

A B R O O K I N G S F O C U S B O O K



OPERATIVE IN THE KREMLIN

Fiona Hill
Clifford G. Gaddy

Who is Vladimir Putin? Observers have described him as a “man from nowhere”—someone without a face, substance, or soul. Russia experts Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy argue that Putin is in fact a man of many and complex identities. Drawing on a range of sources, including their own personal encounters, they describe six that are most essential: the Statist, the History Man, the Survivalist, the Outsider, the Free Marketeer, and the Case Officer. Understanding Putin’s multiple dimensions is crucial for policymakers trying to decide how best to deal with Russia.

Hill and Gaddy trace the identities back to formative experiences in Putin’s past, including his early life in Soviet Leningrad, his KGB training and responsibilities, his years as deputy mayor in the crime and corruption-ridden city of St. Petersburg, his first role in Moscow as the “operative” brought in from the outside by liberal reformers in the Kremlin to help control Russia’s oligarchs, and his time at the helm of a resurgent Russian state. The authors then examine the nature of the political system Putin has built, explaining it as a logical result of these six identities.

Vladimir Putin has his own idealized view of himself as CEO of “Russia, Inc.” But rather than leading a transparent public corporation, he runs a closed boardroom, not answerable to its stakeholders. Now that his corporation seems to be in crisis, with political protests marking Mr. Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012, will the CEO be held accountable for its failings?

MR. PUTIN

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THE KREMLIN

Fiona Hill
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FOREWORD

FOR MORE THAN a dozen years—the equivalent of three American presidential terms—Vladimir Putin has presided over the largest nation on the planet, the second most powerful nuclear arsenal, and massive natural resources. Yet there is still debate about who he really is. Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy have gone a long way in answering that question, starting with the title, which makes a crucial point: even though “Mr. Putin” was, in his upbringing and early career, a prototype of the Soviet man, he’s no longer “Comrade Putin.” His aim is not the restoration of communism. He has made a deal with the capitalists who have thrived in Russia over the past two decades: they support him in the exercise of his political power, and he supports them in amassing their fortunes. The result, as Fiona and Clifford put it, is a two-way “protection racket” between the “CEO of Russia Inc.” and his “crony oligarchs.” Putin has also facilitated the accumulation of private wealth by public officials, especially those connected with the power ministries, including his own alma mater, the intelligence service. The USSR was also a kleptocracy, but like virtually all other enterprises, it was monopolized by the state, whereas today a perverse sort of public-private partnership exists in Russia.

Another contrast between the country in which Putin was born and the one he now leads is in their belief systems. Communism scorns “bourgeois nationalism,” rejects religion as “the opiate of the people,” and empowers its adherents as the vanguard of a global movement (“workers of the world unite!”). In each of those respects, Putin is an apostate: he extols Mother Russia, professes his devotion to the Orthodox Church, and bases his hopes for his country’s future on nostalgia for its pre-Soviet past.

Fiona and Clifford make a convincing case that Putin has adopted—and adapted to his ambitions and agenda—what might be called Russian exceptionalism. It’s an atavistic ideology in that it reaches back to Slavophiles of the nineteenth century and their faith in the mystique of the Russian soul and Russia’s manifest destiny in Eurasia. Putin’s famous but usually misconstrued statement lamenting “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [twentieth] century” referred not to the demise of the USSR but to the weakening of the Russian state in the early 1990s. This and other views reflect the influence of various nationalistic historians as well as the filmmaker Nikita Mikhalkov, best known in the West for his powerful, Oscar-winning indictment of Stalinism, *Burnt by the Sun*. Mikhalkov has, for years, been on a crusade to rehabilitate as true Russian heroes the Whites who were defeated by the Reds in the five-year Civil War that followed the Revolution of 1917.

So in a sense, “Mr. Putin” is, in his quest for a Russian “national idea,” not just post-communist—he’s also pre-communist and, in a sense, even anti-communist.

That said, what Putin emphatically shares with both tsars and commissars alike is a belief in the need for a supreme leader. Concepts like separation of powers and checks and balances have long been anathema to the Kremlin. Stalin was called *vozhd’* (the closest Russian comes to *Der Führer* and *Il Duce*). Even Boris Yeltsin—a liberal leader in many ways, certainly in comparison to his protégé-turned-successor—had a habit of using the verb *tsarstvovat’* (“rule like a tsar”) in the first-person singular.

For his part, “Mr. Putin” is, as Fiona and Clifford note, careful to avoid such language. That’s partly, they suggest, because of his experience as a foot soldier and middle-rank officer in the KGB, a profession that required him to work quietly, deceptively, often under cover. Besides, if you’re a former intelligence agent who’s now the country’s “first person” (the title Putin selected for his own quasi-autobiography), you don’t need to be addressed in aggrandizing terms; your power is *ex officio*. Therefore, among colleagues (none of whom he regards as peers), Putin answers to “Vladimir Vladimirovich,” or, in more formal settings, “Mr. President.”

Even during the four years he served as prime minister “under” Dmitry Medvedev, he was indisputably at the top of “the vertical of power.” Putin has translated that telling phrase, along with “sovereign democracy,” into his determination and, by and large, his success in manipulating a supine parliament, cowing or co-opting political rivals, intimidating and sometimes jailing enemies, and controlling much of the media.

However, Putin’s mastery of the system he has built is neither absolute nor guaranteed to last. Fiona and Clifford are penetrating and persuasive in identifying his Achilles’ heel: a growing inability to respond adequately to the needs of the Russian people.

The problem is largely structural—a perverse, zero-sum dynamic built into the vertical of power itself. When authority is excessively concentrated at the pinnacle, it’s diluted at ground-level, where citizens depend on effective governance.

The most vivid example that Fiona and Clifford cite occurred in September 2004, when Chechen terrorists took hostage more than a thousand people, most of them school children, in the northern Caucasus. Local officials and the SWAT team on the scene felt they had to wait for presidential instructions, which were slow in coming. The resulting standoff exploded into mayhem, in which more than 300 hostages died, including nearly 200 children.

There’s also a personal, self-inflicted dimension to Putin’s weaknesses as a leader who prides himself on his strength. He demands

accountability from everyone who reports to him, which essentially means every servant of the Russian state. Yet he has, on several occasions, demonstrated a combination of a tin ear and an avoidance approach when it comes to his own accountability to the citizenry. One such instance was in August 2000, when he was incommunicado during the protracted, widely covered, and ultimately failed attempt to rescue the crew trapped in a Russian submarine, the *Kursk*, that had sunk in the Barents Sea.

On that occasion, Putin was widely criticized for being aloof and uncaring. More than a decade later, he aroused opposition in an entirely different way—by taking his public support for granted and being *too much* in charge. On September 24, 2011, he issued a pro forma announcement of his intention to reclaim the presidency from Medvedev, as though filling that post was a matter that he alone could decide. As Fiona and Clifford put it, Putin’s “brand of personalized politics [had grown] stale.” Protests grew over the following months, leading to a massive demonstration featuring the slogan “Russia without Putin” with reverberations well into 2012.

I’ll close with two personal comments about this remarkable book.

First, while Fiona and Clifford make clear that Putin is in some crucial ways *sui generis*, their analysis of the Russian leader’s pronouncements and policies constitutes a guide for understanding “Putinism,” a term now commonly used to describe what Fareed Zakaria has dubbed “illiberal democracy,” especially when the regime in question puts the accent on the adjective while making a mockery out of the noun. The crudest, most extreme and entrenched case is President Alexander Lukashenko’s eighteen-year iron grip on Belarus. Other examples, less flagrant but heading in ominous directions, are several heads-of-state in former republics of the USSR, such as Presidents Viktor Yanukovich of Ukraine and Ilham Aliiev of Azerbaijan.

Commentators have recently begun to apply the label “Putinism” to a political leader west of the old Soviet borders: Hungary’s prime minister, Viktor Orbán, a legitimately elected one-time

reformer who is turning authoritarian and getting away with it. Since he's doing so in a new member-state of NATO and the European Union at a time when those bulwarks of the transatlantic community of democracies face severe challenges, I believe it's fair to say that the specter of Putinism is now haunting Europe—a trend that makes Fiona and Clifford's book on the namesake of the phenomenon all the more timely and valuable.

My second personal comment is that Fiona and Clifford's book is full of revelations, insights, and analysis that augment—and often alter or correct—my understanding of what I experienced during the eight years in the 1990s when I worked at the State Department on relations between the United States and Yeltsin's Russia. My view was then, and remains today, that future historians, notably including Russian ones, will be far more charitable to Yeltsin's leadership and legacy than his contemporaries have been. He had his failures, excesses, and shortcomings, personal as well as political. The shakiness and capriciousness of his rule were exacerbated by his alcoholism and chronic heart problems. But he will, I believe, eventually get the credit he deserves for his determination to take a wrecking ball to the Communist Party, his commitment to opening society and the media, his pursuit of genuine partnership with the West, and his critical role in ensuring a peaceful dissolution of the USSR. The world must never forget that the largest country on earth could have gone the way of Yugoslavia, with thousands of nuclear weapons in the mix.

Still, the homegrown *Russian* version of Putinism is part of the Yeltsin legacy. That's not just because Yeltsin promoted Putin and installed him as his successor; it's also because—as Fiona and Clifford make clear—Putinism is a reaction to the privations that the Russian people suffered during Yeltsin's reign, as well as the shock many felt in the loss of a quarter of their territory when the fourteen other constituent republics of the USSR headed for the exit.

I dealt with Putin in the four capacities that vaulted him from obscurity to ultimate power: As Yeltsin's national security adviser

and prime minister, then as acting president, and, finally, as elected president. Fiona and Clifford's description of him rings true, especially in the extent to which he's continued to apply the tradecraft of a spy—and a recruiter of spies—to his mode of operation as a political leader. For instance, I recall how, in our first meeting, he let me know, not so subtly, that he'd studied my dossier, mentioning in passing the early twentieth-century poet about whom I'd written a dissertation in graduate school. I found it more of a warning than a compliment ("We know *all* about you").

When Bill Clinton visited Russia for the last time as president in June of 2000 for his only bilateral summit with Putin, he found the encounter to be personally frustrating and foreboding in its implications for the future of Russia. The newly ensconced Kremlin leader was cool, cocky, and borderline patronizing toward an American counterpart who was in his final months in office. Putin politely but firmly rebuffed Clinton's efforts to make progress on several diplomatic and security issues. He used the meeting to signal that he was tougher, more vigorous, and more assertive than his predecessors—and that the same would be true of Russia itself under his command.

Putin also fended off Clinton's efforts to engage him on the course of Russia's internal evolution. It was that last issue that preyed on Clinton's mind when, on his way to the airport, he paid a visit to Yeltsin, who was living in retirement at a dacha outside Moscow. "Boris," said Clinton, "you've got democracy in your heart. You've got the trust of the people in your bones. You've got the fire in your belly of a real democrat and a real reformer. I'm not sure Putin has that. Maybe he does. I don't know. You'll have to keep an eye on him and use your influence to make sure that he stays on the right path. Putin needs you. Whether he knows it or not, he really needs you, Boris. Russia needs you. You really changed this country, Boris. Not every leader can say that about the country he's led. You changed Russia. Russia was lucky to have you. The world was lucky you were where you were. *I was*

FOREWORD

lucky to have you. We did a lot of stuff together, you and I. We got through some tough times. We never let it all come apart. We did some good things. They'll last. It took guts on your part. A lot of that stuff was harder for you than it was for me. I know that."

"Thank you, Bill," Yeltsin replied. "I understand. . . . I really do understand what you said. I'll think about it."

"I know you will, Boris," said Clinton, "because I know what you have in here." Clinton tapped Yeltsin on his chest, right above his ailing heart.

Afterward, ruminating on his friend "Ol' Boris," Clinton remarked, "I think we're going to miss him." A majority of the Russian people still don't miss the upheavals and hardships of the Yeltsin era, but a growing number of them are impatient to move beyond the Putin one.

STROBE TALBOTT
President
The Brookings Institution

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MR. PUTIN

CHAPTER ONE

WHO IS MR. PUTIN?

WHO IS MR. PUTIN? This question has never been fully answered. Vladimir Putin has been Russia's dominant political figure for more than a dozen years since he first became prime minister and then president in 1999–2000. But in the years Putin has been in power we have seen almost no additional information provided about his background beyond what is available in early biographies. These relate that Vladimir Putin was born in the Soviet city of Leningrad in October 1952 and was his parents' only surviving child. Putin's childhood was spent in Leningrad, where his youthful pursuits included training first in sambo (a martial art combining judo and wrestling that was first developed by the Soviet Red Army) and then in judo. After school, Putin studied law at Leningrad State University, graduated in 1975, and immediately joined the Soviet intelligence service, the KGB. He was posted to Dresden in East Germany in 1985, after completing a year of study at the KGB's academy in Moscow. He was recalled from Dresden to Leningrad in 1990, just as the USSR was on the verge of collapse.

During his time in the KGB, Putin worked as a case officer and attained the rank of lieutenant colonel. In 1990–91, he moved into the intelligence service's "active reserve" and returned to Leningrad University as a deputy to the vice rector. He became an adviser to

one of his former law professors, Anatoly Sobchak, who left the university to become chairman of Leningrad's city soviet, or council. Putin worked with Sobchak during Sobchak's successful electoral campaign to become the first democratically elected mayor of what was now St. Petersburg. In June 1991, Putin became a deputy mayor of St. Petersburg and was put in charge of the city's Committee for External Relations. He officially resigned from the KGB in August 1991.

In 1996, after Mayor Sobchak lost his bid for reelection, Vladimir Putin moved to Moscow to work in the Kremlin, in the department that managed presidential property. In March 1997, Putin was elevated to deputy chief of the presidential staff. He assumed a number of other responsibilities within the Kremlin before being appointed head of the Russian Federal Security Service (the FSB, the successor to the KGB) in July 1998. A year later, in August 1999, Vladimir Putin was named, in rapid succession, one of Russia's first deputy prime ministers and then acting prime minister by Russian President Boris Yeltsin, who also indicated that Putin was his preferred successor as president. Finally, on December 31, 1999, Putin became acting president of Russia after Yeltsin resigned. He was officially elected to the position of president in March 2000. Putin served two terms as Russia's president from 2000 to 2004 and from 2004 to 2008, before stepping aside—in line with Russia's constitutional prohibition against three consecutive presidential terms—to assume the position of prime minister. In March 2012, Putin was reelected as Russian president until 2018, thanks to a law pushed through by then President Dmitry Medvedev in December 2008 extending the presidential term from four to six years.

These basic facts have been covered in books and newspaper articles. There is some uncertainty in the sources about specific dates and the sequencing of Vladimir Putin's professional trajectory. This is especially the case for his KGB service, but also for some of the period he was in the St. Petersburg mayor's office, including how long he was technically part of the KGB's "active reserve." Personal

information, including on key childhood events, his 1983 marriage to his wife Lyudmila, the birth of two daughters in 1985 and 1986 (Maria and Yekaterina), and his friendships with politicians and businessmen from Leningrad/St. Petersburg, is remarkably scant for such a prominent public figure. His wife, daughters, and other family members, for example, are conspicuously absent from the public domain. Information about him that was available at the beginning of his presidency has also been suppressed, distorted, or lost in a morass of competing and often contradictory versions swirling with rumor and innuendo. Some materials, related to a notorious 1990s food scandal in St. Petersburg, which almost upended Putin's early political career, have been expunged, along with those with access to them. When it comes to Mr. Putin, very little information is definitive, confirmable, or reliable.

As a result, some observers say that Vladimir Putin has no face, no substance, no soul. He is a "man from nowhere," who can appear to be anybody to anyone. Indeed, as president and prime minister, Mr. Putin has turned himself into the ultimate political performance artist. Over the last several years, his public relations team has pushed his image in multiple directions, pitching him as everything from big game hunter and conservationist to scuba diver to biker—even nightclub crooner. Leaders of other countries have gained notoriety for their flamboyant or patriotic style of dressing to appeal to and rally the masses—like Fidel Castro's and Hugo Chavez's military fatigues, Yasser Arafat's ubiquitous keffiyeh scarf, Muammar Qaddafi's robes (and tent), Hamid Karzai's carefully calculated blend of traditional Afghan tribal dress, and Yulia Tymoshenko's ultra-chic Ukrainian-peasant blonde braids—but Vladimir Putin has out-dressed them all. He has appeared in an endless number of guises for encounters with the press or Russian special interest groups, or at times of crisis, as during raging peat bog fires around Moscow in 2010, when he was transformed into a fire-fighting airplane pilot. All this with the assistance, it would seem, of the Kremlin's inexhaustible wardrobe and special props department.

THE KREMLIN SPECIAL PROPS DEPARTMENT

Mr. Putin's antics are reminiscent of a much-beloved children's book and animated cartoon series in the United Kingdom, *Mr. Benn*. Each morning, Mr. Benn, a non-descript British man in a standard issue bowler hat and business suit, strolls down his street and is beckoned into a mysterious costume shop by a mustachioed, fez-wearing shopkeeper. The shopkeeper whisks Mr. Benn into a changing room. Mr. Benn puts on a costume that has already been laid out by the shopkeeper, walks out a secret door, and assumes a new costume-appropriate identity, as if by magic. In every episode, Mr. Benn solves a problem for the people he encounters during his adventure, until summoned back to reality by the shopkeeper. At the start of every episode a spinning wheel stops at the costume and adventure of the day.¹ The Mr. Putin(s) pinwheel we use for the book cover is a tribute to the opening sequence of *Mr. Benn*. Like his cartoon analogue, Mr. Putin, with the assistance of his press secretary, Dmitry Peskov (mustachioed but without the fez), and a coterie of press people, as if by magic embarks on a series of adventures (some of which oddly enough overlap with Mr. Benn's). In the course of his adventures, Mr. Putin pulls off every costume and performance with aplomb, a straight face, and a demonstration of skill.

Vladimir Putin and his PR team—which closely monitor the public reactions to the Mr. Putin episodes—are aware that these performances lack universal appeal and have sparked amusement at home and abroad at their elaborate and very obvious staging.² But Russian intellectual elites, the Russian political opposition to Mr. Putin, and overseas commentators are not the target audience. Each episode of Mr. Putin has a specific purpose. They are all based on feedback from opinion polls suggesting the Kremlin needs to reach out and create a direct connection to a particular group among the Russian population. Press Secretary Peskov admitted this in a meeting with the press in August 2011 after Mr. Putin

dove to the bottom of the Black Sea to retrieve some suspiciously immaculate amphorae.³ Putin himself has asserted in biographical interviews that one of his main skills is to get people—in this case the Russian people, his audience(s)—to see him as what *they* want him to be, not what he really is. These performances portray Putin as the ultimate Russian action man, capable of dealing with every eventuality. Collectively, they have been one of the reasons why Vladimir Putin has consistently polled as Russia's most popular politician for the best part of a decade.

PERSONALIZED POLITICS

As the PR performances underscore, the political system Putin has built around himself as Russian president and prime minister is highly personalized. Its legitimacy and stability are heavily dependent on Putin's personal popularity. The Russian economic and political systems are private and informal. A small number of trusted figures around Mr. Putin, perhaps twenty to thirty people, make the key decisions. At the very top is an even tighter inner circle of about half a dozen individuals, all with close ties to Putin, who have worked together for twenty years, beginning in St. Petersburg and continuing in Moscow. Real decisionmaking power resides inside the inner circle, while Russia's formal political institutions have to varying degrees been emasculated.

Within the system, Mr. Putin has developed his own idealized view of himself as CEO of "Russia, Inc." In reality, his leadership style is more like that of a mafia family Don. Everyone is interdependent, as well as dependent on the informal system, which provides access to prestigious positions and a whole array of perks and privileges, including the possibility of self-enrichment. The enforcement of rules and norms is based on powerful reciprocal ties and threats, not on positive incentives. Core individuals collect and amass detailed compromising material (*kompromat* in Russian) that can be used as leverage on every key figure inside and outside government. Mr. Putin the CEO has not been the

executive of a transparent public corporation. He has operated in the closed boardroom of a privately held corporation, with no genuine accountability to anyone outside the inner circle. The corporation's operating style is now in question, however. Since the Russian parliamentary (Duma) elections in December 2011, members of the public have taken to the streets of Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other cities to assert their rights as stakeholders and demand that Putin the CEO be held accountable for the failings of Russia, Inc.

After Putin first became president in 2000, the tight inner circle around him created an array of mechanisms—like Putin's PR stunts—to construct a feedback loop with Russia's diverse societal and political constituencies and keep a close eye on public opinion. Putin and his political system derived legitimacy from periodic parliamentary and presidential elections, but otherwise the Kremlin closed off political competition. The Kremlin did this by aggressively championing a dominant political party, *Yedinaya Rossiya*, or United Russia, by controlling opposition parties and by marginalizing especially charismatic independent politicians or other public figures. Mr. Putin also deliberately usurped the agendas of nationalist and religiously motivated political groups that could provide alternative means for public mobilization.

PUTIN'S PERMANENT CAMPAIGN

In many respects, Putin and the Kremlin were in permanent campaign mode for more than a decade leading up to the December 2011 elections. To maintain Putin's personal popularity, they constantly adjusted their approach at the first signs of trouble. The permanent campaign was given an extra imperative and dimension in the early 2000s, when so-called color revolutions unseated unpopular leaders in Georgia, Ukraine, and other former Soviet states. The "Arab Spring" of 2011, which overturned authoritarian regimes in North Africa and the Middle East, including some with close ties to Moscow, provided another political jolt. Through

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