

Vladimir Putin:

How the West Was Duped

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Vladimir Putin is undoubtedly described in the most gratuitous terms today, some complimentary and most scathing. This spectrum points to the ironic success of Putin's foreign policy as it has evolved from the day Yeltsin stepped down, opening the floodgate for his power consolidation resulting in the offensive campaign in Ukraine today. Putin's gambit has always been based on two tenets: solidifying the unity of Russia and great power status restoration.¹ Within these branches is a litany of complexities ranging from ethnocentrism, conservatism, and natural resource manipulation. While these two overarching principles have remained unchanged since 1999, Putin's method of administering foreign policy has changed dramatically since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Putin has stepped away from his past role as the primary face of Russia to international leaders as these encounters become more controversial since February 2022 and instead retreated deep within Russian society, allowing lackeys to be on the receiving end of international criticism.

Putin must now feel the international order accepts Russia as an influential force of reckoning as he no longer elbows in to take part in discussions. Instead, world leaders such as Macron are flying to Russia to plead for an end to hostilities. The scenes are rich, with Putin grilling his guests across a massive table for domestic public image building. For once, Russia has both of its historical powers of conquest at its beck and call, and regardless of the mounting Russian casualties, it's a price Putin is willing to pay.

Michael McFaul recounts a time when U.S. President Barack Obama, on a visit to Russia, discounted Putin as remaining in the past while overestimating the authority of Dmitri Medvedev. After Obama met with Medvedev, Obama met with Putin as the Prime Minister. Putin ensured that his owed respects were given, making the retinue come to him and singlehandedly elongating the meeting by two hours, a classic attempt to abrogate someone's

importance.² McFaul interacted exclusively with Sergei Lavrov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, as Putin had a personal vendetta against the U.S. Ambassador. Lavrov was given a certain length leash and allowed to interact with those who did not qualify for Prime Minister or Presidential discussions. This pattern identifies Putin's recent international reticence as more than a respite for a potential illness or convalescence. Putin is investing time interacting with his own population right now, proving that he is on to Act Two, or unifying Russia. He has achieved his goal of re-establishing Russian greatness or, even more importantly, a fear of the Russian threat. He is now focused on rallying his domestic support and the former USSR states. Dealing with heads of state participating in a global order with which he disagrees is not on his to-do list. These meetings are cast to Lavrov to attend to protect Putin's image. Putin's new priority is impressing his population and cajoling them into following his radical and violent direction. He cannot risk public humiliation or shame by other world leaders that could beget instability and protests. Curiously, Putin is now two years out from his next election in 2024, and the chance for democracy is increasingly looking more adrift. Putin is creating a fortress economy and society to prepare for long-term western pariah status while stoking high approval ratings. The Western sanctions are only helping to move his agenda along.

While the Russian leviathan continues to thrash and throw its might against its little neighbor, the current world leaders are only continuing to solve Putin's great power restoration problem. This freedom allows him to focus on drumming up domestic support and patriotism, which will allow a continued bellicose approach to its former USSR states. Putin is choosing to give awards to soldiers involved in potential war crimes. He is making appearances where it counts. He has abandoned his diplomatic engagements for the next phase of his plan, thereby protecting his image and securing a long-term reign over Russia.

Notes

All errors found herein are my own.

¹ Dmitri Trenin. “Twenty Years of Vladimir Putin: How Russian Foreign Policy Has Changed.” *Moscow Times*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 28 Aug 18.

² Michael McFaul. *From Cold War to Hot Peace*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (Boston, MA: 2018). 130.