



# UNISCI Discussion Papers

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

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### Introduction

This is the second part of an article that appeared in the previous issue of this journal.<sup>2</sup> There we dealt with the first years of Putin's career, concluding that there are many missing points in the official accounts of his service as a KGB officer. We also referred to his transition to politics beside Anatoli Sobchak, in the last months before the Soviet Union collapsed.

Here, in section one, we are going to consider his positions at Yeltsin's administration, and later at the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Security Council, and the cabinet. In section two, we will analyze the main ideas in Putin's political program, as outlined in the 2000 presidential campaign. Finally, in section three, we will see how this project has been put into practice, contrasting several explanations of the president's aims and decisions that have been suggested by the media and the scholarly literature.

### 1. Putin's Career beside Yeltsin

In 1995, before the general elections, Putin was appointed St. Petersburg leader of the "Our Home is Russia" (NDR) party, the pro-Kremlin political force headed by prime minister Viktor Chernomirdin. The winner was the Communist Party (KPRF), while NDR obtained even less votes than its predecessor, "Russia's Option", had two years before.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, Putin was judged to be a talented organizer despite the poor results: after Sobchak – whose campaign had also been directed by him – lost the local elections in 1996, he found a new job at the President's Administration in Moscow.

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<sup>1</sup> 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

<sup>2</sup> See: Morales Hernández, Javier: "Who Rules Russia Today?: An Analysis of Vladimir Putin and his Political Project (I)", *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, No. 3 (October 2003), in <http://www.ucm.es/info/unisci>.

<sup>3</sup> Fundació CIDOB (2001): *Biografías de líderes políticos CIDOB: Vladimir Putin* [CIDOB Political Leaders' Biographies: Vladimir Putin], in <http://www.cidob.org>.



Putin's "great leap" to high politics had not occurred yet. His tasks were at first mainly bureaucratic, as dealing with the Kremlin officials' cars and residences.<sup>4</sup> However, under the authority of his immediate chief Pavel Borodin and the Administration's chief Anatoli Chubais, he was appointed head of the Main Control Directorate – the Administration's main department – only seven months after his arrival. Probably, a liberal as Chubais trusted a man who had helped Sobchak in St. Petersburg; this may have probably been the cause of recruiting Putin in the first place. The importance of personal relations in Yeltsin's entourage was such that Putin was made first deputy head of the Administration when he had been living in Moscow for less than two years.

This last appointment proved that he had also managed to obtain the president's trust: since then, Yeltsin would resort to Putin for key posts as FSB Director and secretary of the Security Council, so it was only natural for the public opinion that he eventually became head of the government. The "leap" had been accomplished. Let us explain it with more detail.

We could ask whether Yeltsin already thought that Putin was going to be his successor when he made him prime minister. After the brief period of Sergei Stepashin, Putin was considered by the public opinion another provisional head of the government; interestingly, the third in a row who came from the security organs. The rationale behind that was that he could provide the Kremlin with the necessary stability to keep an ill president in power until the March 2000 elections: if things got worse, he could make use of his former agency to protect Yeltsin.<sup>5</sup>

The last period of Yeltsin's presidency had been characterized by the ruling of the "Family", leaded by the president's daughter Tatyana Diachenko.<sup>6</sup> The triangle formed by the Kremlin circle, the economic tycoons known as the "oligarchs" and the huge state bureaucracy did not want to give up power to anyone who threatened their privileges. Yevgeny Primakov, former Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) director and prime minister, had made the mistake of trying to pave his own way to the Russian presidency without the Family's approval: after declaring a war against corruption and replacing many high bureaucrats with his own people, he had been dismissed by Yeltsin – probably, following his daughter's advice – and replaced by the unknown Stepashin.

At the same time, the pressure of time was being felt in the Kremlin, because the danger of such a popular figure as Primakov was not eliminated yet. He and the Moscow mayor, Yuri Luzhkov, were the preferred candidates for the elections;<sup>7</sup> lacking a choice of their own, the Family and Yelstin himself were exposed to revenge from the next president.<sup>8</sup> Which were the qualities they required from a successor? The most important one was not experience, nor preparation, but loyalty. It should be someone whom they could trust to the extent that they could put their futures in his hands; they had to be sure that he would not betray them, even after the election.

And Putin had this quality in the utmost degree. After loosing his job as St. Petersburg mayor, Sobchak had been charged with abuse of power and corruption, but managed to leave

<sup>4</sup> Fundació CIDOB, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> Shevtsova, Lilia (2003): *Putin's Russia*. Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 26-28.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> This could take the form of a criminal prosecution for corruption and illegal enrichment during their years in the Kremlin. The Mabetex scandal was a precedent for this.



Russia and get to Paris undetected by the security organs: Putin's hand as a former KGB colonel may well have been behind his escape.<sup>9</sup> Later, when Sobchak passed away, he did not hesitate to appear in his funeral and publicly showing his sorrow at his political godfather's death.

In the case of Yeltsin, Putin's debt was even greater, so he could be expected to behave in a similar way with him:

The most important argument in Vladimir Putin's favor as Yeltsin's successor was that he was completely obligated to Yeltsin for his advancement. Putin had nothing of his own – no supporters, no charisma, no ideology, no popularity, no experience – nothing that made him an independent figure. He had been created by the people around Yeltsin; naturally they expected gratitude and allegiance from him.<sup>10</sup>

## **2. A New Political Project?**

Since he became prime minister, a new ruling style appeared on stage: Putin's tough stand on the Chechen conflict was the main reason behind the high approval rate he obtained. As Putin himself said, Chechnya "had become occupied by the criminal world... We had just to meet these bandits in open confrontation... We had to take the initiative and smash the enemy in the enemy's own field".<sup>11</sup>

The guerrilla raid into the territory of Dagestan by the forces of Shamil Basayev – which eventually started the second Chechnya war –, and the series of terrorist blasts in Moscow and other cities attributed by the Kremlin to the rebel forces, could not have happened in a better moment for the interests of the prime minister. There is still much discussion, however, about the passive attitude of the Russian forces towards Basayev's troops on their way to Dagestan; or the reason why the Chechens changed their tactics – until then, guerrilla warfare and kidnapping – to bombing the civil population. If the Kremlin was not implicated in any of them, it cannot be denied that the benefits for them far outweighed the losses.<sup>12</sup>

But, if Putin's image was new in contrast to Yeltsin's chaotic and weak leadership style, were his ideas, his political project, also "new"? They did not need to be so. As the year 2000 began, most Russians – as well as Westerners – were ready to support anybody who could turn the country into a more stable and predictable environment. Revolutionary changes, as the economic "shock therapy" of the early 1990s, were no longer acceptable; on the contrary, Putin's most attractive feature for Russians was that he promised to correct the failures of the painful transition.

Secondly, Yeltsin had made things much easier for his appointed successor by resigning the last day of 1999. On the one hand, Putin could spend the campaign as acting president, which obviously gave him the opportunity to show himself on the media as if he had already

<sup>9</sup> Shevtsova, op. cit., p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> Putin, Vladimir V. (2000): *Otkrytoe pismo Vladimira Putina k rossiyskim izboratelyam* [English translation: *Open Letter by Vladimir Putin to Russian Voters*, in <http://www.vladimir-putin.ru>.]

<sup>12</sup> The change in Russian public opinion towards the Chechen conflict was mainly due to this campaign of terrorist attacks. If the first Chechnya war had lacked public support, the second one started with the Russians rallied around Putin and his promises of an end to terrorism.



been elected: it would be more difficult for Russians to vote for another candidate after getting used to see Putin in the Kremlin. The unrestrained use of state-controlled TV channels for this purpose was not a new idea in Russia. On the other hand, Yeltsin understood that keeping himself on the stage before the elections could damage, more than help, his candidate: people would associate Putin to the unreliable president who had appointed him, therefore loosing their hopes.<sup>13</sup>

The acting president did not do anything to spoil that carefully crafted image, for he did not even organize a traditional political campaign. As a candidate, Putin preferred to send a message that the conception of politics as a struggle for power between contending options was being replaced by that of an un-ideological management of the country to solve the citizen's problems: "I am convinced that the defining feature of the new century will not be a battle of ideologies, but a sharp competition over the quality of life, national wealth and progress".<sup>14</sup>

The only document we can consider to be his "political program" is an open letter to the voters that he published before the elections.<sup>15</sup> There, he did not make any specific compromise, but presented only general ideas which he intended to put into practice when he became president. The main argument in it is that Russia should confront the challenges facing it with decisive measures; an example for this, he argues, is the start of a new war in Chechnya.

National priorities, as defined in the document, are:

- **To establish the rule of law.** Corporate or private interests, as the oligarchs, will no longer be granted special privileges. "Democracy – this is a dictatorship of law..."<sup>16</sup> However, he assures, it does not imply a dictatorship of those who govern.
- **To reawaken "national dignity".** "Russia long ago ceased to be a truncated map of the Soviet Union; it is a self-confident power with an excellent future and a great people"... "Russia has ceased to be an empire but it has not dissipated its potential as a great power"... "A strong Russia should not be feared but has to be reckoned with. Offending us will cost one dearly".<sup>17</sup>
- **To achieve economic recovery,** eliminating poverty and economic crime. "Russia is a rich country of poor people"... "There is not, nor can there be a superpower where weakness and poverty reign"... "It is only the real interests of the country, meaning economic interests, which must be the guiding principle for Russian diplomats".<sup>18</sup>

Have these aims been advanced during Putin's first term? In the following section we will compare them with his actual policies, drawing a picture of the Russian president in contrast to the interpretations suggested by the analysts.

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<sup>13</sup> See: McFaul, Michael: "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (July 2000), p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> Putin, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



### 3. Contending Interpretations

KGB apparatchik, authoritarian, reactionary, statist, advocate of law and order, Cold War warrior, progressive, modernizer, champion of liberal economic reform – the labels piled on top of one another, as people struggled to define and make sense of a man whose coming no one predicted and whose views were shrouded in the mystery of a secret past. Three years later, we are little the wiser.<sup>19</sup>

#### 3.1. Yeltsin's Heir

We have already said that Putin, at first, was nobody but the successor of Yeltsin; and the truth is that he perfectly played the role the Kremlin had decided for him, granting the former president and his family immunity from prosecution.<sup>20</sup> But in comparing both presidents, it is useful to bear in mind that Yeltsin himself was the product of history, of a series of more or less permanent factors that have been present in Russian politics for centuries. This is what Shevtsova calls the “Russian system”, which is defined as

a specific type of governance structure whose characteristics include paternalism, the state domineering over the individual, isolation from the outside world, and ambitions to be a great power. The heart of the system was the all-powerful leader, above the law and a law unto himself, concentrating in his hands all powers, without a balancing accountability, and limiting all other institutions to auxiliary, administrative functions.<sup>21</sup>

Putin can safely be qualified as a paternalist leader, given the new cult to personality that is held in Russia today; individual rights have also been restricted, by attacking independent media and thus curtailing freedom of speech; the topic of Russia's *derzhavnost* [“great power-ness”] is still present as one of the main priorities; and the political system has become even more presidential, with no role for the parliament, no accountability and no balance of powers. So in many ways Putin is not Yeltsin's, but Russian history's heir when he follows this model.

#### 3.2. Neo-Authoritarian

Under the expressions “dictatorship of law” and “power vertical”, many have seen a return to old habits that implies the restoration of some Soviet-style elements. However, it cannot be said that the Yeltsin regime was much more democratic, given the former president's repeated clashes with the parliament, the 1993 hyper-presidential constitution, the unrestrained use of state-controlled media for the Kremlin's aims, or the alliance between the Family and the oligarchs.

What is the difference, then, with Putin? In contrast to the fragmentation of power in the previous decade – Family, oligarchs, state bureaucrats, security organs, army, regional

<sup>19</sup> Lo, Bobo (2003): *Vladimir Putin and the Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy*. Chatham House Papers, Royal Institute of International Affairs. Oxford, Blackwell, p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Decree of 31 December 1999, “On guarantees for the President of the Russian Federation, having laid down his office, and members of his family”, quoted by Nicholson, Martin: “Putin's Russia: Slowing the Pendulum without Stopping the Clock”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 77, No. 3 (2001), footnote 5.

<sup>21</sup> Shevtsova, op. cit., p. 16.



governors and so on –, he has started a process of concentration and centralization of power in his own hands. One example for this is the creation of the seven “federal districts”, each of them headed by a presidential representative who has the authority over the elected governors and leaders of the regions that his district comprises; or the reform of the Federation Council, where the regional leaders have been replaced by delegates with a lower profile, elected by the regional parliaments.

To some extent, this was a necessary change. It is true that in many regions, federal laws were not obeyed, and even contradicted by the local regulations. However, once established, the presidential representatives have also been used to impose the Kremlin’s interests regarding the regional elections or the control of natural resources by private companies.

Another, perhaps more important change is the substitution of the Family by the so-called “St. Petersburg Clan”, a group of officials from Putin’s city – many of them, also veterans from the security organs – who enjoy the trust of the president.<sup>22</sup> They have been appointed to the top posts in the state bureaucracy, therefore assuring the Kremlin’s control over the implementation of policies.

What about the oligarchs? They have been given a clear option: either to accept Putin’s authority or to suffer the consequences. Those who wanted to keep their power have been ruthlessly eliminated from the political stage, as the now exiled Boris Berezovsky or Vladimir Gusinsky; their disappearance has also granted the Kremlin control over the media groups they owned. However, for those who have stayed, their influence has not necessarily diminished, but rather become more institutionalized. “Instead of fighting for resources in the political arena, the tycoons now lobby for them quietly at the top of the bureaucratic pyramid”.<sup>23</sup>

The Yukos affair has marked the start of a new stage in the process of concentration of power. Now, it is not only political power what Putin is pursuing, but also economic: the detention of the oil company’s CEO, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, was reportedly caused by the former’s intention of selling shares to Exxon Mobil and Chevron Texaco, while he prepared a merge with another Russian company, Sibneft.<sup>24</sup> The Kremlin was not ready to accept him sharing the benefits of oil exports with the Americans, but wanted to keep energy resources exclusively in Russian hands: this way, the state control would be granted.

We may be seeing to a repetition of history: as Yeltsin and his supporters took control of Russia’s resources by dissolving the Soviet state and turning it into a market economy – therefore becoming owners of what they had only administered before –, now Putin is replacing the economic tycoons of that era with his own people. In this way, the *siloviki*<sup>25</sup> from the “St. Petersburg Clan” could be not only the new rulers of the country, but also its new economic elite. As Andreff puts it,

The campaign against the oligarchs with which Putin could be trying to curtail the power of the oligarchs heirs of the Yeltsin era, really covers a deadly fight for the repartition of the main Russian

<sup>22</sup> On this subject, see: Mujin, Alexei A. (2003): *Piterskoye okruzhenoje prezidenta* [The President’s Petersburg Circle]. Moscow, Tsentr Politicheskoy Informatsii.

<sup>23</sup> Treisman, Daniel: “Russia Renewed?” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 6 (November/December 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Bernstein, Jonas: “El caso Yukos: la oligarquía ha muerto ¿larga vida a la oligarquía?” [The Yukos Affaire. The Oligarchy is Dead: Long Live to the Oligarchy?], *Vanguardia Dossier*, No. 9 (January/March 2003), p. 49.

<sup>25</sup> In Russian, officials from the security organs and the “ministries of power”.



companies; on the one hand, among the oligarchs, and on the other, between them and the economic interests, and the security services which surround president Putin.<sup>26</sup>

With regard to the individual citizens, their importance has not changed in the slightest: if under Yeltsin they were mere spectators of the struggle among factions, now they are expected to gather around Putin and keep “national unity”. State interests continue to be the priority over individual rights: as we have said, attacks on the freedom of the press or the unaccountability of the security organs – let us remember the tragedy of the Dubrovka theatre in Moscow – seem to announce a clear involution. Moreover, the apparent economic recovery is only caused by the high prices of energy in the international markets, so improvements in their welfare are not grounded on a solid basis.<sup>27</sup>

These conditions have even made it possible for an analyst to argue that “Putin now commands an authority unprecedented since the death of Stalin in 1953”.<sup>28</sup> It does not seem possible that he could use it to establish an open dictatorship, though it is also unlikely that he will advance liberal democracy. “Putin is indifferent to democratic principles and practices, perhaps believing that Russia might have to sacrifice democracy in the short run to achieve ‘more important’ economic and state building goals”.<sup>29</sup>

### 3.3. Nostalgic for the Great Power

Together with the economy, Putin considered a top priority to increase Russia’s prestige abroad, as the great power it had once been. Some Soviet-era symbols have been used again to reinforce that feeling of “national dignity”, and at the same time Putin’s own authority as a state leader: the restoration of the USSR national anthem,<sup>30</sup> the firing of two missiles on the day of his election, the gradual conversion of his electoral platform, Unity, to a mass organization – with even its own youth branch – called United Russia, are only several examples of this process.

Putin has repeatedly said that not only he does not regret his past in the KGB, but is proud of having served in it; he also refers to the patriotic values he learned in the Soviet times. Nonetheless, even if not a liberal democrat as we have seen, Putin cannot be considered a nostalgic for the USSR. We know that, when the Communist regime was coming to an end, he preferred to leave the security organs and seeking the new leaders’ protection. And his political career already started in the post-Soviet era, beside the president who had signed the death of the Union.

So his attitude in the internal affairs should be related to a project for creating a substitute of the Communist ideology, a sense of purpose shared by all Russians that could make their support endure longer than any temporary achievements. If they believe that Putin is the hope of the country, the only one who can save it from its collapse, they would be

<sup>26</sup> Andreff, Wladimir: “El capitalismo ruso” [The Russian Capitalism], *Vanguardia Dossier*, No. 9 (January/March 2003), pp. 38-43.

<sup>27</sup> Pleshakov, Konstantin: “Putin’s plan takes aim at democracy”, *The Japan Times*, 7 January 2004.

<sup>28</sup> Lo, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> McFaul, op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>30</sup> It was only the music that was restored, not the lyrics. However, most adult Russians must still remember the words when they hear the anthem: “Indestructible Union of free republics, united forever by the great Russia...”



prepared to accept anything, namely poverty and authoritarian rule. A great deal of populism, of course, is present in this message of “national pride”.

The role of the army is another feature of Putin’s style. There is no doubt that his stand on the Chechnya war, visiting the Russian troops during the electoral campaign, granted him the loyalty of the military at first. However, their influence in politics has not increased, but rather the president’s control over the armed forces has been reinforced. Putin has appointed who is perhaps his most reliable friend, member of the “St. Petersburg Clan” Sergey Ivanov, as the first ever civil minister of Defense. Since then, many new people have arrived to the Ministry from the security organs: even the military intelligence, the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), is now headed by a former KGB officer. Discipline is being enforced more strictly regarding the civil control over the military: the era in which generals could publicly contradict or criticize the power has come to an end, and the few who have dared to do so – as the notorious “hawk” general Guennadi Troshev, who recently refused to be transferred from the Caucasus Military District (MD) to the Siberian MD – were taught the consequences of stepping out of the line.

Putin’s support of the U.S. war in Afghanistan was probably seen by the military as treason: if American troops arrived to Central Asia, it would be the first step towards their loss of influence in the post-Soviet space. However, the Kremlin control is still in place; up to date, Putin’s plans of military reform are finding opposition, but being carried on any way. There is no general as popular as Alexander Lebed was, because anyone who has tried to attract the public attention has immediately been given retirement or a new job outside Moscow, as the many regional leaders who come from the armed forces.

So this idea of “national pride” will not probably be translated into a new imperialism, or a takeover of the territories which became independent in 1990-91: Russia has no means – powerful army, economic influence – to do so. On the contrary, that concept can be considered instrumental in reinforcing the president’s authority and gathering mass support.

### **3.4. Pro-Western Reformer**

While the message sent to domestic audiences is that of a great Russia, which must be respected again as a great power, the actual foreign policy has been much more pragmatic.<sup>31</sup> Putin is conscious of the constraints facing him: until a country with rule of law and a prosperous economy is achieved, he cannot expect the West to regard him as an equal partner. So he has adopted a much more flexible strategy than that of his predecessor, making the most of Russia’s resources in bargaining with Western counterparts. It must be admitted that he has obtained positive results: for example, in the face of the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM treaty, a new document – the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty – was signed to mark the continuation of the bilateral arms control dialogue. With regard to NATO enlargement, the Alliance promised to give Russia a more balanced status by means of the new NATO-Russia Council. This could not have been several months before, given the low profile that the Bush Administration planned to give to relations with Russia when they arrived to the White House. Putin’s support of the global “war on terrorism” was the key to this change of mind.

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<sup>31</sup> See Nicholson, *op. cit.*, pp. 870-871;





Having said this, we must remember that there is nothing that suggests that Russia is taking the West as a model, or that a liberal democracy is being created: even when the alliance with the United States was tested over the Iraq war, it resulted not to be as strong as it might have seemed before. It is Western support, in the form of economic aid and investment, and not intervention in their “internal affairs” as the war in Chechnya, which Putin demands; the reforms he is implementing are more conditioned by internal circumstances than by foreign influence.

## Conclusions

After the 2000 elections, a journalist suggested four possible scenarios for Russia’s future: (1) Putin becoming the puppet of the Kremlin power groups; (2) Putin replacing Yeltsin as a referee between those contending interests; (3) Putin imposing his own team; (4) Putin failing and being expelled from the political system.<sup>32</sup> In our opinion, it is the third one which has become true. We have seen that centralization of power has been the main feature of the president’s first term, while on the international arena his stand has changed from an assertive attitude, to cooperation with the U.S., to disagreement over Iraq.

In this way, it is easier to assess Putin’s relations to the West than predicting their future course, because the success of his reforms will affect his ability to formulate a more independent foreign policy, free from the constraints of the economic dependence. Especially, the evolution of energy markets will determine whether he can obtain the necessary resources to implement any state building project.

However, this uncertainty has been minimized by the Russian president by crafting a flexible approach that many have defined as “pragmatism”. Being able to send different messages to specific audiences, rejecting a conflicting stand in favor of that of a reliable partner – who does have his own views and interests, anyway – has allowed Putin a great deal of success in pursuing his aims: centralized authority, mass support, a free hand on internal affairs, and which is perhaps the most important one: no viable alternative to his leadership in the face of the 2004 presidential elections.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Bonet, Pilar: “El irresistible ascenso de Vladimir Putin” [The irresistible ascent of Vladimir Putin], *Claves de razón práctica*, No. 101 (2000), p. 35.

<sup>33</sup> After the huge majority obtained by United Russia in the parliamentary elections, some party leaders as Yabloko’s Grigori Yavlinsky have announced that they will not present their candidacy in March. An exception for this has been Irina Khakamada, co-leader of the Union of Right Forces (SPS). See Zaks, Dmitry: “Russia’s chic liberal sets sight on Putin”, *The Manila Times*, 20 January 2004.



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