

From Russia with love? Not exactly. Vladimir Putin has been in power for 18 years, and remains the dominant political actor in the post-Soviet era. Flickr photo

Vladimir Putin's Potent Recipe for Longevity

Anthony Wilson-Smith

A quarter-century after the demise of the Soviet Union, the early promise of a truly democratic Russia is a distant memory all but obscured by 18 years of Vladimir Putin's increasingly autocratic rule. Former Maclean's Moscow correspondent Anthony Wilson-Smith explains the potent alchemy of mythology, nostalgia and intimidation that keeps Putin in power.

In 1995, the celebrated Russian author Yevgeny Yevtushenko visited Toronto on a book tour. Over lunch, Yevtushenko was asked where he thought his still-torn country was headed—just over three years removed from the dissolution of the former Soviet Union at the end of 1991. In response, he picked up his novel, *Don't Die Before You're Dead*, and thumbed through it until he found the paragraph he wanted. Post-Soviet Russia, he had written, “divided into three countries. One was frightened and wanted to return to yesterday. The second did not yet know what tomorrow would be like, but did not want to return to yesterday. The third was waiting.”

Today, Yevtushenko appears to have been right not just once, but twice. After the erratic post-Soviet leadership of Boris Yeltsin, Russians ended their “waiting” by electing Vladimir Putin as president in 1999. And now, 18 years into Putin’s rule (including a spell where he nominally stepped aside as president for constitutional reasons while ceding little power as prime minister), Russia has in many ways returned to yesterday.

It’s increasingly hard to recall that period in the 1990s during which Russia looked to the West for cooperation and guidance. In place of that, consider this: Canada’s foreign affairs minister, Chrystia Freeland, is barred from entering Russia because of her support of Ukraine and criticism of Moscow arising from the troubled relations between the two countries. Russia has found itself by revisiting many elements of its past, including suspicion toward the West and an unwelcome fondness for acting unilaterally and aggressively in other countries’ spheres. Those paths are led by Putin, the sort of wilful, unblinking and casually ruthless leader that the country has lived with—and often enough, loved—through much of its past.

To many, Putin embodies the slick, cold-eyed villains that are staples of James Bond movies. Those same qualities are among the ones that Russians prefer. They include Putin’s strong nationalism, his well-honed skills as a communicator and shrewd branding of his lone-wolf self. His enthusiasm for blunt talk is accompanied by aggressive action in places ranging from Ukraine across Eastern Europe and into the Middle East. Most recently, there are the allegations—and clear indications—that Russia did all it could in clandestine ways to tilt the United States presidential election toward Donald Trump, even though Trump now seems to have fallen into disfavour around the Kremlin.

At home, Putin is often referred to as *batyushka*—or holy father. In keeping with that, his approval ratings routinely eclipse 80 per cent. His hold on power is helped by the fact that over the years, oppo-

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nents of Putin often end up jailed—or worse—while there have been frequent allegations of voting irregularities in successive elections. That includes the 2016 vote that saw his United Party and other supportive groups resoundingly swept back to power.

But Putin’s popularity isn’t wholly manufactured or reliant only on fear. Surveys by independent pollsters reflect his soaring popularity levels, and those are supported by a wide body of anecdotal evidence. This remains true even as the economy has been in a downward spiral for years as a result of plummeting oil prices, a flawed infrastructure, an overly high percentage of spending devoted to rebuilding the military, and damaging economic sanctions imposed by a disapproving West.

In fact, Putin has shrewdly taken advantage of his country’s diminished status and economic conditions. Outsiders have often underestimated or misread the deep anger and frustration among Russians over the turmoil and hardship wrought by the end of the Soviet system. For Russians, it meant the collapse of a system that sustained them—albeit in bare-bones fashion—from cradle to grave. After its fall, jobs disappeared, pensions vanished, the ruble’s value plunged, and the already threadbare health system collapsed. Some of the most talked-about improvements, such as the growth of private enterprise and the freedom to travel abroad, touched relatively few Russians.

The holes in the old Soviet Union’s economy were apparent well before its final collapse. In some ways, President Mikhail Gorbachev’s policies of *glasnost* (increased openness) and *perestroika* (reform) contributed to his unpopularity: for the first time, Russians could see how poorly they were

living measured against many other countries—and with that knowledge came the freedom to publicly lament their situation. During my three years travelling the USSR as a Moscow-based correspondent, Gorbachev’s unpopularity became more apparent month-by-month. At first, many people equated greater democracy with increased prosperity. When the latter did not arrive alongside the former, they were shocked and felt betrayed.

To some extent, Russians have long accepted hardships in their living conditions so long as there were other compensations. Many became inured to tales of brutality meted out by their leaders. I recall interviewing Second World War veterans in Moscow about their wartime experiences. By then, the media was rife with stories of Joseph Stalin’s indiscriminate jailing and murder of millions of Soviet citizens during his time as leader. But the veterans either didn’t believe or simply dismissed those stories. To them, Stalin remained a hero because he led their country to triumph over Nazi Germany against long odds. Putin understands that sentiment. As he has once observed: “Stalin is the most popular figure in all of Russia.”

Putin is no Stalin, but he similarly understands the importance that Russians place on their standing in the world. Before the collapse of oil prices, it was a common and accurate boast among Russians that Moscow had more billionaires than New York City. Many newly-minted oligarchs were Putin intimates who provided vocal and financial support in his favour.

But Putin has also shown a cheerful willingness to toss those same people aside when convenient. For a classic demonstration, search “Putin Rage”

on Youtube to see a video that appears in various choices of length. It features a 2012 Putin visit to the town of Pikolyovo to investigate cost overruns and delays that were afflicting a large factory and its workers. With cameras conveniently on hand, as well as a strong showing of local residents, Putin summons the factory managers and the owner, the billionaire Oleg Deripaska.

Speaking in a soft voice with his rage nonetheless apparent, he asks several perfunctory questions, denounces the managers and owners as “cockroaches”, and then summons Deripaska to publicly sign a contract committing to get the factory fully moving again. First, Deripaska argues he has already done so; then, recognizing defeat, he slouches forward and signs. As a final touch, Putin lets him get five or six strides away, then snaps: “Give me back my pen!”

Other, similar videos all make for great theatre. Putin, a former KGB station chief, has

no trouble looking genuinely menacing. Couple that with his palpable enjoyment of the perquisites of power, fluency in German (and occasional displays of impressive English proficiency) and you have a leader of whom Russians generally feel proud. Never mind the speculation that Putin has close to a dozen residences in various places, and that his net worth has been estimated at anywhere from \$40-\$70 billion (US). Official Russian government disclosures list his annual salary at \$187,000 (US) or 5.8 million rubles with a total net worth of less than \$500,000 (US).

By rights, Putin should be past his best-before date, done in by an economy that has sputtered too long. The Russian economy shrank by an estimated 3.7 per cent in 2015, and real disposable income fell by 10 per cent. The ruble’s value is now about half what it was at its peak, and the number of poor increased by 3.1 million to 19.2 million in 2015.

But Putin seems likely to remain in power as long as he wants. One con-

cern outside Russia is whether his ambitions include the restoration of the old Soviet Union. He fuelled that speculation in 2010 with a now-famous quote in which he said: “Whoever does not miss the Soviet Union has no heart.” But, he then added: “Whoever wants it back has no brain.”

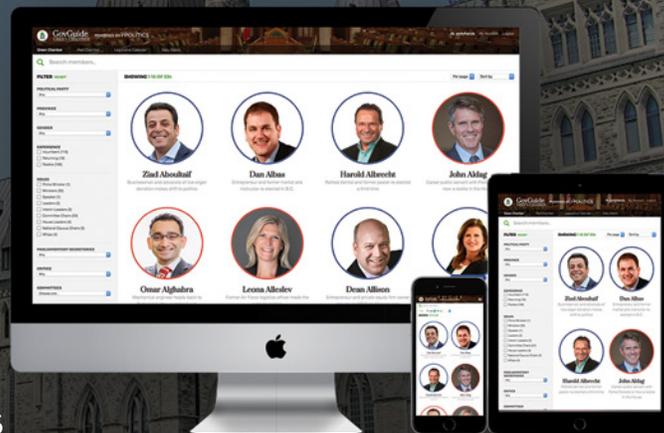
Since then, Putin has insisted that he simply wants to restore Russia’s pride in itself and starring role on the world stage. Russians like that—and it helps that Putin has a knack for the sort of turn of phrase that would make for a great tag line in any Hollywood action movie. Asked once about his view on terrorism, he responded: “We’ll chase terrorists everywhere. If in an airport, then in the airport. If in the toilet, we’ll waste them in the outhouse. Case closed.” As his opponents know too well, he means it. **P**

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