



UNISCI Discussion Papers

WHO RULES RUSSIA TODAY? AN ANALYSIS OF VLADIMIR PUTIN AND HIS POLITICAL PROJECT (I)

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1. Introduction

*Yeltsin proclaims at a campaign rally, "Elect me and you'll get a brand-new president."
"What if we don't elect you, Boris Nikolaevich?" asks a voice from the crowd.
"Then you'll get the same old president," Yeltsin replies.²*

In March 2004, a presidential election is expected to be held in Russia, but—in contrast to the same event four years ago—the European non-specialised media and public have paid little attention to it. The difference between both campaigns does not lie in the probabilities about their outcome: having been appointed by Yeltsin as his semi-official successor, Putin was certain to become president in 2000, as he is now to continue for a second term. What happened then is that the Kremlin's candidate was a complete stranger for everyone, from the Western analysts to the Russians themselves; discussion went on for a long time, trying to solve the now topical question of "Who is Mr. Putin?"

That all came to an end with 9/11. Russia's support to the U.S. war in Afghanistan was seen as a litmus test of Putin's intentions, and the "Pro-Western Reformer" paradigm triumphantly emerged among the contending explanations of the president's aims. However, that was not supported by facts from his former career or, more importantly, the rest of policy measures he had been implementing before September 2001. War in Iraq has finally demonstrated that Putin's choice to support the United States was not irreversible.

¹ Las opiniones expresadas en estos artículos son propias de sus autores. Estos artículos no reflejan necesariamente la opinión de UNISCI. The views expressed in these articles are those of the authors. These articles do not necessarily reflect the views of UNISCI

² A popular joke during the 1996 presidential campaign, quoted by Belin, Laura: "Humor of the Political Opposition: Then and Now", *RFE/RL Russian Political Weekly*, Vol. 2, No. 36, 30 October 2002, in <http://www.rferl.org>.



The explanation for such a misinterpretation could be found in the analysts' failure to rely on facts, rather than on official declarations and foreign commentators. As Bennet has wisely pointed out,

Putin's pre-electoral book-interview,³ long, authorized leaks in the media and a film autobiography "Muzhskaya Rabota" were occasionally quoted but not analysed. Western journalists and commentators preferred to rely on anti-Putin, erudite chattering classes in Moscow and St Petersburg and unattributed translations from the Russian press. Their Russian counterparts prematurely switched on their old Soviet auto-censorship mechanism, avoiding profiling Putin in depth. A better look at Putin at this stage would have shown that his background and his early working years could have been a serious drawback in his political career had they been scrutinized earlier [...]⁴

Today, we have not solved yet the enigma that Putin presented in March 2000. In addition to the optimistic, "post-9/11" interpretation, some have warned of a more conflicting foreign policy based on his goal of restoring Russia's position as a "great power". Others have stressed that he owes his job to Yeltsin, which should restrict his ability to implement changes that could affect the privileges of the so-called "Family"⁵; while many have perceived a return to authoritarian methods, based on the slogans "vertical of power" and "dictatorship of law".

This research,⁶ whose results are presented in two separate articles, tries to offer a wider and more accurate view of Putin's role as Russian President, supported by direct evidence. Part One, which is published here,⁷ is focused on his biographical antecedents: the first section deals with his official biographies and their failures; section two presents a detailed analysis of his career in the KGB; section three deals with the start of his political career beside Anatoli Sobchak, and the influence that the mayor of St. Petersburg may have had on him.

Part Two—in the next issue of this journal—will begin with a study of Putin's later career in Moscow, until he became prime minister. Then, we will examine his political project, as stated during his campaign and on his public appearances; and finally, discuss the main interpretations of his role that have appeared in the scholarly literature. Our conclusions want to contribute to the debate about the next, and probably also Putin's term of presidency, addressing the persistent question of "Who Rules Russia Today?"

³ The book mentioned is Gevorkian, Natalia; Timakova, Natalia and Kolesnikov, Andrei (2000): *Ot piervogo litsá: razgovori s Vladimirom Putinim* [In the First Person: Talks with Vladimir Putin]. Moscow, Vagrius. We will refer to it later in this article.

⁴ Bennet, Gordon (2002): *Vladimir Putin and Russia's Special Services*, in <http://www.csrc.ac.uk>.

⁵ Designation for the group of Yeltsin's advisors, aides, and relatives—as his daughter, Tatiana Diachenko,—that greatly influenced political decisions during his presidency.

⁶ The author—who is currently writing his Ph.D. thesis *Russia's Security Policy: Internal Factors and International Relations, 1998-2004*—thanks the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation (AECI), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for awarding him a grant towards a stay in Moscow in August 2003, during which the Russian materials for this study were obtained.

⁷ The second part, "Who Rules Russia Today? An Analysis of Vladimir Putin and His Political Project (II)", will be published in the next issue of *UNISCI Discussion Papers*.



2. Official biographies

*In fact, I have a very simple life [...]*⁸

The first source that may be approached for trying to analyse Putin's project is, of course, his career, from which significant evidence could be obtained about how his ideology and personality were shaped. Therefore, as many Western scholars have done since he became Yeltsin's successor, we should refer in the first place to his widely known official biographies.

However, that kind of information must be carefully contrasted before reaching any conclusion, distinguishing facts from mere political propaganda. In Russia, since the 2000 electoral campaign, the president has been presented by the state-controlled media as a young, energetic, and reliable official (in contrast to Yeltsin's chaotic style of leadership), and his life story been used to reinforce that image in the public. Such a phenomenon, which has gradually become a real "Putinmania", reminds us of the Soviet "cult to personality" and, perhaps, Yeltsin's popularity in 1990-1991.

That is why we consider these biographies to be not only insufficient to assess Putin's performance before becoming Russian president, but also plainly biased when they omit potentially embarrassing facts as, for example, his career in the KGB. All that we learn about his fifteen years in the *organi*⁹, one third of them in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), is his role in the foreign intelligence, with no details about his actual duties or his possible relation to other KGB activities.¹⁰ Therefore, trying to stick to the official data could negatively affect the objectivity of our conclusions.

This becomes evident by examining the very few lines, mainly an enumeration of his political posts since 1990, in which these biographies can be summarized:¹¹

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin was born in Leningrad (now St Petersburg) on 7 October 1952. He obtained a degree in Law at Leningrad State University in 1975 (later, he became Candidate to Doctor in Economic Sciences). After graduating, he was selected by the KGB, where he worked from 1975 to 1990 as a foreign intelligence officer. From 1985 to 1990 he served in the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

In 1990 he returned to Leningrad and became assistant for international affairs to the President¹² of Leningrad State University. Later, he was appointed advisor to the Chairman of the Leningrad City Council. In June 1991, he was promoted to Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Leningrad City Council. After the collapse of the USSR, from 1994 he also served as first deputy mayor of St Petersburg.

⁸ Vladimir Putin, in Gevorkian, Timakova, and Kolesnikov, *op. cit.*, p. 5 (translated by Javier Morales).

⁹ "Organs" (of the State Security). A common Russian designation for the KGB.

¹⁰ See: Morales Hernández, Javier: "Los Servicios de Seguridad e Inteligencia en la Rusia de Putin" [Security and Intelligence Services in Putin's Russia], *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, No. 2 (May 2003), in <http://www.ucm.es/info/unisci>, pp. 2-3.

¹¹ Our sources here are the Russian Presidency's website and the Ministry of Defence's *Military Encyclopaedic Dictionary*. Substantial data in other official biographies are almost identical to these examples. See: *Biografiya / Biography* [Russian and English versions], in <http://www.president.kremlin.ru>; Ministerstvo Oborony Rossiyskoy Federatsii, Institut Voennoy Istorii (2002): "Putin, Vladimir Vladimirovich", in *Voyenniy Entsiklopedicheskiy Slovar* [Military Encyclopaedic Dictionary]. Moscow, Bolshaya Rossiyskaya Entsiklopediya / Ripol Klassik.

¹² Other sources say "assistant to the Vice-President for International Affairs of LGU".



In August 1996, he moved to Moscow as deputy head of President Yeltsin's Secretariat.¹³ From March 1997, he worked as deputy head of the Presidential Administration, head of the President's Main Control Directorate.¹⁴ In May 1998 he was appointed first deputy head of the Presidential Administration. Two months later, he became Director of the Federal Security Service (FSB). From March 1999, he also served as Secretary of the Security Council.

In August 1999, he was appointed first Vice-President, and then President of the Government.¹⁵ On 31 December 1999, after Yeltsin's resignation, he became acting President. He was elected President of the Russian Federation on 26 March 2000; inaugurated on 7 May 2000.

There are, as we have said, many missing points in this story. First, we find three out of four paragraphs devoted to Putin's career since 1990, while his fifteen years in the KGB are described in only two sentences. Furthermore, no explanation is given for the KGB's interest in recruiting him, nor for his reason for leaving the organization for an uncertain political career when he was still in his thirties. We will address each of these points in the following section.

3. The Missing Years: KGB, 1975-1990

All decent people have started [their career] in the intelligence. Me, too.¹⁶

Where Putin has most extensively talk about his past in the *organi* is a series of six interviews published in the form of a book in 2000,¹⁷ just before the election in which he became president. There he made an unusually personal account of his own life, talking to the journalists in a relaxed, "without jacket" environment.¹⁸ In this fashion, he may have consciously tried to distance himself from his image as Yeltsin's "grey cardinal" in the eyes of Russian voters. This suspicion is increased after knowing that, despite the detailed picture that the book presents and the sometimes embarrassing nature of the questions, the Kremlin has recently included its full text in their official website.¹⁹

The first conclusion we can draw out is that it was not ideology, but more likely idealism or romanticism, what first convinced Putin of applying for the KGB. As a schoolboy, he even went to its Leningrad headquarters to inform himself of the requirements for joining the organization,²⁰ so it all started as a teenager's, not an indoctrinated communist's decision. For Putin's generation, already raised in the Khrushchov era, the KGB (with a little help from

¹³ We have preferred to translate certain designations from the Kremlin's website in Russian, instead of taking them as they appear in its English version. See *Biografiya / Biography, op. cit.*

¹⁴ See the previous footnote.

¹⁵ Official designation for the Russian prime minister.

¹⁶ Henry Kissinger, former U.S. National Security Advisor, in a conversation with Putin (who was already working at the St. Petersburg City Council), after knowing that he had served in the Soviet foreign intelligence. Quoted by Putin in Gevorkian, Timakova, and Kolesnikov, *op. cit.*, p. 73 (translated by Javier Morales).

¹⁷ Gevorkian, Timakova, and Kolesnikov, *op. cit.* Other books, as the one by the journalist Leonid Mlechin, are also based on that source for their chapters about Putin. See Mlechin, Leonid M. (2002): *Kreml. Prezidenti Rossii: Strategia Vlasti ot B. N. Yeltsina do V. V. Putina* [Kremlin. Presidents of Russia: Power's Strategy from B. N. Yeltsin to V. V. Putin]. Moscow, Tsentrpoligraf.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁹ See: *Kniga "Ot piervogo litsá..."* [Book "In the First Person..."], in <http://www.president.kremlin.ru>.

²⁰ Gevorkian, Timakova, and Kolesnikov, *op. cit.*, p. 25.



propaganda) could be identified with adventures against foreign enemies, rather than with internal repression and mass executions. Those were the years of “de-Stalinization”, and, as Bennet explains,²¹ there were few dreams available for a Soviet boy as exciting as that of becoming *razvedchik*, spy. In a society that glorified intelligence officers together with cosmonauts, scientists, sportsmen and other state heroes, and considering Putin’s age at the time when he made up his mind, this cannot be interpreted as an ideologically motivated decision; it is more likely that he simply became interested by watching films as *Podvig Razvedchika* [The Spy’s Exploit], his favourite one.²² Putin himself acknowledges that “my notions about the KGB were based on romantic stories about the spies’ work”.²³

However, even if it was not a mature decision, Putin really had a true and clearly defined vocation. The best evidence for this is that he carefully planned how to be accepted in the KGB: his brief interview with an official at the Leningrad headquarters made a deep impression on him, that had two important consequences for his immediate plans. First, being told that he needed a university degree before joining the *organi*, and that the most appropriate was Law, he chose to enter that faculty. Secondly, as the other reason for not accepting him then (apart, of course, from his age) was that, in the officer’s words, “we do not take people on their own initiative,”²⁴ he consciously tried during all his university years to attract the KGB recruiters’ attention—and his strategy worked.²⁵

The second point of concern for us refers to his actual duties in the *organi*. As it is known, the KGB was in charge of a wide range of activities, from the repression of political dissidence to the protection of the state borders, intelligence collection in foreign countries or satellite imagery; and it is still not clear in which of them Putin was engaged during his fifteen years’ service.²⁶ It is crucial for us to determine that, because the possibility of Putin’s participation in political repression could greatly undermine his democratic credibility. There are mainly two views on this issue.

In Russia, Putin is predominantly believed to have only served in the KGB’s foreign intelligence directorate, as we have read in the first section of this article.²⁷ On the other hand, some authors consider that he fulfilled counterintelligence duties: “Putin’s career pattern indicates that he must have been sent to one of the counterintelligence schools, most probably in Minsk, the KGB school which catered mainly for the employees of the Second Main Directorate [...]”²⁸ So, according to this version, he did not belong to the KGB’s First Main Directorate (the foreign intelligence service), but to the Second, responsible for counterintelligence and internal security, which maintained the network of informers and also

²¹ Bennet, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²³ Gevorkian, Timakova, and Kolesnikov, *op. cit.*, p. 39 (translated by Javier Morales).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25 (translated by Javier Morales).

²⁵ When he was in his fourth year at the university, the KGB finally contacted Putin and offered him to join the organization after his graduation. See: Gevorkian, Timakova, and Kolesnikov, *op. cit.*, p. 38,

²⁶ Although we briefly dealt with this issue in a previous article (in Spanish), here we will complement it with new sources and Putin’s own account and perceptions. See: Morales Hernández, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-3; and specially Bennet, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6. General descriptions of the KGB history and structure are: Andrew, Christopher and Gordievsky, Oleg (1991): *KGB: The Inside Story of its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev*. London, Hodder & Stoughton; Waller, J. Michael (1994): *Secret Empire: The KGB in Russia Today*. Boulder, Westview Press.

²⁷ *Biografiya / Biography*, *op. cit.*; Ministerstvo Oborony Rossiyskoy Federatsii, *op. cit.*

²⁸ Bennet, *op. cit.*, p. 6.



fought organized crime and drug trafficking.²⁹ All these areas were conducted in the territory of the USSR, so this would be a contradiction with Putin's period of service in the GDR. However, Bennet argues, in that period he may have worked in the First Main Directorate's counterintelligence department based in Eastern Germany, or perhaps acted as a liaison officer with the local security services.³⁰

Putin has partially answered to this questions in the book *Ot piervogo litsa*, where he tells that after joining the KGB he was assigned to its Leningrad local directorate. His first task was an administrative one, at the directorate's secretariat, and then at its counterintelligence unit: ³¹ an uninteresting, bureaucratic work, he says. However, probably because Putin's superiors carefully studied his psychological profile, after only five months he started an intensive retraining course for "operational staff"³² in Leningrad, which lasted for half a year.

His performance seemed to attract the attention of the foreign intelligence directorate, who contacted him when he returned to his former office. Working as a "spy" was all Putin had desired from his childhood; entering the First Directorate was also a promotion, for its members were regarded as "white collars" inside the organization (in part because they could travel and live in the West, an inaccessible privilege for most Soviet citizens). So he accepted, and—at the end of the 70's, with the rank of major—he went to Moscow for another special course, where he spent a year.³³

During the following months, Putin worked again in Leningrad, but now at the so-called First Section (*Piervy Otdel*), a subdivision of the First Main Directorate with offices in the main cities of the Soviet Union.³⁴ There he worked for four years and a half, and then returned to Moscow for attending the Red Flag Institute "Yuri V. Andropov".³⁵ Due to his knowledge of German, he was trained to work either in Western or Eastern Germany; but before going to the West, it was required to spend some years at the Directorate's headquarters. So, wanting to start soon, he chose the GDR.³⁶

In Dresden, his only foreign destination, he and his family lived for five years. Being a socialist country, the KGB acted openly in the GDR, which for their purposes could be considered a "province" of the Soviet Union.³⁷ According to Putin's own account, he worked in a "political intelligence line", which recruited informers and collected data about public

²⁹ Waller, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

³⁰ Bennet, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

³¹ Gevorkian, Timakova, and Kolesnikov, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³⁴ According to the CIDOB Foundation's biography, that "First Section" had nothing to do with the First Main Directorate, and is described as a recruiting office. However, what Putin says is precisely the opposite: "After that, I returned again to Leningrad, [and] continued working there [...] in the First Section. The First Main Directorate was the espionage. That directorate had offices in the big cities of the [Soviet] Union, Leningrad included. There I continued working [...]" See Gevorkian, Timakova, and Kolesnikov, *op. cit.*, p. 47 (translated by Javier Morales); and Fundació CIDOB (2001): *Biografias de líderes políticos CIDOB: Vladimir Putin* [CIDOB Political Leaders' Biographies: Vladimir Putin], in <http://www.cidob.org>.

³⁵ The Institute was the training centre of the KGB's First Main Directorate. Now, it is the Foreign Intelligence Service (*Sluzhba Vneshney Razvedki*, SVR) Academy.

³⁶ Gevorkian, Timakova, and Kolesnikov, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

³⁷ The collaboration between the KGB and their German counterparts was so close that even Putin and his family lived in a building which belonged to the local State Security Service (*Staats Sicherheitsdienst* or "Stasi"). See Liudmila Putina's declarations in Gevorkian, Timakova, and Kolesnikov, *op. cit.*, p. 62.



officers and the activities of potential opponents—the most important of which were, of course, NATO countries. Their areas of interest included Western political parties, leaders and tendencies inside them, the government—especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—, their policies and relations to other countries, and so on.³⁸ Nonetheless, they apparently did not travel to the other side of the iron curtain; at least, Putin says that he never went to Western Germany in that period.³⁹

Nonetheless, some dark points continue to be present in this story. Although it is very clear that Putin was transferred to the First Main Directorate from his former position, what was exactly *that* position? The Leningrad local KGB directorate seems to have been divided into several sections: the First, for example, was dependent to the First Main Directorate. So, in which section did Putin work at first? In the counterintelligence unit, which was probably also subordinate to the Second Main Directorate.⁴⁰ Here lies the problem: even if the Second did not work on political repression itself—which at that time was the Fifth Directorate's job,⁴¹—the network of informers that it controlled was certainly used to detect and monitor dissidents. Putin may have not taken part in that, and worked only against foreign agents; but both functions were exercised by the same department. What is more: some suggest that his knowledge of foreign languages were not enough at that time to perform counterintelligence tasks, so he was more likely to be in charge of monitoring Soviet citizens.

From this point of view, we can understand as well why—according to Putin's words—he was not apparently sent to any KGB academy after entering the organization, which is very improbable. He may want to keep secret the basic training he received, because it could be directly related to politically compromising functions.⁴² This explains why he gave so little information about his first tasks as a KGB agent in the pre-electoral interviews we have referred to, and leaves open the question about his participation in a less “heroic” area than foreign intelligence.

When he is asked about the KGB's role as a political police, Putin says that he “did not think [about repression] at all”, and even “did not know” about it. He argues that, when he entered the organization, he was still leaded by that romantic feeling from his youth about the spy's job, mixed with the patriotic indoctrination that every Soviet citizen had went through.⁴³ However, although this explanation could be enough for his early vocation, it is not credible that in the years that followed he did not pay any attention to the moral problem which was implied. That is, even if he only fulfilled counterintelligence and then foreign intelligence tasks, he was part of a wider organization directly responsible for the worst crimes in Soviet

³⁸ Putin denies that he worked on technical intelligence collection, for which another “line” was responsible. See: Gevorkian, Timakova, and Kolesnikov, *op. cit.*, p. 66; Fundació CIDOB, *op. cit.*

³⁹ Gevorkian, Timakova, and Kolesnikov, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

⁴⁰ Which, as we have said, was responsible for counterintelligence and internal security.

⁴¹ See Waller, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁴² If the Second Directorate was his initial destination, he should have attended a course in a Counterintelligence School, probably in Minsk. See Bennet, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6.

⁴³ Gevorkian, Timakova, and Kolesnikov, *op. cit.*, p. 39.



history.⁴⁴ What answer, if any, did he find? As Mlechin reminds, “he did not know what he did not want to know [...]”⁴⁵

4. From Intelligence to Politics: St. Petersburg, 1990-1996

*I had already understood that that system [the USSR] had no future.*⁴⁶

The end for Putin’s career as an intelligence officer started with the fall of Berlin Wall: he feared that the Communist regime could also collapse in his country, and “sitting inside the system and waiting for its dissolution... It is very hard.”⁴⁷ In 1990, when he returned to the Soviet Union, he arrived to a country that had changed, and where “serving in the KGB no longer caused envy”.⁴⁸ So he asked to be transferred to the KGB’s active reserve, and decided to seek new opportunities outside the *organi*: he started writing a dissertation for the degree of Candidate to Doctor (*kandidat nauk*) at Leningrad State University (LGU), while at the same time was looking for a job there. He succeeded very soon, becoming assistant for International Affairs to the President of LGU.⁴⁹

There, always by his own account, he met some old friends from the Faculty of Law that had become professors, and one of them offered him to join the team of Anatoli Sobchak—a lawyer who had previously taught at LGU, and had recently been appointed mayor of Leningrad.⁵⁰ Although Putin did not know him personally, apart from the courses he attended as a student, it seems that one of Sobchak’s former colleagues thought that Putin’s experience could be useful in the City Council.⁵¹

Sobchak was Putin’s initiator in politics, so he probably had an important influence on the Russian president.⁵² He was an example of how many clever Party members decided to support *perestroika*, and later democracy, when the USSR was living its last moments: in 1990—ironically, only two years after having joined the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU),—Sobchak already declared that “Marxism is condemned by History, the future of Communism in Russia is announced; the Communist Party is disappearing from the political scene.”⁵³ As one of the most active members of the Congress of People’s Deputies, he took part in favour of Gorbachev against the most conservative sectors led by Yegor Ligachov: for example, accusing the latter of ordering the troops to fire against Georgian nationalist demonstrators in Tbilisi, 19 of which were killed.⁵⁴

⁴⁴ It is important to bear in mind that when he eagerly accepted the KGB’s offer, he still did not know in which directorate he would work. See Gevorkian, Timakova, and Kolesnikov, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

⁴⁵ Mlechin, Leonid M. (2002): *Kreml. Prezidenti Rossii: Strategia Vlasti ot B. N. Yeltsina do V. V. Putina* [Kremlin. Presidents of Russia: Power’s Strategy from B. N. Yeltsin to V. V. Putin]. Moscow, Tsentrpoligraf, p. 30.

⁴⁶ Vladimir Putin, in Gevorkian, Timakova, and Kolesnikov, p. 75.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Mlechin, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

⁴⁹ Gevorkian, Timakova, and Kolesnikov, *op. cit.*, p. 77. See also footnote 11.

⁵⁰ His official designation was then “chairman of the Leningrad City *Soviet* (Council)”.

⁵¹ Putin’s service in the KGB should have been a serious disadvantage, because Sobchak was openly opposed to the power of the security organs. According to Putin’s account, although Sobchak reacted with suspicion when he knew about his former job, he accepted him because he urgently needed a personal assistant.

⁵² Sobchak died in February 2000.

⁵³ In *Novaya Gazeta*, 16 June 1997; quoted by Poch-de-Feliu, Rafael (2003): *La gran transición: Rusia, 1985-2002* [The Great Transition: Russia, 1985-2002]. Barcelona, Crítica, p. 74.

⁵⁴ Poch-de-Feliu, *op. cit.*, pp. 82-83.



Nonetheless, Sobchak realized that also Gorbachev's days were coming to their end; from then on, his career would be linked to Yeltsin's. In June 1991, he changed his old title—"chairman of the Leningrad *Soviet*"—for that of a democratically elected mayor, by winning the local elections held together with those in which Yeltsin became president of the Russian republic.⁵⁵ "We are witnessing the agony of the Communist regime", he said three months later, in a press conference on the first night of the failed *coup d'état*.

But, as Yeltsin himself and many of the politicians that joined his rise to power, his democratic credentials were not as true as it could be supposed. Despite their populist declarations, they did not hesitate to use authoritarian methods to achieve their aims; which is not surprising, taking into account that they had spent all their political career inside the Soviet system. What happened later was only a substitution of the Marxist-Leninist ideology for the "democratic" one as the official state doctrine, but according to a very particular definition of democracy. As the liberal Grigori Yavlinski denounced,

in Russia a democrat is, in the first place, a person who supports an unlimited concentration of power in the hands of president Yeltsin. Secondly, a democrat is a person who [...] fights budget deficit. All other people who have a wider concept of democracy are not considered democrats.⁵⁶

It was clear soon that Sobchak did not accept other aspects of democracy, and in practise ruled in an authoritarian fashion because that permitted him to implement the planned reforms without contestation.⁵⁷ Of course, freedom of speech was not very helpful to his projects, and the new mayor repeatedly showed his indignation at every criticism of him.⁵⁸ After August 1991, his powers were even reinforced by Yeltsin, by dissolving the Leningrad and Moscow local parliaments.⁵⁹

Putin's new position beside Sobchak clearly came up to his expectations: a political career could be the job he had been looking for, so he resigned from the KGB's reserve to concentrate himself on his new duties. Here we can see a further evidence of his accurate perception of the historical circumstances he was living in: success would no longer depend from serving in the state bureaucracy, in which the security organs or the CPSU were included, but from new sources of legitimacy that were introduced by *perestroika* and *glasnost*. Sobchak, as Gavriil Popov in Moscow and the "Democratic Russia" movement, contributed to the collapse of the USSR by supporting Yeltsin's rise to power; and by doing so, they assured themselves and their collaborators—Putin among them—a place in the new political system.

5. Conclusions

The first conclusion after this brief summary of Putin's career before arriving to Moscow is that his image has been constructed by the media: it is not easy to distinguish between what he really thought and did, and what he tells his audience when he speaks about his past. The fact that he allowed the journalists to ask him about his whole life for *Ot piervogo litsa* does not mean that he wanted to increase transparency between him and the Russians: being released just before the elections, the book could be considered a calculated work of public relations, for a presidential candidate that had only three months to become known to his voters. As we

⁵⁵ Poch-de-Feliu, *op. cit.*, pp. 214, 248-249.

⁵⁶ Quoted by Poch-de-Feliu, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

⁵⁷ Poch-de-Feliu, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

⁵⁸ Taibo, Carlos (2000): *La explosión soviética* [The Soviet explosion]. Madrid, Espasa Calpe, pp. 170, 309.

⁵⁹ Poch-de-Feliu, *op. cit.*, p. 249.



have seen, his answers are always well thought and balanced, not to contradict the impression he wants to create in the readers; and even potentially embarrassing points have been conveniently omitted.

On the whole, Putin's ability to adapt himself to the circumstances, while he continues sticking to his objectives, could be considered the key to understanding him. He is persistent in pursuing his goals, as he proved when he succeeded in being accepted by the KGB; he also makes plans for the long term, as when he chose his university degree or, twenty years later, decided to leave the Soviet intelligence. But his strength of will is combined with an ability to make a cold reasoning, and change the means he employs when the situation demands it. He was clever enough to realize that to survive to the collapse of the USSR he had to leave the KGB to serve the new political elites; and not only he was not affected by the dissolution of his former agency, but was successively promoted as the post-Soviet regime evolved.

However, we do not find that Putin ever believed in democracy, neither as a KGB agent nor later in St. Petersburg. He does not seem to reject the role that the *organi* played in the USSR, and is even proud of having served in them: his only reason for his resignation was a purely pragmatic one, the uncertainty about his future. Furthermore, he first worked in politics beside Sobchak, whose authoritarian style—even if he was compromised with the opposition to the Soviet regime—seems to have been adopted by Putin on his relations to the independent media and opposition.

These contradicting features can explain the confusion that still persists among the analysts, who have produced a wide range of interpretations of Putin's ideology and political project. Five of them—"Yeltsin's Heir", "Neo-Authoritarian", "Nostalgic for the Great Power", "Pro-Western Reformer", and "Pragmatic"—, together with the evolution of his career from 1996, will be discussed in the next part of this article.

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