

## CONCLUSION

### PUTIN THE SAINT

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On May 11, 2000, four days after Vladimir Putin's first inauguration, the film *Brat 2* (Brother 2) was released. The sequel to 1997's crime thriller *Brat*, it tells the story of a veteran of the Chechen war who travels to America to help the brother of a dead friend. There he does battle with the Ukrainian mafia ("You bastards are gonna pay for Sevastopol!" he shouts), tangles with Chicago police ("Are you gangsters?" "No, we're Russians"), and rescues compatriots in need ("In war Russians don't abandon their own"). At his most philosophical, the protagonist asks rhetorically: "Tell me, American, what is power? Is it really money? Bro said it was money. You've got a lot of money, and what of it? I think truth is power. Whoever has truth on his side is stronger."

Russian cinema at the time was in a poor state. Few films were being made, and the public was not interested. But *Brat 2* became a huge hit. In 2015 the mix of anti-Americanism and straight-talking patriotism was the political mainstream, but fifteen years earlier it had been fresh. There had been no need for state directives back then. People themselves had "ordered" *Brat 2*, which captured the mood of the crisis-ridden country.

The film made a deep impression on many viewers, including President Putin and FSB head Nikolai Patrushev. They both loved to quote the film in interviews: "Tell me, American, what is power?" The ingrained anti-Americanism epitomized by *Brat 2* dovetailed with Patrushev's worldview and his political interests.

Members of Putin's inner circle say that Nikolai Patrushev is Russia's most underestimated public figure. He has been the nerve center of most of Putin's special operations—the annexation of Crimea, for instance.

Patrushev was in no way Putin's man, even though he had been the latter's deputy at the FSB. Putin is said not to have wanted Patrushev to succeed him as head of the organization. But Patrushev dug in. It was he who went on to feed Putin stories about enemies in the woodwork, saying that the Americans were not to be trusted and that the FSB was the president's only real power base.

In the 2000s FSB chief Patrushev was one of the most non-public public figures in the Russian government. In one interview he described the FSB as Russia's "new nobility," yet in general his political views remained unexpressed.<sup>1</sup> He maintained a pointed silence on terrorist acts committed on Russian soil, even though his department was responsible for dealing with them.

In 2008 the newly inaugurated president, Dmitry Medvedev, dismissed Nikolai Patrushev from the post of FSB director (allegedly due to serious illness) and transferred him to the less accountable position of Security Council secretary. But Patrushev soon overcame his "ailment," and on Putin's return to the Kremlin he resumed his boisterous political activity. In the wake of the annexation of Crimea he began to comment on matters of Russian security and foreign policy, which previously had been the exclusive realm of President Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov. He became Russia's top hawk and a cheerleader for anti-Westernism and anti-Americanism inside the Russian leadership. Only he was allowed to publicly expose the global conspiracy.

On October 15, 2014, the state-owned newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* published an interview with him—a manifesto entitled "Cold War Two." That is roughly when the rising anti-American table talk turned into an academic subject and was presented as Russia's new official ideology.

In that interview, Patrushev expounded his own version of the modern history of Russia. The Soviet Union had collapsed as a result of a plot hatched by Zbigniew Brzezinski and the CIA to weaken the Soviet economy, he said. But the collapse of the Soviet Union did not mark the end of the Cold War. The United States then set itself the objective of dismembering Russia: the West had deliberately provoked a war in Chechnya ("extremists and their adherents were supported by the US and British intelligence services, as well as allies in Europe and the Islamic world"), and Washington spent the entire

post-Soviet period laying the groundwork for the crisis in Ukraine ("The upcoming generation in Ukraine was poisoned with hatred for Russia and the mythology of 'European values'"). But the West's true purpose was to strike a blow to Russia ("Even without the calamity in Ukraine, they would have found another pretext to intensify their policy of 'containing' Russia").<sup>2</sup>

In subsequent interviews Patrushev added to the accusations against the United States—from the creation of ISIS to the revival of Nazism in the Baltic States and Ukraine. He frequently cited former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright, who is alleged to have said that it was "unjust" that such vast and resource-rich areas as Siberia and the Russian Far East should be "under Moscow's rule."<sup>3</sup> There is no evidence that the former secretary of state made any such statement, however, and Albright herself denies it. In July 2015 journalists uncovered the source of the myth: a former officer in the Russian secret services alleged in 2007 that the Federal Guard Service of the Russian Federation used psychics to read the thoughts of Western politicians. One of their targets was Albright, who apparently *thought* that the riches of Siberia should not belong to Russia.

It seems that the Russian leadership was duped by its own propaganda. Petty gossip was no longer just the preserve of old ladies and the television channel RT (formerly Russia Today), which seduces viewers with conspiracy theories from around the world. Russia's top officials were now indulging in it too.

It was not the first time in Russia that a historical myth had influenced domestic policy. At the end of the nineteenth century, for example, a fake document entitled *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* appeared in the Russian Empire, allegedly stolen from the personal files of the founder of political Zionism, Theodor Herzl, and supposedly outlining a Jewish plot for global domination. The forgery contributed to the pogroms of Jews in Russia and was reprinted in the United States and (in huge quantities) in Nazi Germany. Similarly, accounts of former CIA director Allen Dulles's plan to "morally corrupt Soviet society" made the rounds in 1990s Russia and became a tenet of post-Soviet anti-Americanism and neo-imperialism.

One prominent statesman (not a *silovik* by any means, but rather a liberal) told me a story about the 1972 treaty between the Soviet Union and the United States to ban biological weapons. Despite signing the treaty, the Soviet Union continued to produce biological weapons. At the end of perestroika Gorbachev closed down the programs and gave access to US inspectors.

At the same time Russian experts carried out checks in the United States. The Americans immediately discovered that the Soviet Union had violated the treaty, while the Russians found nothing.

What was the statesman's conclusion? "The Americans deceived us," he stated categorically. "Of course they had biological weapons. It's just that we didn't find them."

"How can you be so sure?" I asked. "Can't we just assume that the Americans were honest and kept to the agreement?"

"Of course, not," he retorted. "If we secretly violated it, they must have done so too. What, you think they're better than us?"

Perhaps the anti-Westernism of Russian politicians is not paranoia but shrewdness. They know their electorate and want to find common language. Even since the Bolotnaya protests of 2011–2012 they have become focused on the broad masses, who love conspiracy theories and dislike America. Moreover, Russian leaders know that if they do not offer television viewers a simple and plausible answer to pressing geopolitical issues, the people will draw their own (far worse) conclusions.

But such analysis is in itself a conspiracy theory. There is no evidence that Russian officials are so crafty. Most likely they really do believe in their fictions.

## FRIENDS FOREVER

If this book were to be continued, the protagonist of the next chapter would be Nikolay Patrushev. And who would be after him? Vladimir Putin has many friends: Yuri Kovalchuk, Arkady Rotenberg, Gennady Timchenko, and cellist Sergey Roldugin—the last a central figure in the Panama Papers scandal of spring 2016 and the so-called secret caretaker of Putin's wealth. Each is surely waiting in the wings. But no doubt Putin's buddies had never had real political influence. They go to the sauna together, or play hockey together, or even take care of his property—but he would never ask for their advice about world policy.

There is a rumor among those who knew Putin during his first presidential term that he did not want to run for a second and wished to be rid of the burden of the presidency. It is said that Putin's inner circle spent considerable time and effort persuading him not to step down. "Volodya [Vladimir] will

never harm himself" is a phrase attributed to Putin's friend Yuri Kovalchuk, who, with help from others, allegedly convinced the president to stay. They explained to Putin that he had to remain, since leaving would be dangerous. Some allege that it was Nikolai Patrushev who persuaded Putin that his departure would be fraught with monstrous upheavals.

Putin's close circle of friends and colleagues became even tighter throughout Putin's presidential and prime ministerial tenures, shielding him ever more from reality—in both his and their interests. They tried to convince Putin that he was Atlas: if he walked away, the sky would come crashing to the ground.

For them, it was true. The primary source of their well-being lay in their proximity to the president. "If not Putin, then who?" was the slogan of pro-government rallies (nicknamed "Putings") in 2012. Over the past fifteen years perhaps the majority of the Russian population has come to ask the same question.

Many members of the inner circle have been hit by Western sanctions and deprived of the opportunity to travel abroad, where they have family and business interests. Nevertheless, Putin's courtiers have kept their grumbling fairly quiet.

## KING FOREVER

While this book was being written, the Russian economy continued to shrink—as surely as the magic shagreen from Balzac's *La Peau de Chagrin*. All the while big business radiated nothing but calm and serenity. Hypothetically the money in Russia's coffers could last for a long time. If oil prices suddenly rise, the situation could rectify itself. If not, then welfare benefits might be cut or taxes (particularly on the oil industry) could rise. As a last resort, the proceeds of large resource-extraction companies might be seized. Business leaders generally understand that some or all of their property could at some point be expropriated in the interests of the state. They have long since come to terms with that fact. It is often said that Russia's top businesspeople are not billionaires but simply work with billions of dollars in assets. They manage what Vladimir Putin allows them to manage.

No one I interviewed sees any prospect of change. Or rather, they see the prospect of change only in one circumstance, which dare not speak its name.

Instead, they resort to euphemisms: “when the black swan flies,” “when the president visits Alpha Centauri,” “when the heavens fall.” They all refer to the time when Putin is no longer, well, Putin.

They are wrong, of course. It is a peculiar myth that everything in Russia depends on Putin and that without him everything will change.

This book demonstrates that Putin, as we imagine him, does not actually exist. It was not Putin who brought Russia to its current state. For a long time he resisted the metamorphosis, but then he succumbed, realizing that it was simpler that way.

In the very beginning Putin did not believe that Russia is surrounded by enemies on all sides. He did not have plans to close down independent TV channels. He had no intention of supporting Viktor Yanukovich. He did not even want to hold the Olympics in Sochi. But in trying to divine the intentions of their leader, his associates effectively materialized their own wishes.

Today’s image of Putin as a formidable Russian tsar was constructed by his entourage, Western partners, and journalists, often without his say. In one of the most famous photographs there is of Putin, he has the mien of a haughty ruler, the “military emperor of the world.” But that is not Putin himself, merely *Time* magazine’s 2007 Person of the Year staring out from the cover.

Each of us invented our own Putin. And we may yet create many more.

## NOTES

### CHAPTER 1

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### CHAPTER 2

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