

RUSSIA

## What Drives Putin

The historian Gerd Koenen laments that Germans don't grasp how things really stand with Russia.

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Vladimir Putin in Beijing, November 2014

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Mikhail Gorbachev knew what he was talking about when he commented in the late 1990s that if the Soviet Union had broken up in the same way as the former Yugoslavia had, then the wars raging there would seem like a "Flea Waltz."

One year after the annexation of Crimea, executed with military precision, and the unleashing of a war of secession in the Donbass that is being militarily and politically nourished by Russia, there is little doubt that Vladimir Putin is determined to correct the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century," as he called the breakup of the USSR in 2005. In 2012, during his inauguration speech for what was (de facto) his fourth term in office as Russia's president, he set his goal even higher. The "life of our future generations," he said, depends on Russians' "ability to become a leader ... for the whole of Eurasia." In other words, this is the historical project with which he wants to enter the history books: as the restorer of Russia, as the leader of Eurasia.

This is challenging the contractually fixed order of states of this post-Soviet region of the world while also lending the character of an imperial re-establishment to the project of an inherently sensible Eurasian Union. And Ukraine is the indispensable core in this, the choicest piece.

Thus, the agreement signed in Minsk to respect the territorial integrity of the neighboring country (minus Crimea) will initially boil down to an attempt to paralyze and sow disorder throughout this fragile state – precisely with the help of the separatists for whose "people's republic" Moscow doesn't plan to provide any reconstruction assistance or to assume any responsibility. These heavily armed mini-states have proclaimed themselves the Piedmont of a new state brought into play by Putin, called "New Russia," with its own flag and its own parliament. And the fact that "historical maps" showing the borders of this neighboring kingdom stretching from Kharkiv to Dnipropetrovsk to Mariupol to Odessa, where they are supposed to connect with the Russian military protectorate Transnistria, are circulating online can at a minimum serve as a constant threat and catalyst of a "hybrid" stealth warfare in these cities and areas. In any case, one thing is certain: Moscow is not willing or able to accept even a "Finlandized" Ukraine that has a democratic constitution, is associated with the EU and is possibly even a prospering state.

Contrary to all claims, and with grave consequences, the United States is not interested in this conflict because it views Russia as a regional power and already has its hands full in the Middle East and East Asia. The EU and NATO have remarkably held together so far, but the cracks and fractures are easy to discern under the pressure of many crises. At any rate, testing them is the additional, parallel goal of the power struggle with global policies that Putin is currently aiming at.

In this situation, the Merkel/Steinmeier government has combined a remarkable steadfastness with well-nigh heroic efforts to serve whenever possible as intermediaries and interpreters, most recently in the marathon of Minsk, which at least provided a chance to catch one's breath. While one doesn't want to let these lines of communications (the historical "wire to Moscow") be severed completely, attempts are simultaneously being made to draw red lines (before Mariupol or near the Estonian city of Narva), and observations of all kinds are being made about how one could sate Russia with new and further-reaching offers as well as perhaps even reintegrate it with some new kind of "Ostpolitik."

But the real test of Germany's steadfastness is yet to come. Regardless of how broad the majorities in the Bundestag and the ruling coalition are, and no matter how unflinchingly the bulk of journalists have been doing their jobs, it is impossible to miss that, on this issue, there is a grave and partially shrill dissonance between political parties and the media, on the one hand, and a significant segment of the German public, on the other. It is also impossible to miss that these dissonances are being fomented in a professional manner like the one we became familiar with during the Cold War era. The only thing is that the pattern of the war of information that Putin's Russia is aggressively waging has become much more ingenious than the pattern of Soviet propaganda was, and the keyboard of motives, emotions, resentments, interests and attitudes he is playing has a much broader range. But, as always, we are supplying the tool ourselves: the democratic public forums of the West, which are being put at the disposal of the virtuosos of Moscow, including cover stories,

talk-show sets and websites – things that are givens in democracies, but that the Kremlin won't allow its critics for even a minute.

Still, it's no use bemoaning this. Indeed, if this propaganda achieves its desired effect, it will only be because Moscow's new, hybrid global policies can latch on to many emotions, mentalities and experiences of its target group, whether rooted in the past or the present. And, for that, Germany continues to be potentially fertile soil.

This includes, first and foremost, a fear of war and shying away from conflict. This is an achievement of civilization acquired through history – but only insofar as it doesn't mean shielding oneself as the result of prosperity chauvinism or keeping oneself dry in good Swiss fashion. This is often a thin line, and it has been from the beginning. During the uprising in East Berlin and the GRD in June 1953, already Konrad Adenauer avoided making any appearances or comments. And he did the same when the Wall was being built in August 1961. The "Ostpolitik" of the old Federal Republic of Germany played a decisive role in loosening up the blocs and divided Europe. But it was also able (like in the time of Solidarno## and martial law in Poland in 1980/81) to be a rather narrow-minded policy geared toward the interests of West Germans and bound to the status quo. It was very accommodating, as Egon Bahr put it, to the Soviet Brezhnev Doctrine – the precursor to today's Putin Doctrine – of granting a limited degree of sovereignty to neighboring states. And it is again so today. In many ways, this policy remained blind to the growth of opposition groups and to the process of disintegration in the Soviet sphere of power, both of which led to the upheaval of 1989.

It is against this backdrop that Germans have revered Mikhail Gorbachev like no other foreign statesman – without suspecting the predicaments the man had been stuck in for a long time, and without grasping to this very day why Gorbachev is the most hated of all the USSR's former leaders in today's Russia. There, he is hated for the very same reasons that Germans revere him: for being the one to overcome the Cold War and the godfather of German unity. Many people here in Germany are also all too willing to believe Putin's stab-in-the-back legend, that Helmut Kohl promised Gorbachev at that time that "NATO will not advance" – as if a German chancellor could or would be permitted to guarantee to a Soviet head of state that, in exchange for German unity, the countries of Central Europe then liberating themselves could be denied the rights to freely join alliances and, ultimately, to enjoy full sovereignty! Such a notion is as clueless as it is unfathomable.

Ah, yes, the always invoked "lessons of history"! This goes so smoothly that a good part of Germans, who are so conscious of history, is willing to concede to today's Russia a zone of security and influence that runs right about where the map of Eastern Europe was divided – by Ribbentrop for Hitler, and by Molotov for Stalin – in August 1939, from the Baltic region straight through Poland to Romania. This partition of Europe ran along very old mindset lines of Greater Germany and Greater Russia. In Berlin and Moscow, the new states of Central Eastern Europe that were created and recognized by international law in

1919/20 were merely viewed as a hostile cordon sanitaire established by the victorious Western powers – and one that the revision policies of the Weimar Republic and the Soviet Union sought to break through together. Until 1933, this aim was pursued by a collaboration of the German Reichswehr and the Soviet Red Army that was financed by a twin imperial interest fund. And, between 1939 and 1941, this collaboration would once again be sealed in the spirit of an old brotherhood in arms. Here, in the formula of the bothersome and artificial cordon sanitaire, the construct of a supposedly "advancing" NATO aiming to seal Russia off from Europe – and, in particular, from Germany – has its direct historical antecedent.

**ONCE AN EMPIRE AND BACK: 1917**

The Bolshevik Revolution succeeds. Months later, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin makes his first public appearance before crowds gathered on Moscow's Red Square.

**1922**

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) is founded. Two years later, Lenin dies. In the following years, Georgia native Joseph Stalin seizes power for himself and imposes a reign of terror. He eliminates his rivals one after the other before dying in 1953.

**1933**

Stalin's policies of collectivization trigger a starvation crisis in Ukraine known as the "Holodomor" (or "extermination by hunger"). It claims more than 3 million lives.

**1939**

In August, Joachim von Ribbentrop and Vyacheslav Molotov sign a non-aggression treaty between the German Reich and the Soviet Union in the presence of Stalin.

The pact guarantees to the Germans that the Soviets will remain neutral during the upcoming attack on Poland. In a secret protocol, Hitler and Stalin divide Europe into spheres of influence (map). On Sept. 17, 1939, the Red Army invades the regions of eastern Poland assigned to the USSR by the pact. In 1940, the Baltic republics are annexed.

**1991**

In August, a coup attempt fails against Soviet President Gorbachev and Russian President Yeltsin. On December 31, the Soviet Union is officially dissolved.

**2000**

President Yeltsin names Vladimir Putin, a little-known former intelligence officer, his designated successor in 1999. The following year, Putin is elected president. After two terms in office, he allows himself to be replaced by Dmitry Medvedev. In 2012, Putin is re-elected president despite protests.

For Germans, World War II really only began in 1941, not in 1939. Until then, everything was still Blitzkrieg and "Kraft durch Freude" ("Strength through Joy"), with Polish geese and French nylons. In Germans' handed-down experience of the war, "Stalingrad" has become the central metaphor. If "Auschwitz" is the cipher of an abstract shame that produces nothing unequivocal in political terms, and if "Dresden," as a metaphysical criminal tribunal, has left behind in the civil consciousness of Germans a peculiar mix of a ready willingness to submit and a latent resentment, then "Stalingrad" remains filled with the most sensory conception. In this cipher, the average German consciousness intersects with the new Russian historical discourse: All of the war crimes committed back then "in the East" – whether in Poland or the Baltic region, in Belarus or Ukraine – and all of the immense sacrifices made during the Great Patriotic War by the many nations of the USSR were placed, in both moral and political terms, on the historical credit account of an eternal,

mythical "Russia." And this is precisely the credit that Putin is reclaiming today for himself and his rump empire.

Indeed, it is only because of this that he is able to pursue a policy of veiled aggression and open land-grabbing under the banner of the "war against fascism" in Ukraine. An amazingly large number of Germans are at least willing "to understand" him (in the sense of having understanding or sympathy for his situation) on this issue – and therefore to avoid the clarity of the present moment that blinds and (rightfully) frightens us.

But "understanding Russia" can especially not mean denying or explaining away what's happening right before our eyes. Instead, we must understand what is essentially driving Putin and his power elite. That is the question of the hour. Of course, one can rattle off a hundred failures of European policies toward Russia, and one can list all the possible breaches of law, acts of arrogance and crimes of American policies around the world. But none of that can justify the aggression toward Ukraine. And none of that seriously provides a reason for the paranoid constructions of the world that Putin and his ideologues are currently ensnaring themselves and their people in – as well as all of us via outwardly directed propaganda.

In his contribution *The West Doesn't Get It* from the previous issue of DIE ZEIT, Jörg Baberowski used a line of argumentation – and one that was rather radical and astonishing for a recognized scholar of Stalinism – to advocate that the best thing to do would be to give Russia free rein to resume its "imperial mission." The "homeland" of millions of formerly Soviet citizens, Baberowski wrote, has now become "the empire." Ukraine, he continued, is a pure "product of Soviet policies of nationalities and conquest," and its nationalistic self-construction and cult of suffering don't deserve any special respect. Crimes such as murdering millions through starvation or terror have been "committed against all peoples of the USSR," he added, and at least the post-Stalinist Soviet myth "integrated the victims in a paradoxical way" instead of dividing them into nationalities.

Apart from that, Baberowski went on, given the experiences of anarchy in the 1990s, the vast majority of Russians – just like all former Soviet citizens – have readily accepted a "dictatorship" like that of Putin. "The end of democracy was the price," he explained, "that had to be paid" so as to be able re-establish a certain "guarantee of order" and to raise the level of prosperity. Ceaseless grumbling about the fact that the vast majority of Russians prefer an authoritarian social system over a liberal one only bolsters their feelings of "deep humiliation," he continued. In his view, Western politicians and journalists simply haven't figured out "that empires pursue different interests than nation-states do, that pluralistic societies are based on preconditions that must be painstakingly developed."

Of course, one can ask who has prevented Russia and Putin, who has been ruling for 15 years now, from creating these "preconditions." And is the combination of "dictatorship," a hackneyed pseudo-conservatism and a revitalized "imperial mission" really what the country needs right now? In fact, doesn't it actually need the opposite? In his work on the

Bolshevik and Stalinist nationalities policies of the 1920s and 1930s, didn't Baberowski just impressively demonstrate the degree to which the reuniting of the "empire" was based on a violation of the Russian and non-Russian populations alike?

It may be that the West doesn't understand Russia. But does Russia understand itself? Or, rather, isn't its fundamental problem the fact it is neither capable nor willing to face up to what it has in large part done to itself and to genuinely understand what the reasons for its renewed, self-inflicted historical failure have been? But instead of doing that, there is once again frantic searching for external enemies or their internal agents and "fifth columns." Doesn't this syndrome, Jörg Baberowski, have an all-too-familiar ring?

When, after all his studies, a German historian who has written that the history of the Soviet Union under Stalin was a history of violence, arrives at such dubious and ultimately ahistorical conclusions about the imperial mentality of former Soviet citizens, then perhaps better insight could come from the life stories of Russian (and Belarusian) men and women, such as those gathered by Belarusian author Sveltana Alexievich in her book *Second-hand Time*. This polyphonic concert of voices, which sounds like an ancient chorus of Fates, makes it possible for the first time to gauge the depths of the distress from war and civil war, starvation, terror and war again – in short, of the entire tragic history of Russia in the 20th century that has been left behind in the minds of its subjects. There, old men praise the iron fist of Stalin, who crushed all of his internal enemies before supposedly rescuing Russia – and then they suddenly speak of how they themselves were churned through the mills of torture, debasement and destruction and "confessed everything." There are the younger intellectuals who, as Perestroika-intoxicated Gorbachev supporters, stood on the barricades in Moscow in 1991 to block the putschists' tanks. Now unhappy, though not unsuccessful businesspeople, they look back on their naiveté with cynical wistfulness.

Back then, when mass graves were being opened all across that vast country, when many forcibly forgotten figures of Russian literature, art, science and philosophy were being "rehabilitated" by having their vanished texts and images republished and re-displayed, when the entire richness of Russian culture as well as the other cultures of this multi-ethnic empire could finally be viewed again, many members of the Soviet intelligentsia passionately tried to understand what their country had done to itself in this century – and went crazy in the process.

It is true: More than a few even regretted this tentative attempt at making a critical revision to their history and their life stories when the Soviet Union, which had simply been their world, broke apart overnight in the Yeltsin era and, with it, their modest material securities and savings vanished. In reality, this catastrophic upheaval had completely internal causes, without any external enemies worth mentioning. This thought alone was unbearable for many and perhaps even most. Already back then, in the early 1990s, this flushed up a vast number of nebulous conspiracy theories and manic, compulsive thoughts. The USSR,

a superpower, was "unvanquished on the field" – yet it had fallen. At the time, some observers spoke in terms of a "Russian Versailles complex."

Of course, all direct historical analogies are false. However, from the speeches of Putin and those feeding him keywords, one can compile an astounding quotology that in many ways does remind us of the German hysterias of this interwar period. According to this quotology, Russia today – just like it has been for centuries – is the object of a policy of containment fundamentally aimed at breaking it up into pieces. Likewise, Russia is already "the largest divided nation in the world." And Russians must be careful, Putin obsessively warns them, not to "lose themselves" lest their land "be dissolved in the world." They must return to the "traditional values" of their history, which they have to thank for all of their historical victories.

The only thing is, what are the "traditional values" of this Russia-Soviet history? For years, Putin has been trying – with the help of entire staffs of spin doctors and ideology designers – to develop a new, hyper-patriotic national narrative. It is supposed to yoke together everything from the real history of Russia and its collapse in 1917 and the Bolsheviks' violent restoration of the empire – the czar and Stalin, the church and the secret police, the white generals and the red commissars, the nameless victims of the terror and their willing executioners. All of this can only make a historian shudder. But, in it, one can discern not only a mental, but also an actual symptom that must be taken seriously: that of an inner void and a fundamental lack of self-confidence.

Even after regaining its stature as a powerful, territorial state, today's Russian Federation is still (similar to Italy) just a state with a single national product. By far the largest part of this is generated by the export of energy and raw materials, followed in second place by arms exports. Instead of being a new "Upper Volta with rockets," as Helmut Schmidt once very exaggeratedly called the old Soviet Union, it is more like some kind of gigantic sheikhdom with rockets and squadrons. In the Putin era, remilitarization has reached deep into society, not least in the form of paramilitary associations that are led by reservists, blessed by priests and instructed by intelligent officers, and that also form the backbone of those defending the Donbass and conquering New Russia.

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However, with few exceptions, post-Soviet Russia has not preserved or succeeded in reconstituting its own civilian industrial base, along with the associated technological and scientific resources. That is the fundamental differences between Russia and the second main power of what was once world communism, the People's Republic of China. Under the pressure of Western sanctions, Putin has hitched his rump empire to China via the supposedly triumphal, but possibly ruinous pipeline contract. Were Russia's existence to

be threatened from any side, it would most likely be from a creeping "friendly takeover" by China.

The fact is that Russia as a society is shrinking – and by no means just on its Siberian periphery, but right in the middle of its main provinces, where tens of thousands of villages have been abandoned and former industrial "monotowns" deserted. The population is rapidly declining, with 8 million fewer inhabitants than there were in the 1990s. This demographic downward spiral is not to be confused with the corresponding phenomena in the developed countries of Europe. Rather, it results from a combination of a low birthrate with massive emigration, particularly from the younger, educated and urban levels of society (1 million of them in the first decade of the new millennium), as well as, and more than anything, with a life expectancy for men that is stagnating at an almost African level, at just a bit above 60 years.

The precise meaning of "understanding Russia" and being mindful of the German-Russian entanglements in both war and peace is being conscious of the fatal circle that this country – crushed by its imperial heritage and afflicted by phantom pains – is about to fall back into. And it is a proverbial disservice if this state, which is imperially overstretched as well as collapsing and expanding at the same time, is once again moved from the side of Germany, of all countries – as if in a distant echo of its own old fascination with "Russian space" – into the role of antagonist of American or Western claims of hegemony, a role in which it has already ruined itself several times.

All offers of cooperation, peace and good neighborliness can and should not signal that one is willing to gradually acquiesce to facts achieved militarily. If Minsk II were to become a Dayton II, it would mean having Ukraine fall into a Bosnian paralysis that would be catastrophic for all sides. Steadfastness is needed until Putin's neo-imperial project reaches its internal and external limits – which, in reality, it already reached long ago.

*Translation: Josh Ward*

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