



Putin's Russia

by Lilia Shevtsova
Brookings Institution © 2003
298 pages

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Take-Aways

- Putin's rise to power reflects the Russian citizen's thirst for order and stability.
- To this day, his activities as a KGB colonel in Eastern Europe remain unknown.
- The Duma approved his appointment as prime minister in part because political rivals didn't consider him a serious threat to their ambitions.
- Yeltsin selected him as his successor because he had demonstrated his loyalty.
- Yeltsin and his circle trusted Putin not to persecute them once he came to power.
- Insiders first viewed him as little more than Yeltsin's lackey; they began to fear him as his power increased.
- Putin's support for economic reforms reflects his pragmatism.
- He envisioned a new role for Russia on the world stage, mediating disputes between the U.S. and other countries.
- He instinctively declared his support for the United States in its war on terrorism, the first foreign leader to do so.
- He has given no indication that he is ready to transform Russia's love affair with strong, central, personified power and invigorate its democratic institutions.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
8	4	9	8

Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) The path Vladimir Putin took on his rise to power in Russia; 2) The political forces he had to balance; and 3) How he navigates his on-again, off-again courtship of American power.

Recommendation

Author Lilia Shevtsova gives an authoritative, if undramatic and less than perfectly organized, account of the rise of Vladimir Putin. Boris Yeltsin chose the anonymous, quiet former KGB colonel for one of the world's most powerful jobs, in part because of his loyalty. Putin's clear-eyed pragmatism and his visceral support of George W. Bush's war on terrorism have given Russia otherwise unattainable international significance. Now, will Putin use his power to reform Russia's political institutions and strengthen its framework of democratic governance? This quite readable book goes beyond the headlines and indicates that Russia is still a land of intrigue and mystery, where the only certainty is that there is none. Under that circumstance, Shevtsova has done an admirable job of framing how Russia reached its current state and what historical choices now confront it. The future of Russia is far from set. *getAbstract.com* very highly recommends this book to those who seek a deeper understanding of one of America's staunchest allies in the war on terror.

Abstract

Russia's Role Today Is in One Man's Hands

Russia today has an important role in almost every sphere of international foreign affairs. From Islamic fundamentalism to the war on terror, world security, nuclear materials, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, energy distribution and counterbalancing China, Russia has put itself squarely in the middle of things. Will the Russia-U.S. alliance against terrorism continue? Given that Russia has yet to break through and deconstruct the allure of personified power by fully establishing independent political institutions and the overall rule of law, the answer most likely depends on the leadership of Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin.

In many ways, Putin is where the rivers of yesterday and the streams of tomorrow converge. He is a symbol of both continuity and change. Some Russians see Putin as a link with the past of Boris Yeltsin, while others consider him a sharp departure. In some ways, Putin is clearly different. In his late 40s, he is remarkably young for a Russian leader. He does not play the monarch and, instead, prefers to be viewed as a pragmatic leader and manager. He achieved order within his country and initiated a pro-Western direction in Russia's foreign policy. At the same time, he demonstrates a desire to keep tight control of democratic institutions, and he prefers subordination and order to spontaneity. Putin has become the embodiment of the Russian people's desire for stability.

To understand how a young KBG colonel rose to become the leader of Russia, begin with Dec. 31, 1999. As the country celebrated the New Year, Russia's ailing first president, Boris Yeltsin, shocked the nation with a surprise — but well planned — taped broadcast announcing his retirement. Yeltsin left Putin in charge of the Kremlin, Russia and his own presidential elections. Like the final tipping of the opponent's king in chess, a time-honored Soviet pastime, the final move was anticipated long before the last piece fell into place.

"The new Russian leader Vladimir Putin has become a symbol of a staggering mix of continuity and change."

"The Russian leader has demonstrated a profound mistrust of the key elements of liberal democracy: political pluralism, an independent opposition, and free media."

“The question therefore remains open: When and how will Russia be ready for its major breakthrough: dismantling personified power and establishing independent institutions and the rule of law?”

“President Putin has become an embodiment of this longing for stability and tranquility. He would have never ascended to the top if the country had wanted to continue its revolution.”

“Putin’s epoch is not over, and both the president and Russia may baffle us with their answers to these questions. Putin’s Russia is still an unfinished story.”

Yeltsin had sought a possible successor for years. As his inner circle learned of the search, Yeltsin observed how those around him reacted. When Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin openly considered himself to be the heir apparent in 1997 and 1998, Yeltsin fired him. So the search for a successor also became Yeltsin’s opportunity to purge political opponents from power. Yeltsin appointed Sergei Stephasin as Chernomyrdin’s successor, although Yeltsin later said that even as he nominated Stephasin, he knew he would fire him. Gradually, Yeltsin and his clique came to prefer Vladimir Putin. Yeltsin was enamored of Putin’s quick reflexes, his youthful vigor, his reputation for loyalty and his ready intellect.

Putin’s rise in national politics was unexpected. As a KGB officer, he served in East Germany. His activities there remain unclear. He retired as a colonel, signaling that he had an honorable, but not particularly brilliant, career. He became a close aide of St. Petersburg’s liberal mayor, Anatoly Sobchak, proving himself an effective manager, loyal, faithful, trustworthy, someone who followed the rules. Managerial talent was in short supply in post-Soviet Russia and, when Sobchak lost re-election, Putin moved to Moscow. He jumped up the career ladder when Yeltsin made him director of the FSB, the Federal Security Service.

On Aug. 16, 1999, Yeltsin appointed Putin as prime minister, and the Duma approved. The nomination sailed through in part because no one took Putin seriously. Yeltsin’s more established rivals for power overlooked his significance, a great political blunder. Rather short and hardly good-looking, with intense eyes and an awkward manner in public, Putin was not exactly a charismatic type of leader. The only remarkable thing about him was his love of judo, a discipline that suggested inner strength and, possibly, ambition.

One reason Yeltsin chose Putin is that his circle believed Putin would not turn against them once he achieved power. When Putin’s former boss, Sobchak, was about to be jailed for alleged corruption, Putin had helped him escape to France. This convinced Yeltsin that Putin’s loyalties were not fickle, that Putin, the man with the steely gaze and the quiet manner, was a man to be trusted. Putin came to power completely obligated to Yeltsin for facilitating his rise. Yeltsin’s evaluation of Putin’s sense of loyalty would be rewarded.

A New Era

Putin’s first act following the New Year 2000 celebration was to grant Yeltsin immunity. Now, Yeltsin could not be prosecuted for any wrongdoing during his presidency. His inner circle also was absolved of any responsibility. While many suggested the pardon essentially proved Yeltsin’s malfeasance, the move achieved its desired aim: to enable the existing regime to pass its power along peacefully without fear of recrimination.

Putin’s popularity and inherited power made the outcome of the March 26, 2000, presidential election almost inevitable. The other ten presidential candidates, some long-time Yeltsin rivals, obviously saw that the best they could accomplish was to garner publicity to promote their future endeavors. This was Putin’s election; he had won it before the race even began, partially because the second Chechen war allowed him to play the role of the strong leader, providing the sense of stability that Russians craved. He also proved loyal to Yeltsin, though his stern, serious demeanor was a welcome contrast to Yeltsin’s red-faced ways.

On May 7, the country observed the inauguration of its second post-Soviet president. Now the question for Putin was how he would rule in post-Communist Russia. All of his training taught him to be unambiguous and unyielding. He had to operate politically in

“Looking at Putin — with his plain face, ill-cut clothes, and straightforward, slightly awkward manner — every ordinary Russian could imagine himself president.”

“Post-communism in Russia was obviously not a sharp break with the past — neither pre-Soviet nor fully post-Soviet. Those who understood that and could move in the atmosphere of mixed signals and bow to seemingly incompatible principles had a chance of staying on top.”

“What Russian elites disliked most about the Democrats was their desire to promote democracy and their concern for rights and freedoms. The new ruling team in the Kremlin did not want to be lectured, especially on democracy.”

“President Putin had managed to consolidate all the basic levers of power in his hands.”

a Russia whose culture was rather similar to Soviet-era culture. Yet, Russia had opened the door to democracy and had set itself on a quite different path, one that would lead in new, untested directions.

Putin’s Personality

Putin attained the presidency after just a four-month learning period as prime minister. His new responsibilities, and how he reacted to them, would reveal a lot, including:

- Putin refused to rush when covering unfamiliar ground. Early in his term, he displayed caution, choosing to consolidate his power rather than offer bold new initiatives that might prove divisive. He listened attentively and posed thoughtful questions.
- He had a keen mind for detail. This trait could work against him, however, when it was necessary to make strategic decisions quickly.
- Those who met him described him as practical and smart. He was a quick study and demonstrated an ability to speak clearly and logically.
- Putin was driven to absorb the relevant details of his office, and was extremely hard-working, using his personal energy to try to compensate for the general lack of efficient institutions of democratic governance in the post-Soviet state.
- He was pragmatic, and began to move Russia toward a more market-oriented economy. He broadened his appeal and brought liberals into his government.
- Putin divided people into either friend or foe. He tended to be unforgiving toward those who publicly opposed his policies or questioned his judgment.
- Putin was unimpressed with freedom of the press. He saw criticism of his policies as a challenge to the stability of the state. The persecution, imprisonment and interrogation of Andrei Babitsky — a Radio Liberty reporter who took umbrage with Moscow’s policy on the Chechen rebels — suggested that all traces of Soviet-style repression had not vanished in the new era.
- Putin continued to demonstrate loyalty, if only for practical reasons. For instance, he nominated Yeltsin loyalist Mikhail Kasyanov as prime minister.

Summer Shifts

The summer of 2000 brought Putin many triumphs. He squelched political rivals and fighting oligarchs, put the Duma in his back pocket, cowed the press and weakened the political institutions that failed to support him. On the political stage, he was a tyrannosaurus, unthreatened by anyone. Those who had complained that he was Yeltsin’s political lackey now worried that he would take them boldly in a direction they could not control.

With his base strengthened, Putin gradually turned his attention to international affairs. By mid-1999, Kosovo and NATO enlargement had strained Russia’s relations with the U.S. Russia’s ruling class began to feel that Washington would always oppose its desire to remain among first class world powers. [Russia’s necessary transition](#) to a more realistic world role proved difficult. When President Bill Clinton met Putin in Moscow in June 2000, the Russian nearly returned to Soviet recalcitrance and independence. Putin indicated that he was more interested in waiting for Clinton’s successor than in working with Clinton, putting U.S.-Soviet relations on hold. Russian jets dared to fly over a U.S. aircraft carrier in November 2000. The Russian government supported the move (for example, by decorating the pilots), which they believed signaled their continued strength. George W. Bush’s election relieved many Russians, who felt Clinton had not provided needed economic support. They also believed liberals would upbraid their lack of social liberalism, rather than focus on larger issues.

“By the time Putin came along, it became clear just how tired and disenchanted society had become. Putin was possible because the masses wanted nothing but peace and order.”

“Putin was suggesting a new role for Russia in the world: The imperial bully would become a mediator between the West and the states that created problems for the West.”

Following Bush’s controversial election, the Kremlin tried repeatedly to arrange a meeting between the two leaders. When that finally occurred, the Russians had mixed feelings. It seemed that Moscow was important to Washington only when it was a threat. Now that the threat had passed, Russia was often relegated to the back-burner. Russians also felt ambivalent toward the U.S. On the one hand, the relationship with Washington was practically the only thing that gave Russians the sense of global significance they wanted. However, the Kremlin often resented that it could no longer demand equal treatment as a partner.

When the two men finally met in June of 2001, the visit couldn’t have gone better. Putin and Bush enjoyed a surprisingly warm relationship. “I looked into that man’s eyes and saw that he is direct and trustworthy,” said Bush. “We had a very good dialogue. And I saw his soul.” Clearly, Putin had decided that chilly relations with Washington were contrary to Russia’s interests. Where European leaders were likely to carp, criticize and posture in their U.S. relations, Putin played down differences and focused on his goal: normalizing relations. That was important, considering the momentous historical events around the corner.

September 11, 2001

Putin’s reaction to the terrorist attacks was instinctively, unambiguously to throw his lot in with the U.S. The first foreign leader to phone Bush with encouragement, sympathy and support, Putin uttered the now-famous phrase, “Americans, we are with you!” Those words signaled a new phase in Russian-U.S. relations, as an ally with no strings attached. The response was not rhetorical. Russia began sharing intelligence with the U.S. and introduced U.S. forces to the Northern Alliance. It let the U.S. use military bases in the allied regions of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell called Russia “a key member” of the international coalition against terror. Putin supported Bush’s declaration about the axis of evil, though he might have preferred omitting former Soviet allies.

The Future

Looking ahead, a conflict looms for Russian society. While its institutions have taken a democratic shift, its culture has remained mostly unchanged. A strong, charismatic leader still rules with a tight fist. To America’s benefit, that ruler is a realistic pragmatist who sees capitalism as an ally not an enemy. Russia remains a hierarchical, bureaucratic society. Just beneath the surface, civil institutions and sense of democratic governance remain quite vulnerable. Does Putin have the power and the vision necessary to lead the country through a transformation that de-emphasizes personified power and decentralizes governance? Russia requires a transformation of the autocracy into countervailing institutional pieces, in short, massive political reform. The test of Putin’s Russia is whether it can rise to the challenge.

About The Author

A senior associate in the Carnegie Endowment’s Russian and Eurasian Program, [Lilia Shevtsova](#) divides her time between the organization’s offices in Moscow and Washington, D.C. Shevtsova is one of Russia’s top political analysts and the author of six books. Her journalistic endeavors have won numerous awards, and she serves as a regular commentator for major, global television and radio networks.