

## **PUTIN AND HIS POLICIES: By Evgueni Novikov, Ph.D.**

***Disclaimer: The opinions and views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the Center for a Secure Free Society (SFS).***

### **Introduction:**

The reader might appreciate that my opinions on Russia and its leadership are based on my long time cultural experience as an insider and observer of the Soviet/Russian elites. My mother's sister, Olga Nikolaevna, was a wife of Mr. Alexey Koslov, CPSU top apparatchik, former deputy of Soviet PM Malenkov and a Soviet minister of agriculture. Olga Nikolaevna's social status made it possible for her to be a friend of Stalin's daughter, Svetlana Alilueva. In my childhood years I would spend a lot of time with Olga Nikolaevna's family and I had vivid impressions about the way of life of Stalin's party elite members. Mr. Alexey Koslov helped me to enroll in the prestigious Nachimov Naval preparatory school in Leningrad, where I became a friend of Admiral Yuri Panteleev who was the President of the Leningrad Navy War College. I was accepted into the Admiral's family and was able to watch the life styles of members of the Soviet military. While I pursued my studies in Leningrad, I became acquainted with the Leningrad culture of the intelligentsia, to which the family of young Putin belonged.

Following my years at the Nachimov Naval preparatory school, I became a student at a most prestigious Soviet University – MGIMO (all Russian foreign ministers are and have been alumni of this University). After graduation, and until my defection to the USA in 1988, I worked for the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's Central Committee's International Department. (My former colleague, Mr. Alexey Pushkov is a head of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Russian Duma). My cultural and personal experience enables me to understand the way of thinking and acting of the Russian inner circle and of President Vladimir Putin.

Based on the above experience I shall try to explain why the Russian people like and support President Vladimir Putin. More importantly, an appraisal of Putin's domestic support can help us to discern his ambitions in Ukraine and his latest endeavor in the Middle East.

### **Background:**

The Russian ruble has fallen as low as 65 per dollar, from an average of 30-35 twelve months ago. The list of problems that the Russian people face today is daunting. Prices for many consumer goods have become more expensive, and people simply cannot buy many imported products. A middle class Russian family cannot afford Christmas vacations at foreign resorts. These opportunities were

available last year. EU and US sanctions threaten to plunge the Russian economy into a deep crisis.

Nevertheless, by some accounts, 89.9% of the Russian population supports President Vladimir Putin, whose foreign policy has brought misfortunes to them.<sup>i</sup> It appears to be difficult for Western analysts to understand this phenomenon. Not all Russians can understand the Putin's personality either. The Russian singer Mikhail Boyarsky, who knows Mr. Putin personally, says of the Russian President: "He is like an iceberg: you see only the tip, and no one knows what's down there."<sup>ii</sup>

Most Russians were born and raised in the Soviet Union and absorbed Soviet culture, which was infused with the communist ideology of class struggle, that is, with the idea of an unavoidable conflict between workers and owners. The idea of the inevitability of "class struggle" that pitted some people against other people with different economic interests was planted by Soviet ideology into the consciousness of Soviet citizens during their childhood. At an early age, Soviet children would start seeking someone to fight (an enemy). This phenomenon led to the foundation of informal groups of "militant" children within schools, classes, streets or blocks of housing flats. The internal structure of these groups was similar to criminal gangs. They were in a state of permanent struggle with each other.

My own school years were characterized by an atmosphere of endless bullying, intimidation and molestation on my way to school, at my school, on the playground or dancing at a youth café. And in order to survive in such conditions, my peers engaged in boxing, "sambo" (a Russian martial art of "self-defense without weapons") and karate. These were the most popular sports in the USSR. Many generations of Soviet citizens craved an informal leader, who would be a strong and tough man, able to resist bullying and intimidation. They hoped for a man who could alone challenge a large gang, who would not be afraid of the fists or knives of an enemy and who might fearlessly protect his girlfriend from street thugs and hooligans.

### **The End of the USSR and Yeltsin.**

During the final years of the Soviet Union and the early post-Soviet years, Russian President Boris Yeltsin came to be seen as a weak party apparatchik. He lost and lacked the characteristics needed to sustain the respect of many Russian. These people were also unhappy with image of their increasingly drunken President. Boris Yeltsin was perceived to have forgotten his responsibilities as a national leader. Worse, he had entrusted management of the country to a corrupt few that included his family and the class of hated oligarchs who were close to the Yeltsin family.

Many Russians became disappointed with Yeltsin's "democratic" reforms. His rule collapsed the Soviet ruble, deprived the majority of Russian citizens of their savings

and pensions, created mass unemployment and allowed a handful of former “partycrats” and criminal businessmen to take possession of the lands, minerals, plants and banks that once were the property of the Soviet state. According to one source: “Russia had become a poor and thoroughly corrupt country during Yeltsin’s time in the 1990s. The average pension was equivalent to 30 dollars a month... At the time, some compared Russia to a wretched drunken cowboy from a Hollywood film.”<sup>iii</sup>

## **Why Putin?**

The new Russian President, Vladimir Putin rose to leadership in 2000, at a time when significant numbers of Russian people felt a sharp nostalgia for the Soviet State, and had begun to blame Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin for the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russians recognized Yeltsin’s successor, Vladimir Putin, as a young, athletic, strong, tough, capable leader who seemed ready to protect the people of Russia from the bullying and intimidation of oligarchs and external enemies.

Many Russians believe that Putin is a man with a strong will and courage; that he is flexible and has a great sense of humor. Russians love his rough and vulgar jokes and some of the comments that he makes at his press conferences. According to Russian historian Aleksey Sergienko, “Russia had few good politicians in its modern history. After Yeltsin and the Communists, Putin looks like a hero”<sup>iv</sup> Valery Fedorov, Director of the Russian Public Opinion Research Center, believes: “That Putin is right to determine the future of the country is now beyond discussion. His actions in Ukraine and Crimea are something that Russians believed he should do by showing the world what Russia is about and (that he) did not bend to the pressure.”<sup>v</sup>

The choice of Mr. Putin as the protector of the interests of the Russian political class was perceived to have been successful, albeit unexpected. Many Russians perceive President Putin as a restorer. He restored the state power where it had been decentralized by Yeltsin-era oligarchs. From the very beginning of his rule, Vladimir Putin stated that he was going to wage war on oligarchs, and this agenda won mass support from the Russian people

A number of these new owners of former state-owned properties become very wealthy and unresponsive to the “uncommon” (political) elites who had empowered them. Putin began to show his “strong hand” by prosecuting independent oligarchs, including Mr. Brerezovskij and Mr. Gusinsky. He forced them to leave Russia and to seek asylum abroad. When Mr. Putin jailed the richest Russian oligarch, Mr. Khodorkovskij, he received public support and was even praised for doing so.

## **Putin’s Role:**

According to Valerie Sperling: "Part of the public's popular enthusiasm for Putin, and for what appears to be his increasingly rash foreign policy, stems from resentment about the deterioration of Russian power and influence in the 1990s. Following the Soviet collapse, the newly independent Russia, under the presidency of Boris Yeltsin, saw its economy atrophy and its superpower status evaporate. Russians soon formed the impression that the Western countries that had advised Yeltsin's administration were out to destroy the Russian economy, undermine their country's military might, and gain influence in Russia's "near abroad" (the former Soviet states)."vi

Putin also won public support by bolstering the state's claims to income from natural resources. By doing so, he increased by 80 times the taxes that private oil and gas companies paid to the state budget. The Secretary of the Presidium of the General Council of the United Russia Party, Mr. Vyacheslav Volodin, praised Putin's actions: "The prices for oil were high, even at the end of the 90's, but only under President Vladimir Putin did the state decide to tax the super incomes of oligarchs and monopolists ... Those who criticize us the most today were against withdrawal of our control of oil money from oligarchs to fill up the budget and to enable us to start national projects".vii

Putin also increased the salaries of teachers and doctors and doubled pensions. These actions received popular support: "In the year 2000, Vladimir Putin took power from Boris Yeltsin's weakening hands. Putin removed thieving oligarchs from power, forced businessmen to pay taxes, and rebuilt industry that was nearly destroyed in the 1990s. He put the country back in order. For Russians, it was a welcome sight."viii

According to the Russian journalist Ekaterina Agafonova: "We have (a political) culture of hard and authoritarian leaders and Putin suits these criteria."ix

### **Putin and His Image in the West.**

Former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani once hinted at his admiration for Putin, saying, "He makes a decision and he executes it. That's what you call a leader."x But this opinion of President Putin is exceptional for a western leader. Most western politicians and experts call him a "tyrant", "usurper", "strangler of freedom and democracy", a "new tsar", "silly KGB colonel", "short-lived ruler", "short-sighted politician", a "loser" and so on. They predict his forthcoming loss of power from inevitable conflicts with the Kremlin elites and with his own people. Most of these predictions for Putin come from the Russian opposition media, such as "Kommersant", "Vedomosti", "Grani", "Slon", "Snob", "Interfax", TV channels "Rain" and "RBC", Radio station "Eho Moskvu".

I believe that Putin allows such opposition media and its participants to speak freely domestically and abroad in order to create a misleading image about himself and his policies among Western politicians and experts. Putin uses the media as a

tool of his “active measures” or disinformation policies to cover his real agenda. And these active measures work. So far, Western politicians and political experts failed to predict Putin’s actions in Georgia, Crimea, Ukraine or Syria. American and EU anti-Russia sanctions were based on the idea that they would harm the interests of Putin’s inner circle and will ignite an anti-Putin coup inside Kremlin. But it did not happen, and these sanctions have only strengthened Putin’s position in the Kremlin and the public, and they increased anti-American and anti-Western feelings among the Russian public.

Today some Western commentators predict that the Islamic State bombing of the Russian passenger plane that went down on the Sinai Peninsula, Egypt, on October 31<sup>st</sup>, will make the Russian people unhappy with Putin’s actions in Syria. But according to Russian political analyst Yury Barmin: "It is relatively easy to convince Russians now that an alleged terrorist act is a sign of how effective the air strikes have been, and that they can't be stopped when victory is one step away."<sup>xi</sup>

Western politicians might want to reconsider the value of their sovietologists and self-styled experts. They may find more objective analysis of the situation in Russia by reading Western business media articles, which are at least more objective."<sup>xii</sup>

### **Russian Military Capabilities.**

I agree with David K. Lifschultz when he states: “It is traditional for the Russians to understate and conceal what they have.”<sup>xiii</sup> However, Putin has encouraged disclosures of real information about sensitive aspects concerning Russian military capabilities, if such disclosures fit into his strategy plans. (This practice also has a long history in the United States also.)

Russia did a lot to develop its military strength following the 2008 Georgian War. And Mr. Putin welcomed leaks of information about successes of Russian military efforts to local and international media.

A number of Western experts have expressed their opinion concerning these strengths:

“While the United States spent a trillion dollars looking for ten people in Afghanistan, and another two trillion looking for non-existent WMDs in Iraq, the Russians ... have been spending massive amounts of money on investments in new technologies to jump one or two generations ahead of the United States. And they have succeeded.”<sup>xiv</sup>

Evelyn Farkas, until recently the pentagon’s top Russian affairs official has indicated that: “Since Mr Shoigu took over the defense ministry in late 2012,

Russia's armed forces have demonstrated a capability and organization and logistics skill-set that we have not seen before."

"Under Shoigu, the army began to believe in itself," says Mikhail Khodarenok, editor of the *Military-Industrial Courier*, a defense weekly."<sup>xv</sup>

Another source argues:

"Russia is a former superpower, with vast experience and skills in designing advanced weapons. The T-34 tank demoralized the German armies in 1941. Soviet anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles surprised Israeli forces in 1973 and American aircraft over Vietnam, while Russian tanks today are equipped with advanced active protection systems to defend against anti-armor missiles. Critics wonder whether Russian jets like the Su-30 will blast America's best planes out of the skies. Russia is the nation with the third-highest military spending on the planet. It is a major military power. It should be treated as such."<sup>xvi</sup>

Russia is a major military power and President Putin is a realistic and pragmatic leader who is not likely to test the military power of the US or NATO. According to Russia analyst, Martin McCauley, "Vladimir Putin knows exactly how far to go, he knows where the red line is, and he isn't going beyond that red line. He is not going to start a war with the US because Russia would lose it. He is not going to start a war with China because he would lose it. Therefore, in his policies he knows exactly how far to go."<sup>xvii</sup> However, he wants to convince the US, NATO and China that they should not attempt to disrespect Russia and should not try to meddle with Russia's perceived national interests as the US did in Ukraine in 2014.

### **A Possible Russian Policy Path for the Ukraine.**

Russian intervention in Syria should be understood from this point of view. Since Russia today is the most capable foreign military force present in Syria, it may seek to convert that capacity into political influence in Europe. The Ukraine has been a major irritant in relations between Russia and Europe / the West. However it seems to be gradually losing the attention of European politicians, especially since the recent Islamic State attacks in Paris.

Putin's Ukraine policy rationale argues: "You accuse Russia of waging a war in Ukraine. We do not wage a war in Ukraine. We support local fighters in Donbas who wage their war against Kiev's pro-Western, anti-Russian government that came to power as a result of a US-EU coup d'état in the Ukraine. In Syria, we will demonstrate how the modern Russian military can wage a real war. Please, think

twice before making any commitments for military intervention in Ukraine that would support its anti-Russian government.” According to Putin, “Ukraine's future should be determined by the Ukrainians themselves.”<sup>xviii</sup>

I believe that a future scenario of Russian actions in Ukraine may proceed as follows:

There are about 2.6 million Ukrainian citizens exiled or residing in Russia at the present time. More than one million of them are from Ukraine's southeastern (Russian speaking) regions.<sup>xix</sup> Only 400,000 of them got permanent residence permits to stay and work in Russia. Others plan to return to Ukraine when the present Government of the Ukraine falls. This population is preparing to become a Ukrainian military force to remove the Government of President Poroshenko in Kiev. They expect Russian help.

Many Ukrainian men escaped the draft for the Ukrainian Army or deserted from it. They fled to Russia, and a number of them have military experience and knowledge and are being further trained by Russia. They are forming a new Army of the Ukraine, under the command of a Ukrainian shadow government in exile established in Moscow. Mykola Azarov, former Prime Minister of the Ukraine, heads this shadow government. Mr. Azarov recently announced the creation of a Committee for the Salvation of the Ukraine. Two former deputies of the Ukrainian Parliament, Oleg Tsarev and Vladimir Oliynyk, also serve on this Committee, in addition to Mr. Azarov. The Committee is believed to be planning to overthrow and replace current Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko with Mr. Vladimir Oliynyk.<sup>xx</sup>

Mr. Putin will implement this project on condition that:

- Russia's relations with USA and EU improve during joint actions against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq;
- The new Ukrainian army in exile accumulates power;
- The present Ukrainian government gets into deep economic crisis and loses popular support.

When these conditions exist, Vladimir Putin will release Mykola Azarov and his army to invade the Ukraine, with air and electronic support from Russia. Russian trained and equipped Ukrainian Special Forces will then accomplish a swift overthrow of the Poroshenko Government. This will minimize time and opportunities for the US and EU to accuse Russia of its intervention.

Journalist Andrei Volkov, describes a scenario for a possible Russian plan for the conquest of the Ukraine as follows.

“The following scenario could occur (in the Ukraine). On a single designated day, and without warning, all ammunition depots of the Ukrainian army are blown up. At intervals of a few minutes, powerful explosions happen at the Ukrainian areas for the storage of military equipment and military airfields. Air defense systems, ballistic missile systems, artillery battalions and armored units will also be bombarded.

“...The 26 “stealth” cruise missiles that struck ISIS targets in Syria fell on them without warning. Western satellites detected none of them. But for an attack against Ukrainian targets the number of such missiles will not be 26, but may be 200, 300 or 500, according to the number of Ukrainian targets that must be taken out.

“At the same time, the entire Ukraine will be covered by electronic suppression (electro-magnetic interference) so that all the communications and electronics of the Ukrainian military would stop working. Communications to and from their General Staff will not be possible, even by mobile or satellite phone, because all cellular systems will be shut down, and almost insurmountable interference will be created for radio transmissions.

“Russia will accomplish this communications shut down with its latest electronic warfare system, called the “Krasuha-4.” Each of these systems can interfere with radio navigation and communication systems within a radius of over a hundred of kilometers. In addition to the “Krasuha-4” system, there are other means of electronic warfare at the disposal of the Russian Armed Forces. These include a variety of systems for jamming and intercepting signals and suppression systems. These electronic warfare devices can be located either on the borders of the Ukraine and or on airborne platforms from altitudes of up to 12,000 meters on aircraft that could fly along the border.

“No-fly zones would be established over the Ukraine, and there would be absolutely no means of communication within the country other than carrier pigeons and signal lights.

“After a week of precision missile strikes, the Army of the Ukraine will cease to exist as a unified armed force. The Ukraine will have no military resources capable of armed resistance, no ammunition, and no significant numbers of armored vehicles or aircraft. Following the suppression of Ukrainian military bases, Russia could enable a ground operation composed of the prepared and well-trained Ukrainian DNI and LC exile armies that are more than ready to march on Kiev. They would have modern weapons, with advanced transportation and armored vehicles. These armies would enjoy a triumphant welcome in the Ukraine. They would be welcomed with flowers, because they are

Ukrainians, and their presence in the Ukraine will not be opposed by the people.

“The ranks of these exile armies will attract new forces, both local residents and disaffected Ukrainian army troops. If the Donetsk battalion starts to move toward the Western Ukrainian city of Uzhgorod, it will expand to ten divisions before reaching its destination.

“There would be no Ukrainian force capable of resisting such an offensive in the southeast. The Ukrainian East and West are too divided, and the center of the Ukraine is too isolated. NATO forces will not intervene in the conflict, because there will be not a single Russian soldier on the territory of the Ukraine, and Russia has no plans to send Russian soldiers there.”<sup>xxi</sup>

Following such an attack, new, pro-Moscow, Ukrainian leaders would produce a new Ukrainian constitution converting Ukraine into a confederation. This will give the Eastern (Russian speaking) regions of the Ukraine an easier path to “re-unite” with Russia, and it will also allow several Western regions of Ukraine to “re-unite” with Poland and Hungary. The Governments of Hungary and Poland are encouraging adjacent regions to secede from Ukraine and to join their countries.

The Polish state television channel, TVP1, noted Polish President Andrzej Duda’s claim that the Polish people must be ready to fight for the return of former Polish territories - such as Galicia, Volyn, Polissya that are now the Lvov, Ternopol, Ivano-Frankovsk, Volyn and Riven regions of Ukraine. According to the Polish President, his compatriots who live in these Ukrainian lands are humiliated and persecuted by the new leadership of Ukraine. Mr. Duda believes that: “If the current Ukrainian Government condemns the policies of the Soviet Union, then it must return the lands that were taken away from Poland in 1939, although Kiev, in principle, does not want to return these territories that it acquired through the “Soviet occupation””<sup>xxii</sup>

### **Russian Policy in Syria Linked to the Ukraine.**

In order to understand the current actions of Vladimir Putin in Syria we must keep in mind that the core of ISIS leaders are former Iraqi officers who served under Saddam Hussein, many of whom studied in the Soviet Union and may still have connections with Russian intelligence agencies.

Based on extensive fieldwork in a village of the North Caucasus, Ms. Elena Milashina, a reporter of the Russian independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, has observed that the Russian Special Services have been controlling the flow of jihadists from the Caucasus into Syria, where they have lately joined up with ISIS. This means that Russian security agencies may be exporting terrorists, whom the Russian government considers to be a threat to their national security.

“Penetrating and co-opting terrorists is a long, well-attested tactic in the annals of Chekist tradecraft.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

There are some good reasons for such collaboration between two anti-Western powers:

- Russian strategists would prefer to wage asymmetric war against the USA and its allies, and ISIS is engaged in such a war;
- ISIS plans to takeover Iraq and then Saudi Arabia, and Russia may welcome these ISIS's goals;
- ISIS terrorist actions in European and (likely) US cities are distracting Western leaders from Russian activities in Ukraine and will encourage them to seek cooperation with Russia in their anti-terrorism plans.

These considerations may explain why Russian air strikes in Syria are mainly directed against anti-Assad opposition and not against ISIS. Russia may disagree with ISIS' plans to occupy Syria and Lebanon and demonstrates such disagreements by bombing some ISIS's targets in Syria. But Putin openly says that Russia will not expand its air strikes to Iraq, perhaps to encourage ISIS to move out of Syria and concentrate their efforts on toppling pro-American governments in Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

According to western intelligence reports, ISIS leaders in Iraq do not fully control the terrorist organizations in Sunni Arab countries within ISIS governorates or “*wiliyats*”. This may explain why the ISIS linked Sinai terrorists bombed a Russian civilian aircraft. (It is remarkable that Russian authorities refused to acknowledge that their aircraft was downed by ISIS for a number of days after the evidence was presented.)

The main goal of Russian intervention in Syria is to support their ally, the regime of President Bashar Assad. But in pursuit of this goal, Russia must also guarantee the expanded presence of its military bases in Syria and maintain its developing relationship with Iran.

Maxim Trudolyubov of the Kennan Institute tells us that: “Russia, almost surely, will now ramp up its troop deployment in Syria. If the bombing of the plane in the Sinai is officially recognized as terrorism, Russian popular thinking would be as follows: we have to take it as a blow and move on. We are at war and to leave Syria would mean accepting a defeat. We have to uproot and fight the cause of the terrorist threat, which is somewhere in Syria. We have to kill it before it kills us. Russia is eager to go in.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

Thanks to Russia's intervention, the Obama Administration has been pushed to sign an agreement with Russia to “deconflict” the two governments' aerial operations over Syria. The US aerial bombing sortie rate has diminished considerably as a result of Moscow's deployment of air forces in Syria. General

Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently testified: "Thanks to the insertion of Russian and Iranian forces in Syria, Assad's position has become stronger."<sup>xxv</sup>

It would appear that on November 16, 2015, at the G20 meeting in ANTALYA, Turkey, Putin managed to persuade American President Obama to cooperate in Syria on Russian terms. President Obama and President Putin agreed on a broad process for achieving a political resolution to the civil war in Syria. Mr. Obama noted the importance of Russia's military efforts in Syria, with focus on the Islamic State. "Specifically, President Obama and President Putin agreed on the need for a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition, which would be preceded by UN - mediated negotiations between the Syrian opposition and the Assad regime, as well a cease fire if the diplomacy continues," the White House official said.<sup>xxvi</sup>

## Footnotes:

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