

EXPLAINING PUTIN

By Philip David Black

Online Article Sample - Originally Published 2017

Note to reader: the following blog article was first published in the year 2017, a full five years prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The following was my assessment of the state of affairs at the time of writing. If you want to know my independent, half-informed thoughts on the current goings on, feel free to contact me.

I do not defend Putin the man, nor would I wish to do so. I have never met him, and to be honest with you, I have not kept up on his recent doings, other than noting with a distant (yet growing) sense of dismay the usual tremor and hum of the 24-hour news cycle that now beats upon our collective brows like a never-ending, doom-proclaiming drum. I have not even been to Russia since the winter of the 2007/2008 school year, when I passed (pleasantly) the first Christmas break of my college career amongst family and friends in the snowy city of Moscow. This last fact makes any insider info I may possess on the current state of the Russian mind essentially one decade old.

However, I did live in Russia for 7 years, and I would certainly like to think I learned something while I was there. So, what I would like to do with this essay is to try and explain why Putin is popular in Russia, even while he is decried for his seeming villainy all throughout the rest of our troubled world. To do this, let's look at three differences in the way Russians view the world as contrasted with a stereotypical American view. This is part two of a series, so if you didn't catch last week's blog, click [HERE](#) to do so.

RUSSIANS ASSUME THEIR GOVERNMENT IS CORRUPT, BECAUSE OF COURSE IT IS.

As Americans, we like to pretend the world is a just and righteous place. Now, yes, as we age into adulthood, we all acknowledge that things aren't perfect, but even the most jaded among us still tend to appeal to some sort of higher code of Law. We assume, at least, that laws are (for the most part) there to protect and defend our rights to life, liberty, and all the rest of it. At the very least, we would say this is the goal that we are working towards, and

we all talk as though we think this may (someday) come to pass. There is some shared belief amongst us, divided as we may BE, that laws, in the end, ought to be obeyed.

Russians do not think this.

After seventy plus years spent under a repressive, Communist government, where “Big Brother” was an active, terrifying reality rather than a lackluster reality television show, the assumption that laws are there to help people has, in Russia, become laughable. Russians just assume everything in their government is corrupt. This is because, generally speaking, everything in their government IS corrupt.

Even now, 25 + years after the fall of the U.S.S.R., the Russian legal code remains an instrument of paralyzing complexity and confusion, and the system is riddled through with poorly paid government employees taking advantage of that fact. From what I understand, multiple contradictory laws are often all still simultaneously on the books, and it is up to officials to “choose” which they would like to enforce. Like I said, these officials are poorly paid, so bribes are simply a part of doing government business. They aren’t even looked at as a shameful thing. “You scratch my back, I give you your permit” is essentially the law of the land. Therefore, the fact that corruption charges are easily leveled at Putin is SHOCKING in our neck of the woods, but it is taken as dull, self-evident fact in Russia. This is just how things work.

RUSSIANS SEE THINGS THROUGH AN “US VS. THEM” LENS.

Seeing as the running assumption in Russia is that laws are crooked and the government is not on your side, you pick your friends, you trust your friends, and you help your friends, because they help you. In a world where there is no benevolent higher authority to turn to, it is up to you to help yourself. This reality is what gives groups of Russians who work together their “mob family” type feel. This is how things work there. You make your friends in school growing up, and at university, and at your first jobs, and then you all move together as a kind of pack, helping each other out along the way. You trust each other, and you help each other out.

So, when Putin seems like an obvious “mob boss” to us, moving about with his gang of oligarchs, making moves that solidify his wealth and power, as well as the power and wealth

of his friends, this just seems normal to Russians. The fact that he is in control of the corrupt government does not make him the cause of its corruption. It's an "us vs. them" world, after all. In this view, we're all just doing the best we can – even Putin.

RUSSIANS ARE READY TO RISE – THIS IS THE TRUE NATURE OF PUTIN'S "STRONG MAN" APPEAL.

In order to truly understand Putin's popularity, let's do a simple role reversal. Imagine, if you will, a world where the United States' economy buckles and then crumbles into dust at the end of the 1980s. By the 90s, the Union has dissolved, and several states (let's be real - California and Texas) have become their own countries, with the majority of the states forming a severely weakened Federation. In this imagined world, the U.S.S.R. is now the only true world super power. Communism has been vindicated. Capitalism, in the end, has turned out to be nothing but a grotesque delusion. All our grandparents' savings and their pensions went up in smoke in the economic catastrophe that preceded the U.S.'s downfall. The older generations are hopelessly disillusioned. The younger generations aren't sure what to think...at first. Soon, Soviet styles, pop music, and movies begin to dominate the world's youth culture. (Admittedly, that last part is the hardest bit to imagine, but just go with me.)

Now imagine a charismatic former C.I.A. member begins to gain power in the new U.S. Federation. We realize, in a world desperate for oil, that we are sitting on vast energy reserves. America begins to flex its muscles again, standing up to the U.S.S.R. We annex Texas. Then California. Now, just you try and tell me that the American public wouldn't love that former C.I.A. guy. We totally would!

If you imagine this scenario for even a second, you'll begin to understand how Russians see Putin. I'm not saying this scenario is a perfect analogy, but it gives you the gist. Russians are very ready to rise from the ashes of their past, and someone like Putin, who offers to lead them with a firm and determined hand, has a strong appeal.

To try and explain some of Putin's weirder moments, often featured here in America primarily in memes, I recommend [this](#) excellent video by Vox. Their "Explained" series is often interesting and sometimes informative. There is so much in this world, after all, that desperately requires some explaining. See you next week.