

# Getting Russia Right

## *Dispelling Myths from ‘Putin the Mastermind’ to ‘Hybrid War’*

Report by **Allison Carpenter**, written for Euroskop

Vladimir Putin – the man, the myth, the legend – is not what he appears to be. At least, not according to Professor Mark Galeotti, a scholar who has studied both Russia and Putin throughout his career. Specifically, Professor Galeotti focuses on one particular aspect of the current President of Russia; how the West gets him wrong.

Since his first term in office, the cult of personality surrounding President Putin has been “assiduously promoted by the Russian state.” In the West, this has led to the promulgation of the idea that he is some sort of savant “puppet master.” Domestically, the Kremlin has carefully cultivated his image as one of “stability, Russian orthodoxy, and Tsar”-like regality. However, verifiable knowledge about the inner workings of the Russian political elite remains “a gray box.” Essentially, the West does not know who Vladimir Putin is; we only know the reputation that the Russian President wishes to convey about himself.

### *Putin the Man – What He Is, and What He Is Not*

Both critics and compatriots have endlessly discussed President Putin’s early life as a KGB officer. Whether citing his military career as the source of his purported strategic expertise, or blaming it for his often-undemocratic political tactics, the perception that Putin is “master of the spooks” remains in full effect. Through Professor Galeotti’s research, an entirely different portrait of the President has emerged.

The entirety of President Putin’s military career was served “inside the borders of the Warsaw Pact.” He was always a mid-level officer, and so never learned “the process of power-climbing.” Though he was Director of the FSB (Federal Security Service), his leadership approach was “hands-off;” Professor Galeotti attributes this style to his “relative inexperience” at managing a large institution at the time.

Furthermore, there is “no evidence that Putin was ever infused with Marxist-Leninist ideology.” Mr. Galeotti credits his emphasis on stability and conservation of Russian culture to his experience of the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR). In his formative years, President Putin witnessed an attempt at political “change and reform” as a momentous “collapse” of governing institutions, the “marginalization” of Soviet citizens, and social “instability.”

Ultimately, President Putin is a man deeply affected by the pragmatic realities of being a citizen of a country that “went from being a world power to an insignificant state with an economy the size of Italy overnight.” What President “Putin is not, is a master spy” determined to restore the Cold War paradigm in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### *The Inner Workings of the Kremlin*

Though not a “spook” himself, Professor Mark Galeotti asserted that President Putin’s “worldview is shaped by them.” Every day, the President receives three (3) briefings. One is from the FSB, one is from the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR RF), and one is from the Russian Federal Protective Service

(FSO). These briefings detail, respectively, the political, social, and economic interests of domestic citizens, international institutions, and the Russian elites / oligarchs.

This regime is inherently problematic not just because the dependence on unofficial communication leads to increased paranoia about foreign intentions, but also because the internal structure of the Kremlin fosters competition. This competition is intractably fierce when it comes to gaining the President's "attention or favor," and often leads to a system in which spies attempt to have the most up to date, extreme, or salacious information to share with the President. Moreover, the primary rule in this game is to never "bring bad news to the Tsar's table." As a result, the President is primarily informed through unreliable, over-exaggerated, paranoid, and overly optimistic sources.

As a result, the structure of the Kremlin encourages two disturbing trends. First, there is a continuous and "dangerously excessive role of intelligence services," and second, political policy is filtered through the landscape of a "competitive struggle to flatter and alarm."

***"His biggest foreign policy success is his myth." – Professor Mark Galeotti***

This system of favoritism and grassroots-led coalition of policy has had mixed results in foreign relations. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the 2014 Russian incursion into the Donbass and the annexation of Crimea. At the beginning of the conflict, most Russian advisors believed that the West's reaction would be similar to their reaction during the Georgian War of 2008 – strong rhetoric for a short period, with no subsequent punitive policy implemented.

That has not been the case. Rather, it has led to an emerging perception that Russia under President Putin is territorially ambitious. Professor Galeotti wholeheartedly disagrees with this assessment. In his view, "[this expansion] was an exception... even Putin's detractors thought that Crimea was rightfully Russian" territory. Moreover, the domestic reaction in Russia, which has largely been ignored, indicates that most Russians have no interest in being involved in a war abroad. This action, while seen as a dangerous and bold geopolitical maneuver abroad, is seen as a blunder at home. This is particularly apparent in the rapid blame-shifting and institutional purges that occurred soon after the first round of USA and EU sanctions hit Russia.

***Legacy Building and a Post-Putin Russia***

Well into his second Presidential term, many have begun to consider the fate of Russia after the end of Putin's presidency. Moreover, while many assert that while Putin's first presidential term (2000-2008) was "strikingly pragmatic," and that the President was a "necessary evil" to overcome the Soviet legacy, his second term (2012-2024) has largely been preoccupied with attempts to solidify his "place in history." Like most autocrats with sustained reigns, President Putin "has become a caricature of himself."

This has become more apparent over time with the President currently "holding a 67% approval rating," whereas in the "previous decade his average popularity was in the mid-eighty percentiles." More so now than ever, President Putin's perceived "exhaustion with the daily politics of governing Russia is resulting in a mirrored exhaustion of Putin."

Now, Professor Galeotti believes that the "hunt for a successor" has commenced. Presumably, President Putin will seek to find a relatively junior politician with a similar mindset who can be installed without difficulty and without concern of a retroactive coup. The President will more than likely create a ceremonial position for himself from which he can still intervene in politics when he feels it is necessary, but will no longer be bothered with daily bureaucratic issues. The likelihood of finding this perfect person seems quite small, and unfortunately for President Putin, "history will not be kind."

### ***The Role of the West***

For more strategic engagement with Russia in the future, it is imperative that leading Western politicians understand that fundamentally, President Putin is “not trying to existentially export his worldview.” He is concerned only with Russia being perceived as a global power; “perception,” Professor Galeotti argued, “drives reality.” The West is currently going through a “legitimacy crisis” as illiberal populism continues to be a prominent political trend, and is largely convinced that Russia is dangerous and unpredictable.

Right now, Russia is bracing for a political shift as the era of Putin draws to a close – and the West must prepare itself as well. Rather than continue the “inevitable clash of civilizations” mindset so common in political rhetoric today, Western countries must instead prepare themselves for a new Russia, and treat the current Russia with a more realistic understanding of its geopolitical capabilities.

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