



DANIEL MORGAN GRADUATE SCHOOL
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presents

“Playing Chess with Putin”

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It has been an embarrassingly one-sided game so far. One team has seized initiative and has executed one winning play after another, and the other has rushed from crisis to crisis, ceded much of the playing field. Its perennially, improvised defenses have been largely ineffective, and offensive, forward-looking plays virtually non-existent. Russian soccer fans would call it, *игра в одни ворота*, meaning, “The play in only one goal to convey the lopsidedness of this situation.”

Surely it’s high time for a pause, for a deep breath, and a longer view in order to anticipate the opponent’s moves rather than merely react to them; and, most importantly, begin to develop and implement a strategy of our own. So, let’s change the game. With a nostalgic nod to my middle school tournaments in Moscow, let’s play chess with Putin.

Now, before sitting down, any respectable player researches the opponent. One needs to study his or her past to uncover patterns, the leitmotifs, the rhythms of the game, and of course the strengths and the flaws. Now in that record, in Putin’s case the good news, is that while he is a clever and decisive tactician, he is no heir to the great Soviet grandmasters, Mikhail Botvinnik, Vasilii Smoslov, Boris Paskhim, Mikahil Tal, or Gary Kasparov.

The US does not have to play at Bobby Fischer’s level either, competent, deliberate, plotting, but consistent and steady will do very nicely. The not so good news is that the Russian ruler brings to the game the speed and the relentless attack of his favorite sport; Putin is a *judoka* meaning a “Judo enthusiast.” His moves at home and abroad have the pattern of the judo match: watch your opponent like a hawk, push or catch him off balance, and then exploit advantage in a lightning move. Pauses are only preludes to further assaults, and patience is the key. Most matches are won not by a single throw or *ippon*, which gives you ten points and an instant victory, but rather by a steady accretion of points; seven points *waza-ari*, *yuko* which is five points, and *koka* which is three points. But of course the tactics are shaped by strategy; and strategies dictated by convictions; and convictions establish the strategic goals.

What do we know about what might be called Putin’s credo, what are the tenants of that credo? I’ll single out four. One: Russia is never wrong but is perennially wronged—mostly by the West. He follows his favorite philosopher, Ivan Ilyin, in the conviction that the West’s hostility toward Russia is eternal and prompted by the West’s jealousy of Russia’s size, her natural riches and, most of all, her incorruptible,

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saintly soul and God-bestowed mission to be the third Rome, the light among the nations. The plots against Russia are, therefore, relentless and while truces are possible and often advantageous, complete, genuine, and lasting peace with the West is very unlikely.

Such narratives, of course, have been the staple of inter-war, fascist regimes all over Europe; primarily, Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany. The narratives of victimhood at the hands of external enemies; and Ilyin may have borrowed, or at least may have been influenced by them, but regardless of how original this train of thought is in Ilyin, it clearly has resonated very powerfully with Putin.

Tenant number two: the end of the Cold War was Russia's equivalent of the 1919 Versailles Treaty for Germany: the meek acceptance of a crushing defeat and the source of endless humiliation and misery.

Tenant number three: the end of the Soviet Union was, in Putin's famous phrase, "the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the Twentieth century."

And now to the last, and fourth, tenant in Putin's credo—and it is an operational corollary of the first three—the overarching strategic agenda of any truly patriotic Russian leader—and not an idiot or a traitor like Gorbachev or Yeltsin—is to recover and repossess for the Russian state political, economic, and geo-strategic assets lost by the Soviet state at the end of the Soviet Union. This is what a few years ago, I think in *Foreign Affairs Magazine*, I called the Putin Doctrine. This is how he proceeded from day one and this is how he's proceeding today.

By the time he left the presidency in 2009—for place holding by Dmitry Medvedev—Putin had largely implemented the domestic side of the Putin Doctrine; national politics, media, first and foremost television, the courts, and what Lenin called "the commanding heights of the economy," were all again owned or controlled by the state. Those assets have been successfully recovered.

Now after he returned to his third presidency in 2012, Putin turned to the foreign policy aspects of the doctrine, and there were several reasons for that. First, there was a defense modernization program implemented by the former Defense Minister, Anatoly Serdyukov, and it had begun to bear fruit by 2012. Now, as always, a great deal was stolen, a great deal had been wasted, but by 2012 this ten-year, 22 trillion ruble—or in much "heavier" rubles of 2008, 700 billion dollars—program had resulted in a significantly increased number of battle-ready units, the weakness that was exposed in the very brief war with Georgia, if you remember in August of 2008. The Soviet era equipment was largely phased out, and most importantly a new generation of strategic nuclear missiles came on-line.

The second reason for the turn to the recovery of geostrategic assets, and the neck of his foreign policy, was that Putin sensed—quite correctly—a large and widening window opportunity in the West which was distracted, uninterested in foreign policy, preoccupied with its own ideological agendas, and increasingly isolationist. Most importantly, however, the turn to an activist foreign policy was caused by a powerful, domestic political imperative, that imperative that is still with us, in fact its effect and power continue to grow and that is our key problem today with Russia.

By Putin's third term, the toxic investment climate and the national economy's dependence on commodity exports—primarily oil and gas—had reduced economic growth to a crawl even with oil prices still historically in high 2012. Public opinion polls consistently revealed people's attitude toward the regime as incompetent, callous, and utterly corrupt. In the words of Putin's close friend, his former first deputy prime minister, his minister of finance, and the man responsible for bringing Putin from St. Petersburg to Moscow, Alexei Kudron, "Russia had hit an institutional wall and the new economic model was required." Now, of course that new economic model Kudron and others inside and outside the

government spelled out in a pretty detailed way required significant institutional reforms. Both economic and political including reliable guarantees of property rights, more honest courts, a real war on corruption, greater government transparency, a significant reduction in the state's control or ownership of the economy, primarily the giant state or quasi-state enterprises, and, of course, reorientation from oil and gas. All of which Putin wrote about in his doctoral dissertation, that is whomever wrote it for him, called, "The Engines of Russian Development and Social Progress for the Next Fifty Years."

A few months before Putin's reelection, mass anti-regime demonstrations broke out in over one hundred Russian cities and towns. If you look at the very clever and very sarcastic posters that people were carrying, they were *ad hominem*, mercilessly, savagely, and anti-Putin as well. If you recall also that then, as now, Putin's personal popularity is the key to the foundation of regime's legitimacy. By the end of 2013, when Putin's popularity reached its lowest point since 2000, the situation was quite serious. Now if Vladimir Putin is given to personal and professional nightmares, chief among them surely must be historical examples where liberal reforms spin out of control and undermine the regime.

So, must Putin be willing to undertake institutional reforms advised by Kudron on the one hand and be confronted with the obvious decline of the regime's appeal and a steady decline of his popularity on the other? Putin has made likely the most fateful decision of his political career, he began to switch the basis of the regime support from what Samuel Huntington called "performance legitimacy," which is legitimacy based on economic growth and steady growth of personal incomes, toward what might be called patriotic mobilization, or as some of my Russian colleagues call it "militarized patriotism".

Carl von Clausewitz famously said that "war is continuation of politics by other means" and in the case of Putin's Russia today, foreign policy, including war, has become not just a continuation but a key component in the foundation of domestic politics. These new domestic politics rested on two, overlapping propaganda meta-narratives: first, Russia was rising "from its knees"—this is the staple catchphrase of Russian propaganda—and because of that the West declared a war on it. Secondly, 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 he will also recover for it the Soviet Union status of being globally feared and therefore globally respected.

On the national television, where an overwhelming majority of the Russians go for their news, foreign policy became a mesmerizing kaleidoscope of breathtaking initiatives and brilliant successes. There, Russians could follow the annexation of Crimea, the war in Ukraine, and, of course, Putin's involvement on the ground in the Syrian Civil War. Russian state television even included launching a volley of cruise missiles to mark Putin's 63rd birthday on October 7th of last year.

Thus far, the shift to patriotic mobilization must be judged a success. The patriotic fervor at the sight of the motherland besieged, yet somehow also victorious, has apparently obscured to the millions of Russians the economic reality of two years of recession, last year's reduction of GDP by almost four percent, an inflation rate of thirteen percent, and the share of the Russians' income dropping below the poverty line which is \$116 per month—almost doubling in the past two years to sixteen percent, or twenty-three million people.

You all have heard about Putin's astronomic popularity, in many regards of course this is a tribute to the tightness of the monopolistic propaganda that denies exposure to anything or anybody contradicting the official narrative. As Russians would put it "if in the town, all restaurants are closed, and in the one open restaurant only one dish is served, that dish will soon be judged the most popular dish." But, it goes beyond that.

Putin has hit on something that the pro-democracy revolutionaries of the 1990s and 1980s tended to disregard: the deep seeded trauma of a loss of their country's self-proclaimed, exceptional status of being a global opponent of what they consider the U.S. ban on global dominance. That is the mission that until Putin recovered, or said he recovered, was lost and that truly had rank. Now, when they think of Putin the politician, even today, the Russians are not blind. Look at the consistent Levada polls. Only sixty percent trust him and only fifty-five percent tell the pollsters that they would vote for Putin in the next election. But, the trick, and here it is attributed to Putin's communication skills and to the abilities of his team, that when the Russians are asked a more general question—not “do you trust Putin,” not “would you vote for him,” but, “do you approve of [what] he is doing,” in effect, they're asked whether they approve of a new proud, sovereign—in Putin's favorite term—Russia, which is again powerful, which is again feared.

He has succeeded in becoming the epitome and the symbol of this recovered national pride as Putin's Deputy Chief of Staff, Vyacheslav Volodin, put it a couple of years ago, "There is no Russia if there is no Putin". The Russian commentators see it this way. There is a symbolic, not economic, not material, but a *symbolic* comfort that is derived by millions of Russians, from their country ostensibly being on the side of justice, on the side of goodness, and the light in the battle of evil and darkness, and “It is a sense of one's own deep righteousness against the background of everyone else's being wrong.” Put in another way, and I'm quoting another Russian analyst that I respect, "Russia is saving the world from the American tyranny and for that we are ready to sacrifice everything, do you approve?" In the polls it virtually becomes a rhetorical question.

Putin has settled the tiger of patriotic fervor and expertly made a trot in the right direction, and briskly. Yet, the obvious problem with this mode of transportation is that the tiger requires an increasingly large supply of meat, the bloodier the better. So the question—the strategic question for you as policymakers is this, can the tiger be slowed down and in the end can Putin be made to get off that tiger? There are no ironclad guarantees of course but there is something that I think can and should be done because the higher the patriotic pitch, the greater the risk of disappointment that reverses.

A century and a half of Russian modern history is an ambiguous demonstration of that proposition. Some of the sharpest reforms including revolutions have occurred following foreign policies that have led to military setbacks. The great liberal reforms of Alexander II, essentially a revolution from above, including the liberation of the serfs, happened after Russia's defeat in the Crimean War which lasted from 1853 – 1856. The 1905 Revolution followed a disastrous war with Japan. The 1917 Bolshevik revolution was in large measure due to the successive defeats and setbacks in Russia's prosecution of World War One. Khrushchev's ouster in October of 1964 was due to the embarrassment of his retreat in the Cuban Missile Crisis. Moreover, Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost*, of course, are rooted in large measure in the quagmire of the preceding nine years of the war in Afghanistan.

Putin knows this history and so here is what I submit to you—in the short-run certainly, perhaps even in the medium-run—as the key strategy that might be well adopted by the West and probably should be. The only way of making Putin at least to contemplate a change of course is to try and increase the domestic political costs and risks of his foreign policy: not the economic risks, not the foreign policy risks, but domestic political risks. The regime's sustaining political dynamic must be gradually reversed. In other words, the foreign policy which today is almost the sole source of the regime's successes legitimacy and popular support must be turned gradually in to a wellspring of doubt, embarrassment, humiliation, and remorse. Let me reiterate: there is no guarantee that this would work, Putin may have gone too far to stop relying on the patriotic mobilization, and the risks of domestic political dislocations may be great.

Yet, at the moment, I personally do not see any other way to try and influence Putin's calculations by at least making him weigh risks and costs of his foreign policy—something that he has largely been spared until now.

Let's remember also that this is a process. There is no need for checkmates. Slowing down Putin's momentum would suffice. There is a chess term called *zugzwang* when every move can only worsen a player's position. There is also a *pat* when a player cannot move and that would be fine as well. Let's not gun for checkmates. Remember, this is not a one game blitz, but it is a classic best-of-twenty-four-games championship match.

Given what we have on the board now, the few, obvious gambit moves, should be aimed at the areas where Putin's chessmen have gotten pretty close to our king. Syria: work towards the removal of the Assad regime, which has repeatedly been condemned by the West for its crimes against humanity. Regardless of what Putin tells foreign audiences and foreign leaders, he has repeatedly emphasized to domestic audiences that his involvement in Syria is, as he puts it, "To stabilize the lawful authority," which is the Assad regime. That is the key objective of the Russian intervention in Syria. Everything else is of second and third in importance. Now, after he received Assad and the Kremlin last October, he owns that regime and therefore Assad's survival in the meta-narrative of domestic propaganda is yet another sign and another piece of evidence of Putin's invisibility and his brilliance, and thus a component of the regime's legitimizing narrative. A reversal of Assad's fortune will make this narrative significantly less credible and that, of course, is what the West must try to do.

Two points on Ukraine: specifically relating to military and economic issues. The West needs to follow-up the September decision by the administration to send counter battery radars to Ukraine with more defensive weapons, such as anti-tank missiles. Now, many Russians cheered the defense of their ethnic brethren against the so-called Nazi *junta* in Kiev. But remember that the fathers and the mothers of Russia's soldiers today lost friends, brothers, older brothers, and fiancés in Afghanistan; and so much as they are cheering for a relatively, or at least "relatively" for propaganda purposes, bloodless victories, in Ukraine. They are not likely to support a conflict fraught with significant casualties.

The Kremlin knows this, which is why Putin recently signed a law making casualties in the so-called special operations in peace time a state secret and their disclosure a punishable treason. Now, some of my colleagues and friends pointed out to "the danger of provoking Putin" (a quote) by supplying Ukraine even with the most obvious defensive weapons. This is an argument that deserves considerable attention. Yet, here is what I submit to you in terms of risk mitigation. First, Putin's *modus operandi* from what we have seen in the past fifteen years has proven to be guided by his own policy schedule. His hand rarely, if ever, has been forced by provocations of any kind. Secondly, the alleged provocation, in other words, we have already absorbed the political and diplomatic price of this provocation—or so-called provocation because as far as Putin and the Russian narrative is concerned the *Maidan* Revolution was a CIA plot—just turn on the Russian television. Putin has called Ukraine, NATO's foreign legion and, as Russians would put it, America has been at war with Russia except America doesn't know it yet. It is hard to see how a few anti-tank missile batteries are going to force Putin to do in Ukraine what he otherwise would not do. And now the sanctions imposed on Russia when Putin annexed Crimea and subsequently what is known as a hybrid war on Ukraine, I said and wrote from the very beginning that we have to be very clear and very honest about the sanctions and their effectiveness. They are not going to sway Putin's policy sharply, certainly not in the short-term. It is worth remembering, however, that we're playing a chess match for an accretion of points not a quick checkmate. Again, the aim of this exercise is to force Putin to make hard choices, something that he has been spared until now.

Today, the sanctions are beginning to be felt, and they're felt by the largest commodity export companies, which, in turn, are the regimes only reliable source of tax revenue. Rosneft, Russia's largest company, is unable to borrow abroad and has more-or-less began to blackmail the government by asking for a loan between \$25 billion and \$42 billion. In fact, it threatened to shut down some of its oil fields because they claim they do not have the operational capital to maintain some of their oil fields.

But that is still long-term. The short-term is that now that these sanctions are preventing, let's say Rosneft, from borrowing or engaging in borrowing for longer than ninety day loans with catastrophic rates, Russia itself is not sanctioned, but clearly if Rosneft is sanctioned then the Russian sovereign debt is much harder to sell as well. And so, Putin is increasingly forced to choose between increasing defense budgets and spending an estimated two to four million dollars a day in Syria on the one hand and, on the other hand, essentially robbing the thirty-eight million Russian retirees, pensioners—Putin's political base—by indexing their pensions at about a third of the current inflation rate. Their rate last year was indexed at four percent and as I said the inflation is thirteen percent.

Additionally, Putin must choose between further cuts in healthcare and education or supplying and defending the Russian enclave in Southeastern Ukraine to the tune of \$36 billion a year. Or, risk mass protests against newly imposed taxes as happened incidentally a few months ago with the so-called long distance truck drivers. As a tribute to Putin's political agility, the situation was handled rather quickly. Nonetheless, this was the first of what might be called "work action" by a significant number of Russians since the so-called monetization of the "in kind" pension reform in 2006-2007.

On the diplomatic front, talk to Russia. We should talk to Russia, but only talk to them when there is a reasonably good chance of strategic gains for the U.S. and therefore discontinue open-ended, ill-prepared, last minute summits, because these summits are not cost-free politically.

From the Soviet days where the only country that ever mattered to the Soviet Union was the United States, a meeting with the president of that country has always been a sizable addition to the regime's domestic legitimacy and especially the leader's domestic legitimacy. Conversely, being snubbed by the U.S. president raises the issue of leader's ability to stay relevant in world affairs and of Russia or the Soviet Union status as a global player.

So, the propaganda symbols were powerful, especially in the Russian media's portrayal of the Obama-Putin September 28th meeting on the margins of the UN general assembly. After bravely hectoring the U.S. in his speech, Putin was still granted the summit with the American president: "This is how indispensable, how brilliant, and how persuasive our leader is and how powerful is the country that he represents." As far as I know, the United States got absolutely nothing out of that summit. For that same reason, I would significantly reduce the Secretary of State's seemingly incessant consultations with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Moscow, Sochi, or Vienna. The diplomatic common ground that Secretary Kerry seems to be so desperately seeking will emerge when there is a change in the actual ground in Ukraine and Syria, which is to say when Putin will decide that he could get and gain more from negotiating than from his actions. In other words military action on the ground. Are we there yet? I don't think so.

Now let me make one side bar here, the utility of conferring with Lavrov is further undermined by the significantly lowered status of the foreign ministry in Russian diplomatic decision making. Sergey Lavrov may be aspiring to be another Andrei Gromyko, but Gromyko was a politburo member and Lavrov is certainly not. For whatever passes for politburo in Putin's Kremlin, Lavrov is not there. He's rarely more than a spokesman for the FSB's foreign intelligence that runs virtually all the key projects of Russian foreign policy today, which, by the way, is Putin's other innovation. For the first time in its history,

whether it's Russia or the Soviet Union, the country has not one, not two, but three foreign intelligence services: the GRU, which is military intelligence inherited from the Soviet Union; the KGB's former first directorate which became the SVR; and, finally, the FSB—Putin's *alma mater*—called for its own foreign intelligence service and Putin can't say no to the *alma mater* and the FSB thus acquired its own foreign intelligence service.

Finally, I think we should begin to erase the risk threshold for a so-called hybrid war against Estonia or Latvia, which are the countries with significant Russian minorities. Now, perceptions matter. My teacher at Columbia, the great American sociologist Bob Merton used to say, "When people perceive things as real, they are real in their consequences." Today I see the confirmation of that theory everywhere. Does Putin perceive the dangers of another hybrid war with Latvia or Estonia as real? I'm not sure.

Again, the argument that my colleagues make is that "well, these are NATO members, they are protected by the Article 5, which means a war against one is a war on all of us. Are we eager to test that proposition by an all-out war with Russia? Wouldn't it be cheaper and more effective to deploy more than 150 soldiers in each of those countries?" That is a company. That is an American-sized company, and it is what we have now: 150 in Lithuania, 150 in Estonia, and 150 in Latvia. Wouldn't it be easier and ultimately less-costly to deploy the amount that might impress Putin, that might really be a tripwire that would impress him as he may still do it, especially if the oil prices are going down to \$30 or \$35 per barrel this year and the country is really teetering? Again, he may do it anyway. But, all I'm saying is that in this chess game, how about we start and make our defense a bit more credible.

I began this talk by recounting good and bad news; let me conclude on the same dichotomy. The good news is that for a number of obvious reasons, this is not Cold War Two. The not so good news is that instead, we are confronted with a unique challenge stemming from an unprecedented combination of domestic-political regime and its strategic capability. Why unique and why unprecedented? After all we have dealt with Russia based nuclear-armed dictatorships for the past seventy some years. But here is the thing: when Stalin died, the Soviet Union had no strategic nuclear weapons. They did have a few bombs, but no strategic nuclear weapons. Khrushchev was a risk taker. He was imperious; but, he just began to develop the intercontinental arsenal, which is why he had to put short-range missiles in Cuba. Yet, even when the Soviet Union had plenty of strategic missiles, it was hardly an impulsive personality-based autocracy. It functioned more like a cautious, conservative gerontocracy. By contrast, Putin's regime today and for the foreseeable future, will remain a highly personality-based dictatorship. He is a president for life.

He has stepped onto the Saddam Hussein, Muammar Qaddafi elevator from which there is no exit; except for a *coup*, a natural death, or assassination. And never before has such a regime, resurgent, activist, or messianic in its beliefs been armed with 1,582 strategic nuclear warheads and 550 launchers. Which makes it all the more urgent to sit down to the chess board, the clock has been running for quite some time now.

