



Statement before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs
On US Policy toward Putin's Russia

Drivers of Putin's Foreign Policy

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman, the Ranking Members, Members of the Committee!

It is an honor and a pleasure to be here—especially in the company of colleagues and friends whose expertise and integrity I have greatly admired over many years: Jack Matlock and Mike McFaul.

I don't have to remind anyone in this room that this is a tough, even rough, patch in the relations between the United States and Russia.

There are many reasons for this troubling state of affairs, and both sides bear responsibility. But I would like to attempt to explore one of the key elements of the present situation: Vladimir Putin's credo, his vision of Russia in the world, and his understanding of his role as Russia's leader.

I want to do this because, contrary to a rather popular view, I don't believe that his foreign policy, and in particular the regime's relations with the United States, is made on an ad hoc basis. Instead, it is part of a long-term geopolitical project, rooted in deeply held ideology, a self-imposed personal historic mission, and domestic political imperatives of his regime's survival.

The Russian president is not the easiest man to read. They have taught him well in the KGB Higher School and in the Yuri Andropov Red Banner Institute (formerly the Foreign Intelligence Academy). But after 16 years of policymaking, there are a few tenets in Putin's credo we can be fairly certain about:

- The end of the Cold War was Russia's equivalent of the Versailles Treaty for Germany—a source of endless humiliation and misery.
- The demise of the Soviet Union, in Putin's words, was “the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century.”
- The overarching strategic agenda of any truly patriotic Russian leader (not an idiot or a traitor or both, as Putin almost certainly views Gorbachev and Yeltsin) is to recover and repossess the political, economic, and geostrategic assets lost by the Soviet state at its fall. A few years back, I called this program the [Putin Doctrine](#), which the Russian president proceeded to implement virtually from Day One of his first presidential term in 2000.

But I believe there is another, broader and deeper basis for the policies of the Putin regime—a set of beliefs that binds many, perhaps most, key political actors in Russia today, especially the cohort close to Putin, the so-called *siloviki*: top members of special and secret services, many of them graduates, like Putin, of the Soviet KGB. They believe—and there is plenty of evidence in their articles and interviews¹—that Russia is “menaced by an external force” with the “greatest threats coming from NATO and the United States.”² A West at war with Russia is the staple of the Russian state's propaganda, which is why Putin called the Europe-bound Ukraine “NATO's foreign legion.”

¹ See, for example, an interview by the former FSB director (and currently the head of the Security Council) Nikolai Patrushev in the FSB magazine *Za iprotiv*, December 22, 2015.

² See, for example, Andrei Soldatov and Michael Rochlitz, “Siloviki in Russian Politics,” unpublished paper.

In addition to the KGB training, these views are also shaped by Putin's favorite philosopher, Ivan Ilyin, whom the Russian president cites in his speeches and whose remains he had moved from Switzerland and interred on the grounds of one of Russia's most hallowed grounds: the Donskoy Monastery in Moscow. Like Ilyin, Putin believes that *Russia* is never wrong, but is perennially wronged by the West. The West's hostility to Russia is eternal and prompted by the West's jealousy of Russia's size, natural riches, and, most of all, its incorruptible, saintly soul and a God-bestowed mission to be the Third Rome, the light among nations. The plots against Russia are relentless, and while truces are possible (and often tactically advantageous to Russia), genuine peace with the West is very unlikely.

Following his boss's lead, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated in a recent article that it is "in the genes" of the Russian people" to defeat "attempts of the European West to completely subjugate Russia, and to deny [Russia] its national identity and religious faith."³ Consistent with the view of the West's perennial plotting against Russia, Lavrov also contended that World War II was caused by the "anti-Russian European elites [who] had sought to push Hitler to attack the Soviet Union."⁴ And today, too, Lavrov continued:

We see how the US and the Western alliance it leads try to preserve their dominance by any means possible. . . . The use all sorts of pressures, including economic sanctions and even direct military intervention. [The US] wages large-scale information wars. It has perfected the technology of the change of regimes by implementing "color revolutions."⁵

In addition to ideology, the foreign policy of the Putin government is shaped in large part by a powerful domestic political imperative. By the time of Putin's third presidential term, the toxic domestic economic climate had reduced Russian economic growth to a crawl, even with oil prices at historical highs. Russian economists inside and outside the government warned that, even if oil prices stayed just as high or even climbed higher, the Russian economy would no longer deliver the 8–10 percent growth in real incomes, as it had between 2000 and 2008, securing Putin's astronomic popularity. Public opinion polls consistently revealed people's perception of the authorities at every level as deeply corrupt, callous, and incompetent. Most troubling for the regime, Putin's popularity, which was and continues to be the foundation of the regime's legitimacy, dropped by almost one-third between 2008 and 2011.⁶

In the words of Putin's personal friend, former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Alexei Kudrin, Russia's economy by 2013 had hit an "institutional wall" and needed a different "economic model."

³ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Статья Министра иностранных дел России С.В.Лаврова «Историческая перспектива внешней политики России», опубликованная в журнале «Россия в глобальной политике» 3 марта 2016 года," March 3, 2016, http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2124391.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Denis Volkov, "Russian Elite Opinion After Crimea," Carnegie Center, Moscow, March 23, 2016.

Yet if Vladimir Putin has a professional or perhaps even personal nightmare, it is likely Gorbachev's perestroika, that is, an effort at economic liberalization that leads to an uncontrollable political crisis and eventually the collapse of the regime.

Unwilling, therefore, to undertake liberalizing institutional reforms, Putin has made likely the most fateful decision of his political career: He began to shift the foundation of his regime's legitimacy from economic progress and the steady growth of incomes to what might be called patriotic mobilization.

The new policy rested on two propaganda narratives. (1) Russia is rising from its knees and because of that the West, first and foremost the United States, declared war on Moscow in order to preserve its *diktat* in world affairs. (2) Although threatened on all sides by implacable enemies, Russia has nothing to fear so long as Putin is at the helm: Not only will he protect the Motherland, but also he will recover the Soviet Union's status of being feared and therefore respected again! On national television, where an overwhelming majority of Russians get their news, foreign policy has become a mesmerizing kaleidoscope of breathtaking initiatives and brilliant successes.

There followed the annexation of Crimea and the hybrid war in Ukraine and then Russia's involvement in Syria.

Thus far, the regime's patriotic mobilization must be judged a great success. A patriotic fervor at the sight of the Motherland besieged yet somehow also victorious; a Russia that again, as in the Soviet days, is mightily shaping world events along with the United States and acting as a moral and strategic counterweight to America has obscured for millions of Russians the increasingly bleak economic reality and repression at home. As the great Russian poet Mikhail Lermontov put it in the poem *Ismail-Bey*, "*Puskay ya rab, no rab tsarya vsellenoy!*": "Yes, I am a slave but I am a slave of the master of the Universe!"

Vladimir Putin appears to have stepped on the Stalin-Brezhnev-Hussein-Gaddafi president-for-life escalator from which there is no other exit except by physical demise or a revolution. The regime he is heading is presenting the West with an unprecedented challenge: a highly personalistic authoritarianism, which is resurgent, activist, inspired by a mission, prone to risky behavior both for ideological reasons and those of domestic political legitimacy, and armed, by the latest count, with 1,735 strategic nuclear warheads on 521 delivery platforms.

Does this mean that the United States cannot cooperate with Putin's Russia? Of course it does not—so long as the U.S. does not waste time and effort in areas where the gap in ultimate goals between Washington and Moscow is too wide to be bridged. For instance, in Syria, the West wants peace. Putin needs victory. And the victory will likely look like this: The secular, pro-Western opposition is either decimated or forced to disarm as part of the US-Russian "peace process." The Bashar al-Assad regime is saved. The West is confronted with the repugnant choice between Assad, on the one hand, and a combination of ISIS and the al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al Nusra on the other. Russia, in the meantime, will have been restored to the Soviet Union's position as an indispensable international player and the key outside actor in the Middle East. This certainly would not serve American interests.

Yet, there is one area where the coincidence in goals is not just possible but vital to the interests of the United States. Today, Russia finds itself under siege. Not by the West, of course, despite what the state propaganda machine asserts on national television daily. It is under siege from what I called the Russian Jihad when testifying a few months ago before Mr. Rohrabacher's subcommittee.

I will be happy to go into more details later in this session. Now, let me mention just a few facts:

- Russia has had more prisoners (9) in Guantanamo than any European nation except for Britain, which also has had 9.⁷
- The first and thus far only Taliban commander ever to be tried in a US federal court was a Russian national. Found guilty, he was sentenced on December 3 of last year to life in prison plus 30 years.⁸
- Russia is surpassed only by Tunisia and Saudi Arabia in the number of its nationals fighting with ISIS (2,400).⁹
- Russian-speaking jihadists, from Russia and the former Soviet Union, make up the second largest group of foreigners fighting with ISIS after Arabic speakers¹⁰ (between 5,000–7,000¹¹). Russian language graffiti has been spotted in Darayya, Syria (“We will pray in your palace, Putin!” and “Tatars and Chechens, rise up!”¹²), and there is even an Univermag grocery store in the “Russian” district of ISIS’s de facto capital of Raqqa, alongside Russian-language schools and kindergartens.¹³

We can't be of much help to Moscow as it struggles to contain the spread of militant Islamism inside Russia. But we can and should cooperate with Moscow in Central Asia, Russia's soft underbelly, to paraphrase Churchill. Next to Afghanistan, Central Asia is likely more vulnerable to the Taliban and ISIS than any other region of the world. The spread of Islamism in Central Asia would bring the Taliban and

⁷ “The Guantanamo Docket,” *New York Times*, <http://projects.nytimes.com/guantanamo/country/russia>; and Andrew McGregor, “A Sour Freedom: The Return of Russia’s Guantanamo Bay Prisoners,” *Jamestown Foundation, North Caucasus Analysis*, vol. 7, no. 22, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5btt_news%5d=3258&no_cache=1#.Va1EIKRVhHx.

⁸ Voice of America, “US Sentences Russian Taliban Fighter to Life in Prison,” December 3, 2015, <http://www.voanews.com/content/us-sentences-russian-taliban-fighter-to-life-in-prison/3087254.html>.

⁹ “Foreign Fighters. An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq,” Soufan Group, December 2015.

¹⁰ Mehdi Jedinia, “IS ‘Cyrillic Jihadists’ Create Their Own Community in Syria,” Voice of America, March 30, 2016.

¹¹ See, for example, Neil MacFarquhar, “For Russia, Links Between Caucasus and ISIS Provoke Anxiety,” *New York Times*, November 20, 2015. An estimate by Alexei Malashenko of the Moscow Carnegie Center is between 2,000 and 7,000. Alexei Malashenko, “Что означают последние теракты для мусульман России” (What the recent terrorist acts mean for Russian Muslims), *Carnegie.ru*, November 18, 2015. The Soufan group’s estimates of ISIS fighters from Russia (2,400) and the former Soviet Republics (4,700) totals 7,100. “Foreign Fighters. An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq,” Soufan Group, December 2015.

¹² “V Tatarstane natsional-speratisty ob’yavili o podderzhke boevikov-islamistov v Sirii” (In Tatarstan national-separatists announce support of militant Islamists in Syria), *Regnum*, June 13, 2013.

¹³ Daniil Turovskiy, “Rossiyane protiv Rossiyan v Sirii: Chto izvestno o vykhodtsakh iz Rossii, voyuyushchikh na Blizhnem Vostoke” (Russians against Russians in Syria: What is known about Russian citizens fighting in the Middle East), *Meduza*, March 28, 2016; and Mehdi Jedinia, “IS ‘Cyrillic Jihadists’ Create Their Own Community in Syria,” VOA, March 30, 2016.

ISIS virtually to Russia's borders—not to mention the hundreds of thousands of Central Asian refugees fleeing to Russia from the Taliban and ISIS if the Central Asian states begin to fall like dominos.

Yes, it is Russia's problem. But it will be Washington's problem as well if an area with a population of 68 million people becomes another terrorist heaven and a magnet for would-be world jihadists.

Again, I'll be happy to discuss the signs and causes of the Central Asian peril as well as how Russia and the United States can work together there. Let me state only that there is a hopeful track record of US-Russian cooperation in trying to stabilize Afghanistan. That experience may be able to inform a joint effort to defend Central Asia from subversion and ultimately a takeover by militant fundamentalism.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.