

Understanding Russia, Un-Demonizing Putin

Since Vladimir Putin became president of Russia in 2000, there has been a steady barrage of negative press and hostility from the West. With Putin up for reelection this year, Sharon Tennison tries to separate fact from fiction.

By Sharon Tennison

Russian President Vladimir Putin obviously has his faults and has made his share of mistakes. Yet, my experiences with him, as well as what I have heard over the years from people I trust — including U.S. officials who have with him worked closely — indicate that Putin is essentially a straightforward, reliable and exceptionally inventive man.

The Russian president is clearly a long-term thinker and planner and has proven to be an excellent analyst and strategist. He is a leader who can quietly work toward his goals under mounds of accusations and myths that have been steadily leveled at him since he became the Russian Federation's second president.

I've stood by silently watching the demonization of Putin grow since it began in the early 2000s — I pondered my thoughts and concerns, and included them in a book published in 2011.

Like others who have had direct experience with this little-understood figure, I've tried to no avail to avoid being labeled a "Putin apologist." If one is even neutral about him, they are called "soft on Putin" by pundits and average citizens who get their news from CNN, Fox and MSNBC.

I don't pretend to be an expert, just an NGO program developer who has lived in Russia and the Soviet Union for the past 30 years. But during this time, I have had far more direct, on-the-ground contact with Russians of all stripes across 11 time zones than any of the Western reporters or for that matter any of Washington's officials.

Understanding Differences

I've been in country long enough to reflect deeply on Russian history and culture, to study their psychology and conditioning, and to understand the marked differences between American and Russian mentalities which so complicate our political relations with their leaders.

As with personalities in a family or a civic club or in a city hall, it takes understanding and compromise to be able to create workable relationships when

basic conditionings are different. Washington has been notoriously disinterested in understanding these differences and attempting to meet Russia halfway.

In addition to my personal experience with Putin, I've had discussions with numerous U.S. officials and American businessmen who have had years of experience working with him — I believe it is safe to say that none would describe him as “brutal” or “thuggish,” or the other slanderous terms used to describe him in Western media.

I met Putin years before he ever dreamed of being president of Russia, as did many of us working in St. Petersburg during the 1990s. Since the anti-Putin vilification started, I've become nearly obsessed with understanding his character. I think I've read every major speech he has given (including the full texts of his annual hours-long telephone “talk-ins” with Russian citizens).

I've been trying to ascertain whether he has changed for the worse since being elevated to the presidency, or whether he is a straight character cast into a role of villain that he never anticipated — and is using sheer wits to try to do the best he can to deal with Washington under extremely difficult circumstances.

If the latter is the case, and I think it is, he should get high marks for his performance over the past 14 years. It was no accident that Forbes declared him the World's Most Powerful person of 2013, replacing Barack Obama who held the title in 2012. The following is my one personal experience with Putin.

The year was 1992, two years after the implosion of communism. The place was St. Petersburg.

Meeting Putin

For years I had been creating programs to open up relations between the U.S. and USSR, and hopefully to help Soviet people to get beyond their entrenched top-down mentalities. A new program possibility emerged in my head. Since I expected it might require a signature from the Marienskii City Hall, an appointment was made.

My friend Volodya Shestakov and I showed up at a side door entrance to the Marienskii building. We found ourselves in a small, dull brown office, facing a rather trim nondescript man in a brown suit.

He inquired about my reason for coming in. After scanning the proposal I provided he began asking intelligent questions. After each of my answers, he asked the next relevant question.

I became aware that this interviewer was different than other Soviet bureaucrats who always seemed to fall into chummy conversations with foreigners with hopes of obtaining bribes in exchange for the Americans' requests.

This bureaucrat was open, inquiring, and impersonal in demeanor. After more than an hour of careful questions and answers, he quietly explained that he had tried hard to determine if the proposal was legal, then said that unfortunately at the time it was not. A few good words about the proposal were uttered. That was all. He politely showed us to the door.

Out on the sidewalk, I said to my colleague, "Volodya, this is the first time we have ever dealt with a Soviet bureaucrat who didn't ask us for a trip to the U.S. or something valuable!"

I remember looking at his business card in the sunlight — it read Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin.

An Unexpected Briefing

Two years later, in 1994, U.S. Consul General Jack Gosnell put in an SOS call to me in St. Petersburg. He had 14 Congress members and the new American Ambassador to Russia, Thomas Pickering, coming to St. Petersburg in the next three days. He needed immediate help.

I scurried over to the Consulate and learned that Gosnell intended me to brief this auspicious delegation and the incoming ambassador.

I was stunned but he insisted. They were coming from Moscow and were furious about how U.S. funding was being wasted there. Gosnell wanted them to hear the "good news" about my NGO — the Center for Citizen Initiatives — and its programs which were showing fine results. In the next 24 hours Gosnell and I also set up "home" meetings in a dozen Russian entrepreneurs' small apartments for the arriving dignitaries (St. Petersburg State Department people were aghast, since it had never been done before, but Gosnell overruled).

Only later in 2000, did I learn of Gosnell's former three-year experience with Vladimir Putin in the 1990s while the latter was running the city for Mayor Sobchak. More on this further down.

December 31, 1999

At the turn of the millennium, with no warning, President Boris Yeltsin made the announcement to the world that from the next day forward he was vacating his office and leaving Russia in the hands of an unknown Vladimir Putin.

On hearing the news, I thought surely not the man I remembered — he could never

lead Russia, I thought. The next day a NYT article included a photo.

Yes, it was the same Putin I'd met years ago! I was shocked and dismayed, telling friends, "This is a disaster for Russia, I've spent time with this guy, he is too introverted and too intelligent — he will never be able to relate to Russia's masses."

Further, I lamented: "For Russia to get up off of its knees, two things must happen: 1) The arrogant young oligarchs have to be removed by force from the Kremlin, and 2) A way must be found to remove the regional bosses (governors) from their fiefdoms across Russia's 89 regions."

It was clear to me that the man in the brown suit would never have the instincts or guts to tackle Russia's overriding twin challenges.

Oligarchs on Edge

Almost immediately Putin began putting Russia's oligarchs on edge. In February 2000 a question about the oligarchs came up; he clarified with a question and his answer: What should the relationship be with the so-called oligarchs? The same as anyone else. The same as the owner of a small bakery or a shoe repair shop.

This was the first signal that the tycoons would no longer be able to flaunt government regulations or count on special access in the Kremlin. It also made the West's capitalists nervous.

After all, these oligarchs were wealthy untouchable businessmen — good capitalists, never mind that they got their enterprises illegally and were putting their profits in offshore banks.

Four months later Putin called a meeting with the oligarchs and proposed a deal: They could keep their illegally acquired wealth-producing Soviet enterprises and they would not be nationalized *if* taxes were paid on their revenues and if they personally stayed out of politics.

This was the first of Putin's "elegant solutions" to the near-impossible challenges facing the new Russia. But the deal also put Putin in crosshairs with U.S. media and officials who then began to champion the oligarchs, particularly Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

The latter became highly political, didn't pay taxes, and prior to being apprehended and jailed was in the process of selling a major portion of Russia's largest private oil company, Yukos Oil, to Exxon Mobil. Unfortunately, to U.S. media and governing structures, Khodorkovsky became a martyr (and remains so up

to today).

Yeltsin's Criminals

In March 2000 I arrived in St. Petersburg. A Russian friend (a psychologist) since 1983 came for our usual visit. My first question was, "Lena what do you think about your new president?" She laughed and retorted, "Volodya! I went to school with him!"

She began to describe Putin as a quiet youngster, poor, fond of martial arts, who stood up for kids being bullied on the playgrounds. She remembered him as a patriotic youth who applied for the KGB prematurely after graduating secondary school (they sent him away and told him to get an education).

He went to law school, later reapplied and was accepted. I must have grimaced at this, because Lena said: "Sharon in those days we all admired the KGB and believed that those who worked there were patriots and were keeping the country safe. We thought it was natural for Volodya to choose this career."

My next question was: "What do you think he will do with Yeltsin's criminals in the Kremlin?"

Putting on her psychologist hat, she contemplated the question and replied that if left to his normal behaviors, Putin would watch them for a while to be sure what was going on, then he would likely throw up some flares to let them know that he was watching. If they didn't respond, he would address them personally, and if the behaviors still didn't change, some would probably spend time in prison.

I congratulated her via email when her predictions began to pan out in real time.

Through the 2000s

Into Putin's first year as Russia's president, U.S. officials seemed to suspect that he would be antithetical to America's interests — his every move was called into question in American media. I couldn't understand why and was chronicling these developments on my computer and newsletters.

During the same period, St. Petersburg's many CCI alumni were being interviewed to determine how the Production Enhancement Program business training program was working and how we could make the U.S. experience more valuable for their new small businesses. Most believed that the program had been enormously important, even life changing. Lastly, each was asked: "So what do you think of your new president?"

None responded negatively, even though at that time entrepreneurs hated Russia's bureaucrats. Most answered similarly, "Putin registered my business a few years ago."

Next question: "So, how much did it cost you?"

To a person they replied, "Putin didn't charge anything." One said that they had gone to Putin's desk because the others providing registrations at the Marienskii were getting "rich on their seats." In other words, Putin had been earning a reputation for honesty and fair-dealing.

U.S.-Russian Relations

The U.S. Consul General, Jack Gosnell, had a close relationship with Putin when he was deputy mayor of St. Petersburg. The two of them worked closely to create joint ventures and other ways to promote relations between the two countries. Gosnell related that Putin was always straightforward, courteous and helpful.

When Putin's wife, Ludmila, was in a severe auto accident, Gosnell took the liberty to arrange hospitalization and airline travel for her to get medical care in Finland. When Gosnell told Putin, he reported that the latter was overcome by the generous offer, but ended saying that he couldn't accept this favor, that Ludmila would have to recover in a Russian hospital.

She did — although medical care in Russia was notoriously bad in the 1990s.

A senior officer at the Center for Strategic and International Studies whom I was friends with in the 2000s worked closely with Putin on a number of joint ventures during the 1990s. He reported that he had no dealings with Putin that were questionable, that he respected him and believed he was getting an undeserved dour reputation from U.S. media.

As a matter of fact, he closed the door at CSIS when we started talking about Putin. I guessed his comments wouldn't be acceptable if others were listening.

Another former U.S. official also reported working closely with Putin, saying there was never any hint of bribery, pressuring, nothing but respectable behaviors and helpfulness.

I had two encounters in 2013 with State Department officials regarding Putin. At the first one, I felt free to ask the question I had previously yearned to get answered: When did Putin become unacceptable to Washington officials and why?

Without hesitation the answer came back: The "knives were drawn," I was told, as soon as it was announced that Putin would be the next president. From what I was told, it seemed that his previous status as a KGB officer had something to do

with it.

When I offered that Bush-41 had previously led the CIA, the reply was that Bush was “our guy,” so this made no difference.

The second encounter was a former State Department official with whom I had participated in a radio interview on Russia. Afterward while we were chatting, I remarked, “You might be interested to know that I’ve collected experiences of Putin from numerous people, some over a period of years, and they all say they had no negative experiences with Putin and there was no evidence of taking bribes.”

He firmly replied: “No one has ever been able to come up with a bribery charge against Putin.”

Demonization and Reality

From 2001 until today, I’ve watched the U.S. media negatively portray Putin, comparing him to Hitler, and making accusations against him of ordering assassinations and poisonings. Yet no one has come up with any concrete evidence for these allegations.

During this period, I’ve traveled throughout Russia several times every year, and have watched the country slowly change under Putin’s watch. Taxes were lowered, inflation lessened, and laws slowly put in place. Schools and hospitals began improving. Small businesses were growing, agriculture was showing improvement, and stores were becoming stocked with food.

Alcohol controls were strengthened, smoking was banned from buildings, and life expectancy began increasing. Highways were being laid across the country, new rails and modern trains appeared even in far out places, and the banking industry was becoming dependable. Russia was beginning to look like a decent country — certainly not where Russians hoped it to be long term, but improving incrementally for the first time in their memories.

In addition to St. Petersburg and Moscow, in September 2013 I traveled out to the Ural Mountains, spent time in Ekaterinburg, Chelyabinsk and Perm. We traveled between cities via autos and rail — the fields and forests look healthy, small towns sport new paint and construction. Today’s Russians look much like Americans — which makes sense considering we get the same clothing from China.

Old concrete Khrushchev block houses are giving way to new multi-story private residential complexes, which are lovely. High-rise business centers, fine hotels and great restaurants are now commonplace — and ordinary Russians frequent

these places. Two- and three-story private homes rim these Russian cities far from Moscow.

We visited new museums, municipal buildings and huge supermarkets. Streets are in good condition, highways are newly renovated and well-marked now, and service stations look like those dotting American highways. In January 2014 I went to Novosibirsk out in Siberia where similar new construction was noted. Streets were kept navigable with constant snowplowing, modern lighting kept the city bright all night, lots of new traffic lights (with seconds counting down to light change) have appeared.

It is astounding to me how much progress Russia had made in the past 14 years since an unknown man with no experience walked into Russia's presidency and took over a country that was flat on its belly.

Understanding the Misunderstanding

So why do our leaders and media demean and demonize Putin and Russia? To paraphrase Shakespeare, is it a case of protesting too much?

Psychologists tell us that people often project on to others what they don't want to face in themselves. Others carry our "shadow" when we refuse to own it. We confer on others the very traits that we are horrified to acknowledge in ourselves.

Could this apply to nations as well? Is this why we constantly find fault with Putin and Russia?

Could it be that we project on to Putin the sins of ourselves and our leaders?

Could it be that we condemn Russia's corruption in order to ignore the corruption within our corporate world?

Could it be that we condemn their human rights and LGBT issues, not facing the fact that we haven't resolved our own?

Could it be that we accuse Russia of "reconstituting the USSR" because of what we do to remain the world's "hegemon"?

Could it be that we project nationalist behaviors on Russia, because that is what we have become and we don't want to face it?

Could it be that we project warmongering off on Russia, because of what we have done over the past several administrations?

Could we be accusing Russia of election-meddling because we do this ourselves?

Whether we can answer these questions with any certainty, one thing I am quite sure of is that 99% of those who excoriate Putin in mainstream media have had no personal contact with him at all. They write articles on hearsay, rumors and fabrication, or they read scripts others have written on their tele-prompters. This is how our nation gets its "news," such as it is.

There is a well-known code of ethics worth bearing in mind: Is it the Truth; Is it Fair; Does it build Friendship and Goodwill; and Will it be Beneficial for All Concerned?

It seems to me that if our nation's leaders would commit to using these four principles in international relations, the world would operate in a completely different manner, and human beings across this planet would live in better conditions than they do today.

Sharon Tennison ran a successful NGO in Russia funded by philanthropists, American foundations, USAID and Department of State, designing new programs and refining old ones, and evaluating Russian delegates' U.S. experiences for over 20 years. She adapted the Marshall Plan Tours from the 40s and 50s, and created the Production Enhancement Program (PEP) for Russian entrepreneurs, the largest ever business training program between the U.S. and Russia. Running several large programs concurrently during the 90s and 2000s, funding disappeared shortly after the 2008 financial crisis set in. Tennison still runs an orphanage program in Russia, is President and Founder, Center for Citizen Initiatives, a member of Rotary Club of Palo Alto, California, and author of *The Power of Impossible Ideas: Ordinary Citizens' Extraordinary Efforts to Avert International Crises*. The author can be contacted at sharon@ccisf.org.
