



A Rogue Intelligence State? Why Europe and America Cannot Ignore Russia

By Reuel Marc Gerecht

Vladimir Putin's Russia is a new phenomenon in Europe: a state defined and dominated by former and active-duty security and intelligence officers. Not even fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, or the Soviet Union—all undoubtedly much worse creations than Russia—were as top-heavy with intelligence talent. What does this mean for Russia and for us? Are we destined to see a post-Communist Russia that aggressively uses assassination and economic blackmail as essential tools of statecraft? Does a policy of engagement, which we have been practicing somewhat energetically since September 2001, now make sense?

The only unalloyed good thing one can say about Russia today is that it is not the Soviet Union: democracy is still, in principle, the basis for political legitimacy. Democracy in Russia is vibrant enough that the Kremlin cannot openly reject it; instead, it must “manage” it. The average Russian may care more about stability at home or respect for his country abroad than he does about abstract democratic virtues or “Western” civil liberties, but Putin’s regime still seems to adhere to the democratic franchise, even if it severely limits it by autocratic practices. As long as the democratic apparatus remains in place, political surprises are possible. Since Russia is an oil-rentier state—in which the economy fluctuates with the price of crude—its political future is volatile.

Putin’s powerful position could quickly change. Would-be dictators often overestimate their own popularity to the point that they do not cheat enough to win elections. The Russian state under Putin has no single, unifying, driving ideology. Lust for power, personal greed, and an aspiration for national greatness have yet to push Russia into fascism, although a number of factors—primitive

nationalism, a reflexive “us vs. them” worldview that is often explicitly racist, and a zero-sum understanding of economics and foreign affairs—make it a real possibility. The Kremlin’s determined efforts to control the Russian media and—increasingly—the Internet leave little space for any meaningful check on state power.

It is difficult now to imagine a situation in which, under Putin or his designated successor, Russia can behave responsibly toward its own citizens or its neighbors. In the mid- to late-1990s, it was still possible to envision a Russia where the former Soviet elite or, to be more precise, the thirty-something children of the last ruling Soviet generation could evolve democratically into members of a historically honest elite who could openly criticize themselves and their parents for their complicity in Soviet oppression. In the 1990s, many former officers of the KGB or active-duty officers of the FSB or SVR (the Russian internal and foreign-intelligence services, respectively, which replaced the KGB) sincerely wished for their children to grow up free of the moral compromises they themselves had made. Although there is no way to know for sure, it is a good guess that many officers in the KGB knew they were the instruments of injustice under the Soviet system.

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That moment of reflection seems now to be past. Largely because of former president Boris Yeltsin's neglect of intelligence reform, the KGB and its successors never had a chance to evolve into institutions in which "good" KGB officers could anathematize bad officials like Putin and his many colleagues who now populate the government and Russian state-owned or state-dominated enterprises.¹ Given the penetration of former KGB officers into the power centers of post-Soviet Russia, Putin and Yeltsin before him bred a unique corporate, capitalist police-state. According to Olga Kryshstanovskaya, of Russia's 1,016 leading political figures—including departmental heads of the presidential administration, all members of the government, all deputies of both houses of parliament, the heads of federal units, and the heads of regional, executive, and legislative branches—"26 percent had reported serving in the KGB or its successor agencies."²

Looking more closely at the biographies of these persons, hunting for the gaps and oddities that almost always appear in the employment records of former intelligence officials trying to conceal their clandestine work, reveals that 78 percent have an intelligence affiliation.³

There is no historical precedent for a society so dominated by former and active-duty internal-security and intelligence officials—men who rose up in a professional culture in which murder could be an acceptable, even obligatory, business practice. All intelligence services create their own ethical universe. In the United States, the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) is a slightly rougher version of the ethics common to most Americans. Until recently, for example, few CIA case officers probably sensed an ethical dilemma with "water-boarding" Khalid Sheikh Mohammad; rendering terrorist suspects to the gentle hands of the Egyptian, Jordanian, or Saudi security services; or using fairly severe psychological pressure in routine terrorist interrogations. But in Russia, the KGB's ethics represent the domain where totalitarianism most perverted right and wrong and justified ugly practices from which the average Russian probably recoiled. All intelligence operatives study and exploit the dark side of human character. All good operatives search constantly for weakness. KGB officers excelled at finding the jugular. Those who operated within the Soviet sphere were the most malevolent in their practices. These men mentored and

shaped Putin and his closest friends and allies. It is therefore unsurprising that Putin's Russia has become an assassination-happy state where detention, interrogation, and torture—all tried and true methods of the Soviet KGB—are used to silence the voices of untoward journalists and businessmen who annoy or threaten Putin's FSB state.

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Requiem: Putin Style

To understand the extent of this activity, it is worthwhile to look at the list of political assassinations since 2000. The list on page 3 gives the lie to defenses of Putin's Russia. We may not know who killed whom, and there may well be individuals on this list who were killed for causes unrelated to the Putin regime, but the vast majority of these murders are in harmony with Putin's policies and preferences. The Russian leader prides himself

on reestablishing a law-and-order state. His most cherished state institution appears to be the FSB. Yet would Putin allow his most prized instruments of state security to murder against his will?⁴ With one, two, or even three murders, it might be possible to view Putin as a Russian Henry II, a willful monarch who in anger and frustration intimated a wish for the assassination of Thomas à Becket. Unlike Henry II, who could show remorse and contrition, Putin has shown only the coldest sympathy for those have "mysteriously" died during his presidency.

Even more alarmingly, Putin's Russia has been directly implicated in the first known case of nuclear terrorism, the murder of former KGB/FSB officer Alexander Litvinenko. Not even the Islamic Republic of Iran—Russia's only superior in using assassination as a tool of statecraft—has killed someone with radiation poisoning.

There is another Russia-Iran parallel: in Iran it is difficult to separate the truth from frightful falsehoods because there is little transparency in the deliberations of the ruling elite. The result in Iran has been severe ethical corrosion as the regime's disregard for life defines down what is acceptable. The politics of murder have left Iran's political and intellectual classes in a moral freefall, where neither the killers nor the victims are sure of ethical boundaries. Dictatorships need these traditional barriers to keep their worst instincts in check. Russia's moral freefall under Putin has probably

THOSE WHO HAVE DIED SINCE 2000

ALEXANDER LITVINENKO
former KGB spy, November 23, 2006

MOVLADI BAISAROV
former Chechen commander, November 18, 2006

ANNA POLITKOVSKAYA
journalist, October 7, 2006

ANDREI KOZLOV
deputy chairman of Central Bank, September 13, 2006

PAUL KHLBNIKOV
journalist, July 9, 2004

ADLAN KHASANOV
Reuters reporter, May 9, 2004

ZELIMKHAN YANDARBIYEV
Chechen rebel leader, February 13, 2004

PETR BABENKO
journalist, December 25, 2003

ALEXEI SIDOROV
journalist, October 9, 2003

NADIRSHAKH KHACHILAYEV
former Duma member, August 12, 2003

ALIKHAN GULIEV
journalist, July 18, 2003

YURI SHCHEKOCHIKHIN
deputy editor of independent daily *Novaya Gazeta*, July 2, 2003

DMITRI SHVETS
deputy managing director of local television station, April 18, 2003

SERGEI YUSHENKOV
Duma member, Liberal Russia Party, April 17, 2003

LEONID KUZNETSOV
newspaper editor, September 4, 2002

NIKOLAI VASILYEV
journalist, August 18, 2002

FIRAT VALEYEV*
opposition newspaper editor, July 20, 2002

VALERY IVANOV
journalist, April 29, 2002

SERGEI KALINOVSKY
journalist, April 1, 2002

NATALIA SKRYL
journalist, March 8, 2002

ELINA VORONOVA
journalist, November 5, 2001

EDOUARD MARKEVITCH
publisher of *Novy*, September 18, 2001

DMITRY ERMAKOV
journalist, July 20, 2001

ISKANDAR KHATLONI*
Radio Liberty journalist, September 21, 2000

SERGEI NOVIKOV*
director of independent radio station, July 26, 2000

IGOR DOMNEKOV
journalist, July 16, 2000

ALEXANDER YEFREMOV
journalist, May 12, 2000

* Unclear if assassination is linked to victim's journalism activities
SOURCE: Compilation by author and AEI research assistant Jeffrey Azarva.

weakened the ethical floor that keeps Russia from descending into the horrific domestic practices and immoral foreign policies that characterized the Soviet Union. Litvinenko played a significant role in advancing the story implicating the FSB in the supposedly Chechen bombings of Russian apartment complexes in 1999.⁵ Given the ethics of Putin's FSB, one can understand why the organization would have wanted to kill Litvinenko in an especially gruesome way.

This political aggression is mirrored in Russia's business practices. Countries such as Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Poland; multinational corporations like Shell; and—indirectly—much of Western Europe have felt Putin's strong-arm tactics in oil and gas, or in his shutting down essential food and export markets.⁶ Russia has explored the possibility of creating gas cartels with Iran and Algeria, which, if erected, could wreak considerable economic havoc in Europe.

What Is to Be Done?

Europeans, and to a lesser extent Americans, are caught in a mindset that Putin is undoing. They believe that political systems with capitalist economies cannot be all that bad, and that the more capitalist they become, the more responsible they become. Leaving aside the question of whether an oil-centered economy can be properly called capitalist, it is dubious to suggest that a great deal of capitalism cannot coexist with dangerous tyranny (see Mussolini's Italy, Franco's Spain, or Hitler's Germany). A policy of engagement with Russia might make sense if there were some sign that there really is a serious internal struggle in Russia, within the FSB or between Russian businessmen and the FSB and SVR. After seven years of strong Western engagement with Putin, Russia is neither more pro-Western nor more civilized toward its own citizens, nor less inclined to use economic blackmail for political advantage, than it was before Putin became president.

Containing Russia as we once contained the Soviet Union is neither possible nor desirable. Russia is historically part of Europe, and Russia-Europe contact may help make Russia a more Western country. But the United States and Europe should confront the FSB and SVR. Putin loves these institutions. We should hurt them, letting Putin know that we can selectively target Russian institutions that have morally and operationally gone beyond the pale. The FSB and SVR are boldly but sloppily using nuclear hit teams abroad. The "wet jobs"

of the former Soviet Union seem pristine in comparison. Western security and intelligence services should start harassing FSB and SVR personnel wherever possible. It should be routine to boot these officers from foreign postings. We should disrupt their lives and the lives of their families whenever and wherever possible. American and European internal-security and foreign-intelligence services should track the finances of former and active-duty FSB and SVR officers. If it is possible to cause them pain—for example, by regularly blocking the accounts of officers even tangentially connected to anti-dissident or criminal activity in Europe or Russia—we should do so.

It is conceivable the Europeans—or at least enough Europeans—would cooperate with actions aimed at former and active-duty FSB and SVR personnel. Even in Germany, where foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier recently reaffirmed his country's view of Russia as “a partner of strategic significance,” whose relationship is defined by engagement, friendship, and “reciprocity,” many German officials, especially in the intelligence business, are not warmly disposed toward Moscow. They do not view Russia's near-monopoly on Western Europe's gas supplies as the sort of trade that makes Russia dependent on Europe, which is how Steinmeier would prefer to see it.⁷ The polonium killing of Litvinenko and Putin's aggressive use of Russian commerce as a political weapon against Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, and the Caucasus has startled many in Europe, even in Germany's sympathetic political class. The Russians will, of course, retaliate against any anti-FSB and anti-SVR actions. But it is far better to sacrifice the normal tours of U.S. and European intelligence officers than to allow Russian intelligence personnel to go unchecked.

We can also try to develop areas of possible mutual interest with Moscow. A common interest would be stopping clerical Iran from developing nuclear weapons. Russia's recent contretemps with the Islamic Republic, in which Moscow refused to deliver fuel to the nearly completed Bushehr nuclear reactor, gives a little hope that Russia can act responsibly—even if Putin is now doing so in large part to demonstrate to the West that Russia is the indispensable nation to which the United States and Europe owe deference. It is worthwhile to recall that Russia previously rejected American and European

overtures for a combined front against Iran, pointedly selling advanced anti-aircraft missiles to Iran in the midst of American and European efforts to pressure Iran to stop uranium enrichment. Only when the United States and Europe appeared to be failing at thwarting Iranian nuclear ambitions did Putin intercede. Intelligence officers always

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seek to exploit weakness in their targets. If we allow the Russians to believe we can be blackmailed over Iran, Putin will surely blackmail us. If Russia really believes a nuclear Iran is not in its national interest, then American efforts to counter rogue Russian behavior in Europe and the Caucasus are unlikely to change the Russian analysis of the menace from nuclear mullahs.

We should also audit and litigate against Russian businesses close to the Kremlin. Perhaps such tactics will have an effect on Putin and his successor.

Needless to say, offering more than \$20 billion⁸ in Western financing for Putin's renationalization of Russia's energy industry—and the Kremlin's continued pillaging of the once mighty and politically liberal Yukos oil company—is not the way to let Putin know that assassination, political oppression, and economic blackmail are acceptable practices. The George W. Bush administration surely could have discouraged American banks from being so eager to finance Putin's and his friends' theft of Yukos.

The United States and Europe ought to protect themselves from classic KGB techniques used during the Cold War. Given the KGB's extensive use of journalists, academics, international organizations, and peace movements during the Cold War, it would not at all be surprising to see the FSB and SVR try to use established Russian businesses—which often have former KGB officers in senior positions—and front companies to fund pro-Russian causes and personalities in the West. Western journalists, universities, and think tanks may already be targets for generous Russian gifts. If an American think tank is receiving laundered Russian money, or a prominent Washingtonian is essentially doing consultancy work for Putin's government through a non-Russian “cut-out”—that is, a Western company that is, in fact, doing the bidding of the Kremlin—it ought to be broadcast widely. One thing ought to be clear, however: doing nothing has encouraged Putin to become more aggressive.⁹ Americans and Europeans are responsible for ignoring his increasingly rapacious behavior. If we

continue this inaction, odds are the Kremlin will keep killing, and what is left of Russia's governing ethics will collapse. Then all of us—Russians, Europeans, and Americans—could have hell to pay.

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Notes

1. Stephen Sestanovich, "Is It All Yeltsin's Fault?" *Washington Post*, December 24, 2006. Though not defending Yeltsin and his failure to focus on the KGB, Sestanovich, a former U.S. ambassador at large to the former Soviet Union, describes well the innumerable catastrophic problems Yeltsin had to confront during the crackup of the Soviet Union. Yeltsin put his energies elsewhere: "At a moment when he was still the towering figure of Russian politics, he was not bold enough to insist on creating new democratic institutions. . . . The KGB was renamed but barely reformed."

2. Quoted in Peter Finn, "In Russia, A Secretive Force Widens," *Washington Post*, December 12, 2006.

3. Ibid. See also Alexander Osipovich, "Career Ladder, A New Book Gives the Lowdown on Russia's Ruling Classes," *Moscow Times*, February 4, 2005; and Victor Khamrayev, "The Power of the Chekists Is Incredibly Stable," *Kommersant-Vlast* no. 10 (March 19–25, 2007): 42, available at www.wps.ru/en/pp/story/2007/03/22.html (accessed April 2, 2007).

4. See Victor Khamrayev, "The Power of the Chekists Is Incredibly Stable." According to Kryshatanovskaya, autocratic rule in Putin's Russia today is even less consensual than during the late Soviet period: "But the present regime's autocratic style is familiar—they understand where President Putin is leading Russia. We still retain our traditional faith in a Good Tsar.

Besides, the position of the chekists is incredibly stable these days. That's mostly because the present system relies on age-old traditions of autocratic statehood. The *siloviki* aren't being resisted by any other force. Not even Yuri Andropov enjoyed such freedom of action: he always had to consult the Politburo, where he had only one vote. But now the chekists are their own 'Politburo.' Essentially, all the major decisions in Russia are made by five people: Vladimir Putin, Viktor Ivanov, Sergei Ivanov, Igor Sechin, and Nikolai Patrushev."

5. For a dark view of the FSB's and Putin's possible role in the bombings, see Holman W. Jenkins Jr., "Putin Puzzle Revisited," *Wall Street Journal*, December 13, 2006.

6. "Power Politics: An Assertive Russia Will Flex Its Energy Muscles Next Year," *The Economist*, December 29, 2006.

7. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, "Interaction and Integration," *Internationale Politik* 8, no.1 (Spring 2007), available at <http://en.internationalepolitik.de/archiv/2007/spring2007/interaction-and-integration.html> (accessed March 28, 2007).

8. "Reports: Rosneft Seeks All Yukos Units," Associated Press, March 28, 2007.

9. See Michael A. McFaul, "Liberal Is as Liberal Does," *The American Interest* (March/April 2007): 83–89, for a critique of a noncritical dialogue with Putin's Russia. According to McFaul: "U.S. policies of democracy assistance will not undermine Putin, and they most certainly will not produce a more rabid nationalist as Putin's successor. Putin's own actions—whether the creation of neo-fascist youth groups and national political parties, the crude use of racist language in reference to people from the Caucasus, or beating the drums of war with Georgia—are doing infinitely more to stimulate the emergence of Russian fascism than any Western policy. Ignoring these internal developments and pretending that Putin is our 'best bet' is exactly what Putin's team seeks, and what the West must reject."