have an inherent tradition of national pride and might, and a desire for international respect, guaranteed by strong leaders who know how to harness this strong sense of nationalism. Ironically, Russia's strong political resolve has rarely been accompanied by economic prosperity and wealth. Therefore, Russian people have become accustomed to living with a sense of great pride of the country's might despite the fact that a greater majority of the population have very little access to goods and services normally available in more prosperous and stronger countries. This culture has built a very determined and loyal population. Even when faced with starvation, the Russian people can display a loyalty and determination that is incomprehensible by most of the Western World. The post-Soviet era is no different. During the 1990s the country searched for strong leadership and someone who could restore Russia's strength and glory .

In 2018, a Moscow-born BBC journalist, Dina Newman, proposed an interesting narrative that described the prerequisites for a very specific type of figure to lead the Russian nation back to greatness. She observed the national narrative of the post-Soviet era and identified the very specific characteristics and traits required to rebuild strong leadership in Russia. She realized a former Soviet TV series that aired in the 1970s captured the political and social climate of the time as well as those leadership characteristics desired by the Russian people that eventually led Putin to power after Yeltsin's resignation in 1999.² The story begins with the Soviet Union leader Yuri Andropov, who commissioned a TV drama series titled "*Seventeen Moments of Spring*" in the early 1970s. The series included a PR campaign designed to improve people's perception about the Soviet secret and special services and to attract young, educated recruits to join the services. The shooting was overseen by the first deputy head of the KGB. The main character of the series, Max Otto von Stierlitz, was the Soviet answer to James Bond. But Stierlitz was a greatly upgraded version of a spy. He had no time for women or gadgets and was devoted entirely to his work in Berlin during World War II where he infiltrated the German high command, disrupting secret peace negotiations between the Nazis and the Americans in 1945. Another, hidden purpose of the series, was to show the importance of secret agents and convince Russians that such patriots deserve the highest respect in the country.

The series turned out to be a huge success. The first broadcast in 1973 attracted 50 – 80 million people. Eleonora Shashkova, one of the stars of the series said "Every evening the streets were deserted and people rushed home from work to watch the latest episode and to find out what would happen next."³ Vladimir Putin was 21 when the series was created and he joined the KGB two years later. Just like Stierlitz, Putin was posted in Germany and both characters were quite opposite to Bond, who was a heavy drinker and womanizer. The series' character spends most of his time alone, deep-diving into his thoughts while looking out of windows, enjoying coffee and smoking cigarettes. In 1991, after leaving the KGB and already working for the mayor of St Petersburg, Putin admitted for the first time of his career as a spy during a TV documentary, which included a re-enacted scene from '*Seventeen Moments of Spring*'. Instead of Stierlitz driving his car back to Berlin, Putin is seen at the wheel of a Russian Volga car, with the series' theme sounding in the background. In the documentary, Putin warns there is a risk that "for a period of time, our country will turn to totalitarianism." He continues: "But the danger lies not in the law enforcement organs, nor in the state security services, nor in the police - and not even in the army. The danger lies in our own mentality. We all think - and even I think it sometimes - that if we bring order with an iron fist, life will be easier, more comfortable and safer. But in reality, we won't be comfortable for long: the iron fist will soon strangle us all."⁴

Ironically, in the turmoil of the late 1990s, many Russians did indeed start expressing sentiments and demands for law, order and even for the iron fist. Opinion polls indicated that Russians preferred the next

² Was the Soviet Union James Bond Vladimir Putin's role model?: <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-39862225>

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p051pnnf>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-39862225>

president to be ethnically Russian, young, non-drinker and preferably a member of security services: "having lost faith in liberals, the country was searching for its Stierlitz."⁵



Max Otto von Stierlitz and Vladimir Putin
<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-39862225>

Shortly before Putin was elected to the post, in March 2000, the *Kommersant* newspaper conducted a survey asking which movie character Russians would like to see as their next president. The wartime military commander Marshal Zhukov came first, followed by Stierlitz. Following the poll, the *Kommersant's* weekly supplement came out with a caption "*President - 2000*" depicting Stierlitz. This narrative provides some helpful insight to help understand what happened to the Russian mentality and what steered, or manipulated, the people to make the choices they made shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this case, Vladimir Putin perfectly fit the picture of the desired new leader for Russia.

Putin - new form of absolute reign

For centuries, Russians deeply believed in their country's might and its ability to influence and shape the world order. They strongly believed in a strong and righteously respected Russia. Despite their suffering, poverty, and starvation, they were still ready to stand and follow their strong leaders to defend the 'Sacred Mother Russia'. The trauma that occurred in the 1990s instilled doubt and disdain for their country; however, the people continued to view themselves as loyal Russians. They remained sentimental about their country, yet more and more hoped for Russia to be strong again. Also, shaped by this propaganda, a majority of the people welcomed and cheered Vladimir Putin as their new leader. However, understanding Vladimir Putin today, requires an understanding of his story. It's important to understand what happened to him in East Germany during the fall of the Berlin Wall, as well as his experiences with democracy at the time when he was the head of external relations and later the deputy mayor in St Petersburg.

The first event placed the young KGB officer into a dangerous situation where he was helpless to defend his post. He stood against a mob of East Germans who took over the Dresden Stasi HQ and then marched toward the local KGB Headquarters. Despite requesting Moscow's support, the Kremlin did not respond. Mikhail Gorbachev's Moscow was silent and Putin received no help in defending his KGB operations. Therefore, according to Putin's biographers (e.g. Boris Reitschuster) and journalists (e.g. Chris Bowlby), Putin relied on his experience and decided to "become the Kremlin."⁶ The second experience relates to the election loss suffered by St Petersburg Mayor Anatoly Sobchak⁷ in the 1996 election. Sobchak's reelection seemed guaranteed. Putin was responsible for the campaign and Sobchak surprisingly lost. Putin was completely surprised and disappointed with democracy because he couldn't believe the loss was possible. He also seemed disappointed with the people who voted against his boss. As a result, he became disillusioned with democracy and grew determined to make Russia

⁵ "The Invention of Russia" by Arkady Ostrovsky, Russia and Eastern Europe editor for the Economist

⁶ Vladimir Putin's formative German years: <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-32066222>

⁷ The first democratically elected mayor of Saint Petersburg, since 1991. Putin served as Sobchak's deputy since 1994

strong enough to protect its interests and assets following Moscow’s silence during the 1989 political changes and strong enough to know what’s good for the people rather than allowing the population to make the ‘wrong decisions.’ Putin came to power after Yeltsin and the new president of the Russian Federation was infused with anxiety about the frailty of political elites and how easily they can be overthrown by the people. He also had ideas for society and ambitions for a powerful network, complemented with personal wealth.

Putin’s approach to politics and ruling the country could be explained by factors that underlie his internal and external policies. Some sources describe it as a shift from “targeted repression to hybrid terror.”⁸ Internally, opposition is allowed to function to some degree, but completely under the Kremlin’s defined limits. Private property, although not formally prohibited, is not defended. Freedom of speech is illusory and allowed to exist only under certain conditions, imposed by the regime. Externally, Putin continues to use an old Bolshevik maxim for putting enemies to a test: ‘Push the enemy with a bayonet. If it goes in easily, keep on pushing. If it meets steel, pull back and try another spot’. Therefore Russia’s behavior under Putin will continue to push the metaphorical ‘bayonet’, be it in Georgia (2008) or Ukraine (2014 onwards), violations of International Air Space, kidnappings (e.g. the kidnapping of an Estonian officer in 2015), or assassinations of those inconvenient to Putin (Skripal, Litvineko, and many others).

Since Russia’s external policies traditionally served internal matters, Putin also leverages success from his actions abroad to fortify his support internally among Russians. For example, the Russian intervention in Syria was promoted throughout Russia as a great success. Many Russians see Putin as a great leader and national hero who protected ‘Sacred Russia’ from the malicious West and singlehandedly won a war for Syria, pushing back the US and the entire Western Coalition. Unlike many other world leaders, Putin believes in a national sovereignty built on a self-sufficient economy and a foreign policy that is not constrained by deep alliances. Also, due to Putin’s determination and devotion to rebuild Russia’s Armed Forces, he is not only accepted, but also cheered by the Russian majority, giving Putin political comfort and security. He knows that if he is attacked by internal opposition, or attacked from external criticism, Russians, including many of his opponents, will come to his defense.



Vladimir V. Putin entering St. Andrew’s Hall in the Grand Kremlin Palace to take the oath of office as president. Credit Alexei Druzhinin/RIA Novosti, via Associated Press

Observing Putin entering the Kremlin’s golden rooms, like a tsar, to take the oath as president, infuses the majority of Russians with pride and set aside objections.

Many who know Russians consider them polite and engaging people. However, many Russians are also nationalists who take great

⁸ Putin has Moved from Targeted Repression to ‘Hybrid’ Terror: <http://windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com/2018/08/putin-has-moved-from-targeted.html>

pride in the strength and dignity of the Russian empire. Vladimir Putin understands this concept and offers Russians the order and illusion of a strong and independent empire.

People of the Soviet special services, to whom Putin belonged, were divided into two groups. The generals and a few colonels who formed the inner circle of influence, and those who were much more modest. When Vladimir Putin came to power, he did not belong to the old 'inner circle', but projected himself as a man who had real ambitions to reform Russia. In truth, he represents Russian elites known to love fancy cars, private jets, luxurious yachts, and spending fortunes abroad, but realize they cannot realistically transform Russia (nor do they have the desire to).⁹ For the West, this should actually be good news; if Russian leadership believes real change is not possible then perhaps that Russia is more convenient for the West than a Russia without corruption. That may be reason enough to accept the reign of Vladimir Putin as "the devil we see is often better than the devil we don't see."

Opportunism and 'tool-boxing' – way to success

Despite their desire for a distinct and unique identity, Russians always preferred to be associated with Europeans, rather than Asians, but more-so to be recognized and respected as a Russian power state by the West. However, playing the role of a great power required capabilities and capacities which Russia lacked. Some of these capabilities include knowhow and technology, civilizational progress and overall wealth for the people. To compensate for these missing attributes, and to surprise, impress or compete against the West, Russian rulers instead found strategies focused on opportunism and attrition to be very effective. Opportunism usually works well with short term and quick action/quick success scenarios.¹⁰ Whereas attrition is the long-term solution when something goes wrong with the quick action/quick success strategy and the enemy appears to be approaching the Kremlin's gates.¹¹ Vladimir Putin seems to follow such patterns. However, his strategies seem to be upgraded and modernized versions. He uses a Soviet network (former agents and those global enterprises established during the Soviet era), along with modern media, cyber space, international interdependencies and a threat of modern weapons to shape the global narrative. This external effort, combined with the ability to manipulate his own nation internally, brought Russian aggression and malign behavior towards the rest of the world to yet another dimension.

In the post-industrial and information era, Russia has accelerated its decisions and actions. Therefore Putin's strategies have evolved to a technique which could be labeled as 'tool boxing.' This concept could be simply described as a menu of opportunities Russia could pursue abroad concurrently or successively to shape its objectives. Shaping these opportunities (tool boxing) in a specific, preferred or desired way provides strategic options that may not be fully examined or fully mature. Nonetheless, based on a specific situation and needs, these opportunities may either be restrained, further developed, or exploited at the most appropriate time. Another technique, supporting shorter-term objectives with quick gains, seems to be 'fait accompli' strategy, which appears to dominate Russia's approach to external actions.¹² Of course such actions pose numerous risks and do not provide immediate or enduring victories, a long-term vision, or steady state building, but it does help individuals remain in power. If a decision maker excels in employing the tool boxing strategy, they may easily surpass the vulnerabilities of slower, more bureaucratic and decentralized opponents. Furthermore, Russia's

⁹ The A-Z of oligarchs: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/the-a-z-of-oligarchs-479815.html>

The lavish lifestyle of the children of Russia's mega-rich: https://www.rbth.com/arts/2016/03/14/the-lavish-lifestyles-of-the-children-of-russias-mega-rich_574921

¹⁰ As recently observed in Syria, Ukraine and Georgia.

¹¹ As observed during the German offensive in Russia in 1941 – 1943.

¹² Dan Altman (2017): Advancing without Attacking: The Strategic Game around the use of force, Security Studies <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1360074> and <https://academic.oup.com/isq/article-abstract/61/4/881/4781720>

reliance on raw resources revenue, seems to even encourage and boost the tool-boxing strategy by presenting a unique set of opportunities.

On the other hand, the territorial vastness, availability of resources and direct access to many neighbors and cultures gives Russian leaders some of the best tools to pursue attrition scenarios when they become stuck in potential longer, persistent conflicts. Therefore, while suffering from Western sanctions, Russians will always be aware that the Western Coalition will also suffer with the assumption that Western populations are not capable or willing to withstand the suffering that Russians more easily cope with. Besides, having so many partners, and playing a spoiling and instigating role, Russia can always find other countries ready to cooperate.¹³

Conclusions

Russia will remain a spoiler and malign actor, disrupting the Western-led/US-led world order. However, President Putin, even though sometimes 'inconvenient' to the West and bold enough to challenge and surprise the West every now and then, remains the most 'known unknown,' out of any possible powers present in Russia. He should be approached with reserve, very limited trust and pragmatism, and boldly countered when needed. The language Russian leadership recognized for centuries is the language of pure, hard power.

It is unlikely that NATO is the direct target of Russia at the moment. Russia is neither ready nor truly willing to go into an all-out conflict against the West. Regardless of how skillfully Putin flaunts his nuclear arsenal, the fear of Russian capabilities and nuclear holocaust should not restrain the West from strong and concrete actions against Putin and Russian aggressions.

Putin's Russia seems to be doing quite well in its efforts to cope with Western strategies and actions. Effective strategies to counter the opportunistic tool-boxing strategy and 'fait accompli' scenarios are required to address Russia's initiatives.

Recommendations for US / USCENTCOM

- Remain vigilant of Russia's developments and consequences that might trigger events within the CENTCOM AOR.
- Maintain lines of communication with Russia; remain pragmatic and engage from a position of strength rather than trust and hope. Russia will identify political trust and hope as weaknesses to exploit.
- Pursue solutions to the 'fait accompli' strategy exploited by Russia and possibly by China.

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¹³ <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/remaining-powers-of-nuclear-deal-looking-to-save-trade-ties-with-iran-1.6495264>
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