



**Ref ections on  
Vladimir Putin  
and Russia's  
Foreign and Military  
Policy**

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leagues: Serban Cioculescu, Pierre Jolicoeur, George Niculescu, Marta Pereyma, Roger Smith, Joel Sokolsky, and Jerry Zaslove.



## Reflections on Vladimir Putin and Russia's Foreign and Military Policy: Exploring Motivations, Factors, and Explanations

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### Introduction

In assessing Vladimir Putin and contemporary Russian foreign and national questions. It can take a lifetime to acquire expertise on foreign countries and this is even more so when a regime is autocratic, secretive, and deliberately deceptive in the information it releases.

Following my academic research and writings on communist Yugoslavia, Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I immediately replied: Read more history that covered a longer time span. With “long history” in mind, we shall analyze Putin and Russia and their intertwined journeys, as we navigate these sobering times of

### The Tsarist Tradition in Russia: Looking East and Inward or Looking West and Outwards?

To better understand Putin and his orientation, it is useful to step back and look at an overview of Russian political history and explore several key enduring themes. Amongst the most famous tsars and commissars, several—Ivan the Terrible (1530–1584), Peter the Great (1672–1725), Catherine the Great (1729–1796) and Stalin, the Man of Steel (1879–1953)—dominate the landscape. Each ruled for more than two decades. (See Table 1: Russian Leaders.) While in some ways they each, they expanded Russia's territory and powers.<sup>1</sup> In addition, all three tsarist leaders and the soviet communist ruler were highly autocratic rulers. This, perhaps, should serve as a reminder that despite

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1. See for example, the growth in territory revealed in the following historical atlases: Barnes, *Restless Empire*; Crampton and Crampton, *Atlas of Eastern Europe*; Gilbert, *Atlas of Russian History*; Kingsbury and Taaffe, *An Atlas of Soviet Affairs*.



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foundation may be essentially the same: autocratic and imperially ex-  
pansionist in goals and aspirations.

During the nineteenth century, major intellectual debates about the  
future of Russia arose with great intensity. It was increasingly evident  
that Russia lagged behind the West. Russians accordingly searched for  
V R O X W L R Q V I R U W K L V L Q I H U L R U L W \ E X W W K

Table 1

**Russian/Soviet/Russian Leaders**

Name	Left Office in What	
<b>Russian Monarchy Era</b>		
Ivan IV the Terrible*	1547–1584	37 years
Peter I the Great*	1696–1725	
Catherine II the Great	1762–1796	34 years
	1894–1917	23 years
<b>Revolutionary Transition</b>		
Kerensky	1917	under 1 year
<b>Soviet Era</b>		
	1917–1924	7 years
	1928–1953	25+ years
Khrushchev	1953–1964	11 years
Brezhnev	1964–1982	18 years
	1982–1984	
	1984–1985	1 year
Gorbachev	1985–1991	
<b>Russian Presidential Era</b>		
	1991–2000	

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versalistic and internationalist, often with an implicit, if not explicit,

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Orwell” published in

With the break-up of the Soviet bloc, a number of former Warsaw Pact client states (e.g., Poland, Hungary, East Germany [GDR], the former Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria) ceased to be under Moscow's direct formal military command of the Warsaw Pact. These reductions in imperial reach represented a shrinkage of about 755,000 square kilometres and about 90 million persons, and further diminished Russia's geopolitical size and impact. By contrast, the European Union continued to grow in population (448 million in 2021) and expand eastward (e.g., Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slove-

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stand the world view and geopolitical goals of Putin, along with the nature of Putin's Russia that is emerging.

### Some Overview Questions

The centuries-old intellectual debate in Moscow between Slavophiles and Westernizers still exists. Recent events suggest that more insular nationalist Slavophile goals are once again displacing nascent and fragile Westernizer's aspirations of liberalization and greater openness to Europe. The West-friendly quasi-democracy of the Gorbachev era of the late 1980s and the Yeltsin era of the 1990s have greatly receded.<sup>19</sup> Instead, it is suggested by some that we are witnessing renewed would-be Tsarist ambitions, propped up by Russian Orthodox Church RFLD's. Others suggest a ruthless KGB/FSB-recruited Bonapartist dictatorial regime is rapidly emerging.<sup>21</sup> Even more pessimistic DQDO \ V W V V X J J H V W W K D W W K H R O G % U H ] K C and somewhat lethargic bureaucratic communist state, while Putin's Russia seems to have evolved once more towards a more dynamic, ambitious, and ruthless semi-totalitarian regime or more recently fully totalitarian, as Masha Gessen suggested in *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*.<sup>22</sup> The change has occurred more rapidly than many expected and has been accelerated by the 2022 Russian-

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in the twentieth century, Winston Churchill, the illustrious politician and historian, described Russia as “a riddle wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma....”<sup>23</sup>

### The Carrot and the Stick: The Marshall Plan and NATO

In post-World War II Europe, as Stalinist Soviet military domination and tight political control over Eastern Europe took hold, the former British wartime prime minister, Winston Churchill, speaking at Fulton, Missouri on 5 March 1946, warned that an “Iron Curtain” of dictatorship, massive censorship, and state-directed propaganda had descended over these East European satellite countries.<sup>24</sup> The apprehension concerning Stalin’s malevolent ambitions and deeds were accentuated by the Soviet regime’s militant ideological rhetoric. In 1947, on the eve of the Cold War, George F. Kennan, the American Ambassador in Moscow, penned a pioneering and pivotal piece in *Foreign Affairs* under the nom-de-plume “X.”<sup>25</sup> It provided the intellectual blueprint for containment theory and a string of US-based military alliances (NATO, CENTO, SEATO)<sup>26</sup> that encircled and sought to constrain the Soviet Union from Europe, through the Middle East to Asia.

With Soviet expansion and tightening control in Eastern Europe and a growing political and military threat to Western Europe, the West responded in twin-fold fashion: economically the Marshall Aid Plan was launched in 1948 to assist war-torn Europe, while militarily NATO was formed in 1949 with the intention to stop the large and powerful Russian army rolling westward. Canada played a key part as one of the 12

Today the Alliance has expanded east and grown to 30 member countries, including the addition of a number of former Warsaw Pact member states (e.g., Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and the Baltic states). Some have called for even more states to join, such as Georgia and Armenia in the South Caucasus and most significant of the Eastern European heartland. In 2022, Sweden and Finland

23. Speech by Winston Churchill on a BBC radio broadcast, 1 October 1939. The second and lesser-known part of Churchill’s famous 1 October 1939 BBC radio quote offered the following observation about Russia: “... but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.”

24. Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence*.

25. The original “X” article appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947. Reprints and commentary on the original article can be found in several edited books including in Gati, *Caging the Bear*. See also Kennan’s later book *Russia and the West Under Lenin and Stalin*.

26. The full titles of the acronyms were: North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Central Treaty Organization, and Southeast Asia Treaty Organization.



jointly explored membership and on 18 May, both countries applied to join NATO.<sup>27</sup> Past NATO expansions seem to have been catalysts for Putin's mounting fears, growing anger, increasingly belligerent tone, and

decades and leaders.<sup>32</sup>

For much of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, the dominant paradigm for analyzing the Soviet Union/Russia was the totalitarian model. While the West as a framework grew in the post-World War II Cold War, particularly amongst political right-wing authors and émigrés. Amongst the major authors of textbooks that utilized this framework were Merle Fainsod and Zbigniew Brzezinski.<sup>33</sup> The model's main features included a single all-powerful despotic leader who ruled through a single state-directed and controlled propaganda and censorship. It was a highly centralized, coercive state that swiftly and brutally crushed all attempted political opposition. The regime sought to monitor, control, and directly rule over all groups and organizations. Autonomous and independent organizations were not allowed. Its dictator's ambitions were far wider than those of traditional autocratic regimes that also ruled by coercion. The totalitarian leader, by contrast, sought to remake

ized and centralized Russian bureaucratic polity;<sup>36</sup> a despotic leader's totalitarian control over all aspects of society;<sup>37</sup> the continuation of Slavic cultural traditions;<sup>38</sup> and geo-political imperial rule.<sup>39</sup>

As the bipolar global Cold War receded, détente began to emerge the 1970s; accordingly, debates about appropriate strategy and tactics arose in the West.<sup>40</sup> Discussions involved not only the nature of the nuclear age and ultimate motivations of the post-Stalinist Russian leaders, but also the appropriate framework for understanding a more modern Russian polity and society. As Russian society changed, Russians (both the mass public and the leaders) became more urban, educated, and more moderate and semi-pluralistic?<sup>41</sup>

The Left in the West suggested that important change had occurred and prospects for peaceful co-existence were thus greater. The Right warned that the fundamentals of Russian society and politics had not changed and that we should remain vigilant, lest more political dom-

The rise of Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s, with his policies of perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness), seemed to usher in a dramatic and positive change in Russia's world view to a more Westernizer orientation. Canada played a role in facilitating East/West dialogue, particularly during Gorbachev's 1983 visit to Canada. However, with the rise of Putin from 1999 onwards, there emerged increasing concentration of arbitrary executive power in one person, renewed militant Russian nationalism and a strong re-assertion of Russian geo-political tides of history.

As Putin continues to alter the Russian political landscape, there comes a long, yet still unfolding, Putin-era political system. Amongst the labels and characterizations posed: (1) "Russia Inc.," "Kremlin Inc.,"

“Gazprom State” (Levine; Dawisha, Hill), “state capitalism” (Dawisha, Laqueur) or “dictatorial petrostate” (Kasparov) which echo Meyer’s corporate description “USSR Inc.” of the Brezhnev communist era; (2) “oligarchy” (Browder), “kleptocracy” or “kleptocratic authoritarianism” (Dawisha, Satter, Kasparov, Snyder), “crony capitalism” (Aslund, Lucas) which are reminiscent of Burnham’s and Djilas “new class” exploitation model; (3) “caesaropapism” (Arutunyan), “Leviathan” (Medvedev), or “never-ending presidency” (Dawisha) which draw parallels to Trotsky’s “Bonapartist” characterization of the Stalinist era; (4) “KGB , QFRUSRUDWHG μ RU . . \* % PD ĀD VWDWH μ . DVS echoing the Chekist-purge era; (5) “totalitarian” (Zimmerman, Kovalyev, Satter, Kasparov, Gessen) or “high tech authoritarianism” (Medve- GHY DQG D YDULDQW RI . VXUYHLOODQFH FDS Fainsod, Friedrich, Brzezinski, and even Trotsky.<sup>42</sup> To help assess these analytical categories, it is useful to evaluate Putin, both the man and political leader.

has revealed is a persistent pattern of coercion and threats.<sup>44</sup> He seeks to reverse the weakened condition that Russia has found itself in. Echoing the Slavophiles, he advocates a more conservative “going back to past traditions.” He, like so many fellow Russians, feels that during recent decades Russia witnessed unacceptable humiliation and loss of status, land, and power. Accordingly, he implemented a rapid revitalization of the military and a reassertion of its pivotal role in society. Given the increasing economic and cyber confrontations with the West, Putin has

reminiscent of Stalinist “Fortress Soviet Union.” Putin calculated that this was a way to provide protection for Russia from the West’s economic clout, foreign pressure, and even political intrusions. This was even more the case after the Western-imposed sanctions following the 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea and the Donbas. Following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and more draconian western-imposed sanctions, the beginning of an economic “iron curtain” around Russia is unfolding.

Echoing the Slavophiles, a major component of Putin’s ideological vision is a strong dose of nationalism. Putin promotes grandiose projects fostering Russian national symbols and power often over ordinary economic and social p Ech

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Gorbachev and Yeltsin eras. To achieve this, like his Tsarist and Commissar predecessors, Putin is willing to employ a number of means: (1) brutally oppress smaller nations (e.g., Chechens, Tatars); (2) truncate other states (e.g., Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova), and create splinter puppet regimes (e.g., South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Donetsk, Luhansk and Transnistria);<sup>46</sup> (3) threaten other countries (e.g., the Baltic States); and (4) seek to reassert dominance in a region (e.g., the Caucasus). Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone suggested that this is Russia's "Munroe Doc-

tin seems to be following the military tactic of “total war” and heavily targeting civilians, a policy that he previously pursued in Chechnya (1999) and Syria (2015).

Given that he believes Russia is in the midst of a major struggle with regard to its overall fate, Putin has concluded that it is crucial for Russia to employ much of its entire arsenal of powers. Accordingly, he is willing to utilize both conventional (e.g., large intimidating border military exercises, economic oil and gas blackmail or invasion) and unconventional methods (including disinformation, propaganda, cyber warfare,<sup>48</sup> unmarked uniforms grabbing foreign strategic installations and locations).<sup>49</sup> He continues to probe in provocative and sometimes reckless fashion various regional and international thresholds to reclaim (by force or trickery) and to rebuild features of the Soviet era. The all-powerful charismatic leader, as with a number of other dictators, achieved initial successes, in Putin’s case particularly during rising oil revenues. As a result, Putin acquired over time a growing sense of impunity regarding his violent deeds and acquisitions of territory. With each major and deceive even more. To further accomplish this, he has fostered the matter how dangerous. One example was his rapidly escalating threats and harsh actions against President Erdogan and Turkey, after the latter’s shooting down of a Russian military plane along the Syrian/Turkish border in 2016. His brutal military targeting of masses of civilians in Ukraine in 2022 suggest that, despite heavy Russian military personnel and equipment losses, he is willing to pursue a deadly ruthlessness towards all of his opponents—soldiers and civilians alike.

Putin is not only committed to an all-out struggle for the future of a powerful Russia, both politically and militarily, he also seeks to augment Russia’s economic might. To achieve this, he was willing, when he could, to extract higher prices for Russian oil and gas from smaller, supplies suddenly in highly vulnerable winter months. Coinciding with this Russian state ambition, Putin possesses a greedy and covetous personal streak. As Dawisha and other authors note, Putin has overseen the emergence of a “kleptocratic” clique of oligarchs<sup>50</sup> where

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48. Lourie, *Putin*, chap. 10. He even directed hacking into the 2016 US presidential election campaign.  
49. During the Russian invasion/re-occupation of Crimea, there were many unidentified soldiers in camouflaged uniforms, who were, in fact, Russian troops, but they did not wear their official military insignia. This fostered stealth aspects of the invasion and made it easier for Moscow’s initial denial of involvement.  
50. Dawisha uses the terms kleptocracy and kleptocratic authoritarianism, *Putin’s Kleptocracy*. See also Laqueur, *Putinism* The New Tsar, 480.

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increasingly the economy is run by a few mega-billionaires who are





tion”)<sup>60</sup> are condemned and their jobs placed in jeopardy.

Putin believes that Russia needs to reclaim its historic global role as a pre-eminent superpower and is willing to employ threats and force, both conventional and unconventional. With a declining and aging SRSXODWLRQ VORZHU LQQRYDWLRQ LQ V LJJO an economy increasingly lagging behind<sup>61</sup> the United States, the European Union and China, Putin may be in a strategic sense correct in believing that an ambitious and determined military posture is the most H FDFLRXV SDWK IRU 5XVVLD • V LPSHULD O D potentially costly endeavour in both the short and long run. In earlier soviet decades, Moscow strained under the economic costs of its military rivalry with the United States, particularly towards the end of the FRPPXQLVW HUD 7KH VDPH AQDQFLDO L PEDO Russia previously still continues to exist, particularly in an age when oil prices plunged by more than two-thirds from a high of \$145/barrel in 2008 to less than \$50/barrel by 2017 and below \$40/barrel in June 2020. Ironically, while the war in Ukraine dramatically drove oil prices back up to new highs of over \$120, subsequent Western sanctions on Russia have ostracized and isolated the Russian economy and greatly limited the ability to actually sell Russian oil and gas, particularly in the West. The Russian economy is exceedingly dependent on oil and gas exports as crucial sources of much-needed foreign income and its GNP.<sup>62</sup> As Lourie and others have noted, the best time for the “petrostate” is perhaps not in Russia’s future, but in its past.<sup>63</sup>

## The 2022 War in Ukraine and Some Reflections on the Future

, Q UHFHQW \HDUV VLJQLÁFDQW GHYHORSPI ing post-soviet states, suggest major interrelated questions: First and IRUHPRVW ZKDW LV WKH HPHUJLQJ QDWXUH society and politics? Secondly, what are the real foreign policy and military goals and motivations of Moscow’s leaders, particularly that of the mercurial and increasingly dictatorial Vladimir Putin? The trajectory in recent years is troubling.

There are a number of ongoing social and economic strains in Russia:<sup>64</sup> (1) there has been a long-term decrease in state income from oil

60. Such Orwellian state language control has some Russian dissidents mockingly suggest- War and Peace might have to be renamed Special Military Operation and

Peace.

61. Laqueur, *Putinism*, particularly chaps. 6, 9.

62. Marshall Goldman describes Russia as a “Petrostate.” See Lourie, *Putin*, chap. 6,

“ See

fl , *Putinism*,

and gas exports (in 2022 prices increased, but distribution was problematic); (2) a decline and aging of the adult working population and a subsequent state response of raising the retirement age for pensions; (3) other major powers; (4) inadequacies in the Russian medical response

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angry totalitarian ruler, unleashed a military assault on the Ukrainian democratic state. The initial twin goals of a coup and installing a compliant puppet regime failed. Subsequently, Putin opted for a slower and more brutal three-pronged invasion campaign from the North, East, and South. Increasingly, the aggressive Russian battle plan has targeted the Ukrainian civilian population with massive artillery and aerial ERPEDUGPHQWV FXWWLQJR HOHFWULFLW\ aggression and involves war crimes against civilians. It even put at grave risk Europe's largest nuclear power station and raised the nightmarish spectre of a continental environmental disaster. His bellicose threat of nuclear weapons escalation is chilling. Putin's initial territorial goals included expanding the strategic Crimean naval outpost of Sevastopol that dominates the northern shores of the Black Sea, re-asserting full military control over the Sea of Azov, and providing land bridges east to Russia and west to Transnistria, the breakaway Russian-dominated Moldovan state. In so doing, Putin sought to reduce Ukraine to a landlocked and increasingly vulnerable regime. It seems his "real-politik" aim was at least to bifurcate Ukraine into two halves, divided by the Dnipro/Dnieper River. In so doing, Putin would greatly expand upon his Donetsk and Luhansk puppet states. Ultimately, if he cannot control 8NUDLQH RU DW OHDVW WXUQ LW LQWR DQ X he would prefer to make it a wasteland.

Echoing Stalin in the 1940s, Putin seems to have set his sights on establishing a new Russian bloc, ranging from Belarus in the North to Crimea and Abkhazia in the South. In a challenge and response inter-QDWLRQDO UHODWLRQV G\QDPLF 1\$72 KDV and re-armed. Germany's geo-political posture towards the East reoriented and military expenditures greatly increased. Ironically, Putin has fostered a stronger and more determined adversary. There is a growing gulf and increasingly polarized military divide between the US-led NATO countries in the West and Moscow and its satellite states in the East. It seems like the beginning of a new Cold War or even a "clash of civilizations,"<sup>67</sup> if we do not rapidly escalate into a hot war, either by design or by accident.<sup>68</sup> It seems the "Bloodlands" of Europe continue WR EHD IRFXV RI LQWHU VWDWH ULYDOU\ V

67. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Orenstein, *The Lands in Between*, 90. In his earlier pioneering volume, *The Common Defence*, 447, Huntington outlined the contrasts between despotisms and democracies in making defence and foreign policy: "A monarchy or despotism ... is like a full-rigged sailing ship. It moves swiftly and efficiently. But in troubled waters, when it strikes a rock, its shell is pierced, and it quickly sinks to the bottom. A republic, however, is like a raft: slow, ungainly, impossible to steer, no place from which to control events, and yet durable and safe. It will not sink, but one's feet are always wet." The passage still seems timely in the West's dealings with Putin.

68. Whitehorn, "Putin and the 2022 Russian Military Conflict in Post-Soviet Lands"



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