

## Introduction

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Even before Vladimir Putin's designation as president-elect of the Russian Federation it was clear that he had very different views of his country and its future than his predecessor and patron, Boris Yeltsin. His KGB background and his ruthless early military actions in Chechnya suggested to some, but certainly not all, Russian and western commentators that he viewed the preservation and advancement of the Russian state itself, and not merely of the citizens of Russia, as the purpose and end of policy.

Rising world oil and gas prices and the swelling inflow of funds to the treasury resulting from those increases enabled him to do just enough for the people to convince a majority of the Russian public that the two ends were compatible and that whatever promoted the state promoted society as well.

Only gradually did Putin's single-minded focus on restoring what he defined as the geographical integrity and honor of the Russian state become evident. And it took yet more time for the world at large to understand how far he was willing to go in pursuit of that end. The inability or reluctance of western and other policymakers, intelligence services, and independent foreign affairs experts to grasp this dedication on Putin's part ranks as an analytic failure of the first rank. Meanwhile, Putin seized the initiative in his military attack on Georgia in 2008, in his multi-dimensional but non-military assault on Kyrgyzstan in 2010, and then in his invasion of Ukraine and seizure of Crimea and other territories in 2014.

Each of these initiatives, and many others that lacked a clear military component, constituted a direct assault on an international system built upon territo-

rial integrity and accepted notions of sovereignty. For a variety of reasons, some arising from good will and others from blunt business interests, the West chose to deal with each of these events individually. Those who insisted on “connecting the dots” were accused of suffering from a hangover from the Cold War and a yearning for a return to the bi-polar politics of yore. In any case, the many Russians and foreign analysts who hypothesized that all these diverse initiatives on Putin’s part arose from a single strategy failed to make their case in a convincing manner.

Nonetheless, events between the invasion of Georgia and the armed seizure of Ukrainian territory in 2014 forced policy makers and international affairs specialists worldwide to acknowledge the possibility that the Russian Republic under Vladimir Putin has reorganized its entire foreign and domestic policy in order to pursue a single objective, namely, the establishment of a new kind of union comprised of former Soviet republics and headed by Russia itself. Even some of those in Europe and America who in 2008 had failed or refused to see that Russia’s invasion of Georgia was not merely a response to that small country’s seeming to thumb its nose at the Kremlin, but an important building block in Putin’s much larger geopolitical edifice. In the end, Putin himself dispelled all doubts on this matter when he attempted first to prop up what he took to be a pro-Moscow government in Kiev, then seized Crimea, and finally invaded Ukraine, first with a motley but well equipped band of irregulars, and then with regular Russian army forces.

Most discussions of Russia’s new course have focused on Putin’s stated intention to redress the consequences of the collapse of the U.S.S.R. in 1991, an event which he called, in an address to the Russian Parliament in 2005, “the major geopolitical disaster of the century.” Some have taken note of his oft-stated dream of a new union of republics that could be built on the same territory as the U.S.S.R., beginning with economic ties and then deepening the “integration” to include politics, security, and culture.

The sources of the disconnect to date between the West’s perception of Putin’s increasingly aggressive military actions and its disinclination or inability to link them directly to any larger strategic goal are not hard to find. To take Putin seriously challenges the assumption that a new Europe could be built mainly on

soft power. In America it meant laying aside the optimistic notion that post-Soviet Russia would be a partner rather than adversary. The disconnect can also be traced in part to a paradoxical aspect of Putin's own approach. He may no longer be a Marxist but in some ways he remains a determinist. He expands grandly on how the "integration" process on former Soviet territories is driven by History itself; he asserts that it is advanced by deep economic and social forces similar to those that built the European Union, and that it is hence inevitable. But at the end of the day, he shows himself to be a doubter. Hence his constant readiness to seize on the slightest sign of indecision or weakness in any of his target countries as an opportunity for Moscow. He seems to be saying that History needs help, and Putin repeatedly casts himself into the role of History's helper, an opportunist *par excellence*, who is prepared to move swiftly when opportunity calls. The West is not prepared for such adroitness.

This same paradox can be seen in the actions, but not the thoughts, of both Marx and Lenin. Marx had predicted an eventual proletarian revolution at some point in the future; Young Lenin, following Marx, assumed the revolution could only occur in a developed bourgeois society. But both showed themselves ready to cast aside all philosophizing about inevitable changes in the distant future the moment they saw an opportunity in the present. This opportunism led Marx to embrace the revolutions of 1848, just as it led Lenin to seize on the possibility of fomenting revolution in still-feudal and certifiably un-bourgeois Russia. Similarly, Putin needs to paint his grand vision as inevitable but in the end he knows its realization depends on him alone and on his tactical focus and speed.

Many have pointed out the similarities between Putin's "new Russian order" and the old Soviet Union, while others have underscored the differences between the Soviet past and Putin's picture of the future. Either way, the very boldness of his dream fully warrants our careful attention. After all, it is extremely rare in history for empires of any sort, once they have collapsed, to be reconstituted under any conceivable terms. No European empire managed to do this, nor did the Holy Roman Empire, Persian Empire, or Alexandrian Empire. In modern times the sole exceptions were the reconstitution of former tsarist territories under Soviet Rule after 1920, and the re-assembling of most of the

territories ruled by Qing China under Mao Zedong in 1949. Both, it should be noted, were achieved only thanks to the very large and well-led armies which both Lenin and Mao had at their disposal.

In other words, history is probably not on Mr. Putin's side, and even Putin appears to suspect this. Only two means of avoiding failure present themselves. Either Mr. Putin must be prepared to use massive military force to build and then maintain his new union of Eurasian states, or he must come up with some entirely new approach to tactics. The fact that Putin showed no hesitation in expanding a brutal war against his own citizens in Chechnya proved early on that he is not one to shy away from military action. The vast expansion of Russia's military budget under Putin and his personal attention to the military sphere, provides further evidence on this point, as did his invasions of Georgia and Ukraine, as well as his attempted militarization of Kyrgyzstan's sector of the Ferghana Valley in 2010.

The second possibility—a fresh approach to the tactics of union-building—does not preclude a heavy reliance on military force. Indeed, the record to date suggests that it requires it. But Putin's important insight on tactics sees the military as but one of more than a dozen distinct spheres in which pressures and incentives can and must be brought to bear to achieve the desired end. These tactical tools are as diverse as energy, transport routes, training, credit and finance, support of kindred groups abroad, information and propaganda, monetary policy, research, immigration policy, labor law, investments, and open-ended payments that are little more than bribes.

Obviously, any state that embraces so many spheres of activity as tactical weapons to be centrally deployed in pursuit of a single and all-embracing national objective is by definition totalitarian. True, it cannot be said that Putin's state imposes itself on every sphere of private life, as did twentieth century totalitarian systems. But his readiness to corral any and all spheres of activities and place them in the service of a single state program that he himself defined is, in a literal sense, totalitarian. This is true even if such a regime enjoys popular support, as has certainly been true in the case of Putin's Russia down to late 2014, or if it allows a degree of freedom to travel or launch private enterprises.

But it is one thing to claim to mobilize these diverse instruments in pursuit of a great national vision and quite another thing to actually make them work effectively. What is most striking and most innovative about Mr. Putin's program is not its unabashed expansionist intent: after all, military rulers have pointed their swords at neighbors since Old Testament days. Rather, it is the seriousness with which he has attempted to coordinate activity in a broad range of seemingly separate spheres so as to provide maximal tactical support for the realization of his national dream.

While Putin uses every opportunity to proclaim his intent of reestablishing Russia as a great power, he is impressively quiet about the complex and carefully integrated tactics he seeks to employ to achieve it.

Western policymakers have been astonishingly slow to accept that Mr. Putin meant what he said about making Russia once more a great power. Tied as they are to reading official pronouncements on their computer screens and to analysts who spend their days parsing similar announcements on *their* computer screens, these same western officials have barely noticed the complex and carefully integrated *tactics* by which Mr. Putin proposes to achieve this goal.

Their oversight, while regrettable, is at least understandable. No official handbook from Moscow sets forth these tactics. Deriving as they do from the kind of analyses the Soviet KGB carried out in the 1970s and 1980s, they are, of course, strictly secret. Yet they can be studied on the basis of the actual record of their use. This is a major objective of the present study.

What cannot be so easily deduced is the formal and institutional process by which the main opportunities of Russian strategy are identified, and the process of decision-making that sets them in motion. Closely related to this are the organizations and organizational processes that define, organize, coordinate, and set in motion the various tactical steps in each concrete situation. Here, too, the reason is obvious: these are matters of the utmost secrecy. Indeed, the entire mechanism by which strategy is translated into tactics in Putin's Russia is protected by the same shield of secrecy that surrounded high tactics in the U.S.S.R.

The one thing that can be asserted beyond doubt is that the process is highly centralized in Putin's own office and that he has been involved in every stage of that process. Putin, a product of the late Soviet KGB, simply assumes that this all a natural and key element of his personal leadership. To compromise tactical secrecy would be to compromise the entire enterprise.

This may appear to be an exaggeration. After all, Putin holds frequent press conferences and responds to more questions from the press, or from people purporting to be the press, than do leaders of many democratic states, including America. He even invites (and pays the way) for journalists and reliable foreign experts from abroad to attend and participate in his annual Valdai meetings, at which he offers candid responses to questions on issues of the day. Yet the inner processes regarding both strategy and tactics remain strictly off limits to outside observers, both foreign and domestic, and definitely beyond the pale of open discussion.

The reason for this is clear. Post-Soviet Russia inherited from the U.S.S.R. a vast bureaucracy, the culture and mentality of which continues to be informed by its experience in the Soviet era. With regard to both priorities and practical policies for their implementation, this bureaucracy—or web of poorly coordinated separate bureaucracies, civil and military—was accustomed to taking its cues from the Communist Party and the State Planning Commission (Gosplan). Had a more democratic regime been established after 1991, elective bodies might have come to play a more active role in both processes. Instead, and increasingly during Putin's decade and a half as president, prime minister, and again, president, all these matters are concentrated solely in his own office. In this respect, Putin's Russia represents a far more personal form of rule than existed in the late Soviet era down to the rise of Gorbachev.

Two conclusions derive from these developments. First, without a single, unified, and coordinated strategy and detailed tactics that are defined and set in motion by a supreme leader, the entire structure of Russian rule would be set adrift. This may not have been the case during the years before 2000, when Boris Yeltsin at least spoke of administrative decentralization and self-government at both the regional and national levels. But it is certainly true today. Without Putin's grand strategy, the country could immediately fall prey to

centrifugal social and economic forces, the existence of which is evident even today. Or so Putin fears.

Putin has had first-hand knowledge of these unpredictable (“*stikhiinii*,” or wild) forces that exist in today’s Russia. He encountered them at first hand while serving under Mayor Sobchak in St. Petersburg, where activists in the newly elected city council brought to naught practically every initiative launched by Putin and his boss. He then watched helplessly as Mayor Sobchak failed at his bid for reelection. Then Putin learned much more about them as he read reports sent to him from field officers during his two-year tenure as head of the Federal Security Service (FSB), successor to the KGB. He concluded that without a “strong hand,” Russia could be enveloped by chaos or democracy, which he considers as synonymous. At the very least, without centrally defined goals and centrally elaborated tactics to achieve them the entire apparatus of government could lose its way and flounder.

Second, and related to the above, Mr. Putin has staked his all on the grand strategy that is the subject of this book, and on the complex web of tactical moves that he has devised to implement the strategy. No part of Russia’s government is unaffected by Putin’s dream and by the many demands that have been placed upon it in the process of implementation. Like a bicyclist, Putin must now either move forward with his program or fall. Mr. Putin shows by his actions that he realizes this full well.

What is unfortunate is that the leaders of Europe and America continue to act as if Russia’s elected president can somehow extricate himself from the web he has created for himself and return to what in their view would be a “constructive” relationship. To repeat endlessly that Mr. Putin’s actions in Georgia, Ukraine, or elsewhere will have “consequences” is simply beside the point. The only consequences Mr. Putin fears, and has reason to fear, is failure.

This book is divided into three sections. The first sets forth the basic character of the Eurasian Union project and the new Russian strategy. Stephen Blank discusses the ideological origins of the project, while Richard Weitz examines the structure of the Customs Union and Eurasian Union. Pavel Baev delves into its relationship with the security sphere, and Richard Pomfret examines the eco-

conomic ramifications of the Union. Finally, a chapter by the editors details the tactics and instruments used by the Kremlin in achieving its aims.

The second section of the book examines the responses of the individual states of the former Soviet Union to Putin's grand strategy. These chapters address the same questions: the expected economic impact of Eurasian Union membership on these countries in comparison to non-membership or integration with alternative structures; the evolution of government policy toward the Eurasian Union; attitudes in society; and the pressure and levers that Moscow has employed or could employ toward these countries.

The eleven countries that are surveyed can roughly be organized, based on their diverging strategies toward Russia's efforts at re-integration, into two groups, the second of which in turn divides into two distinct categories. A first group, including Belarus and Kazakhstan, and increasingly clearly also Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, could be labeled "reluctant followers." While seeking to maintain as much autonomy as possible, these states have all, for varying reasons, concluded that their only option is to join the Eurasian Union, even at the price of compromising their sovereignty. The remaining six countries all oppose membership in the Eurasian Union; but in different ways. One group, including Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia—the "European integrators"—seek deeper ties with the European Union, thus choosing the alternative mechanism of signing Association Agreements and implementing Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements with the EU. Another group, made up of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—the "rejectionists"—simply stay away from any form of integration, seeking instead to become increasingly self-reliant.

The section begins with a chapter by John Daly covering the experience of the two states already members of the Eurasian Union, Belarus and Kazakhstan, which details the beginnings of buyer's remorse in these countries. Armen Grigoryan then provides a critical analysis of Armenia, which suddenly switched tacks in September 2013 to embrace Eurasian Union membership. Next in line are the two small Central Asian states of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, covered by Johan Engvall, both of which have committed in principle to



joining the Eurasian Union, but seek to delay the process and obtain concessions.

James Sherr then studies the fate of Ukraine, arguably the lynchpin of the entire project, concluding it has decisively closed the door to Putin's grand ambitions. Mamuka Tsereteli examines Georgia and Moldova, which have stayed on their course of European Integration. Svante Cornell then delves into Azerbaijan's strategy of eschewing integration with either bloc, and Frederick Starr analyzes the similar strategies of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

The third section examines the policies of three major powers to Putin's grand project. Slavomír Horák studies China's delicate balance, seeking to develop its influence in Central Asia while maintaining an alliance of sorts with Russia. Svante Cornell studies the EU's approach and the development of the Eastern Partnership, concluding Europe is punching below its weight, but that its attraction was a key motivating factor for the acceleration of Putin's project. Finally, Frederick Starr discusses American policies, which have been found wanting in their slow and inadequate response to Putin's project.