

# This Is Who He Is

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As Ukraine endures the agony of a brutal assault by Russian forces, the world is beginning to confront the cost of misreading Vladimir Putin - his character, his intentions, his obsessions, his risk calculus and his worldview.

In the run-up to the Russian attack on Ukraine on February 24th, it was striking that the greater part of global commentary on the crisis, which had been festering since the beginning of the year, assumed Putin to be a rational interlocutor, amenable to dialogue and potential compromise. Despite repeated humiliation at Putin's hands, Emmanuel Macron kept talking and proclaimed the hope of a summit meeting with a view to defining a new order of peace and security in Europe. This, as up to 200,000 Russian troops enveloped the Ukrainian border, like a giant boa constrictor.

What much of the world missed in this prelude phase to the war was that Vladimir Putin's rule has been a trajectory of escalatory radicalism, characterised by a deepening of repression at home, increasingly matched by a ratcheting up of external disputes, encouraged by what Putin perceived to be the weakness of the West. Putin's period in

office perfectly encapsulates Rousseau's remark that "the whole life of kings, or of those on whom they shuffle off their duties, is devoted solely to two objects: to extend their rule beyond their frontiers and to make it more absolute within them".

From the outset of his rise to power in Saint Petersburg in the 1990s, Vladimir Putin behaved much more like a mafia chieftain than an aspiring politician. While initially the frustrations he felt as a decommissioned KGB agent dovetailed with, and were magnified by, the trauma which Russia experienced after 1991, Putin quickly found his *métier* in this new world and emerged as the key victor from the orgiastic tableau of lawlessness and violence that characterised St Petersburg in the chaotic decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union. By the time he left that city for Moscow in 1996, he was the unquestioned *capo di tutti capi* of a burgeoning global crime syndicate

Despite presenting as a dull (or even diffident) provincial bureaucrat, it should have been clear that violence (and the threat of violence) permeated the clique he surrounded himself with. It was deceit, lies and violence that brought him to power, and the same toxic combination of elements, buffered by the machinery of the state, which helped sustain his regime, well before he brought that violence to neighbouring countries. In short, Joe Biden got it right when, in 2021, he called Putin a "killer".

The clues were there from the beginning. In September 1999, Moscow and other cities were rocked by a series of bombings of apartment buildings which killed more than three hundred people. Together, these bombings constituted Russia's "9-11" and provoked enormous fear in the population. The bombings were quickly blamed on Chechen separatists. But three operatives from the FSB, the successor agency to the KGB (which Putin headed before being appointed prime minister by Yeltsin) were caught in the act, planting more bombs under an apartment block in the city of Ryazan on September 22nd. The bombs contained the explosive hexogen, which had also been found in the previous blasts.

From being virtually unknown just a few months earlier, Vladimir Putin was now on every newspaper and television screen, promising to obliterate "the terrorists in the shithouse". Almost overnight, he mutated from amorphous, grey security operative to the "strongman" Russia desperately needed to deal with the renewed Chechen insurgency. The Kremlin propaganda machine under his "cardinal of propaganda", Vladislav Surkov, worked continuously to churn out images of the no-nonsense, uber-virile Putin, the very opposite of the frail and increasingly disordered Yeltsin. It worked. Putin was duly elected president of Russia in early 2000, having being elevated to the position in a caretaker capacity after Yeltsin's resignation on New Year's Eve 1999.

The question that should have been asked at the earliest point of Putin's rule was thus: if the foundational act of his presidency was to authorise the murder of hundreds of his fellow citizens as a way of "introducing himself" as a presidential candidate, what else might he be capable of? When Adolf Hitler revealed his true radicalism on the "Night of the Long Knives" on June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1934, the hundreds of victims of the purge at least were

mostly members of the Nazi SA rather than innocent German civilians. Putin, by contrast, was more than willing to eliminate hundreds of his compatriots in order to platform himself as the candidate to “save Russia”.

The bombings set a pattern for later events. Just four months into office, Putin’s response to the *Kursk* submarine disaster was widely perceived in Russia as callous as well as incompetent. Informed about the accident, he at first declined to end his summer holiday, brushed off the offers of help offered by Norway and the UK and then faced the rage of incandescent wives and families, as he lied to them about the sequencing of the disaster. One woman, Nadezhda Tylik, the mother of *Kursk* submariner Lt Sergei Tylik, was forcibly sedated after haranguing Putin and his acolytes. The tone of the new regime was set at this early stage: incompetence was blamed on others and Surkov’s propaganda machine turned out Manichean lies for domestic consumption as the tragedy unfolded. The forced sedation of Tylik might be viewed in retrospect as an ominous metaphor for the regime’s determination to subjugate any and all voices of opposition and protest.

This episode was followed in 2002 by the Nord Ost theatre siege, when forty Chechen terrorists assailed the Dubrovka theatre in Moscow and held more than nine hundred people inside hostage. When Russian forces stormed the theatre with poison gas, widely believed to be a derivative of the deadly opioid Fentanyl, up to 130 of the hostages and all forty terrorists died. The authorities did not acknowledge the use of gas until eight hours later, and even then did not disclose what type of gas it was, so that doctors did not know how best to treat patients. Putin conferred the title of Hero of Russia on Vladimir Pronichev, FSB deputy director, who managed the operation. Subsequently, efforts to carry out parliamentary hearings were stonewalled by the pro-Kremlin majority in Putin’s United Russia party. Putin’s indifference to the human cost of the rescue calamity became evident in a televised address, when he defended the violence of the assault as the government having “achieved the near impossible, saving hundreds ... of people”, adding that the rescue “proved it is impossible to bring Russia to its knees”.

The violent denouement to the Nord Ost siege was followed by an even greater tragedy. The Beslan school siege began on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2004 and saw Chechen terrorists kidnap more than 1,100 children and staff. It ended after three days with the deaths of 333 people - 186 of them children - after Russian special forces stormed the school. The handling of the siege by was the subject of fierce criticism by the Mothers of Beslan, who argued that the use of tank cannon, flame throwers and grenade launchers was completely inappropriate, and that Putin seemed indifferent to the loss of life. The European Court of Human Rights later ruled that the authorities failed to act on an attack they knew was imminent and failed to protect the hostages. No Russian official has ever been held accountable.

Thereafter, Putin lost no time in rolling back the post-Soviet reforms that had turned Russia into something resembling a democracy. The propaganda instruments accompanying and underpinning the retrenchment of pluralism and the rule of law were aimed at convincing Russia and the world that the regime was merely intervening for the good of Russians against the chaos and instability which had marked the Yeltsin era.

Lies, falsehoods and misrepresentation designed to sow confusion and chaos became a hallmark of the regime. This was a world where, as Peter Pomerantsev put it in his landmark book “Nothing is true and everything is possible”. “Managed democracy” and “sovereign democracy” were the disingenuous terms Putin’s acolytes and apologists used to describe this new era, with “political technologists” employed to communicate its essence to the world.

That these were the first steps towards establishing a renewed dictatorship now seems clear. Soon journalists, opposition leaders and oligarchs who refused to toe the Kremlin line would feel the lash of the new regime. The targeting and imprisonment of Mikhail Khodorkovsky was an early indication of how the game had changed under Putin. Repression practised by the organs of the Putinite state developed along a trajectory familiar from Soviet days. Outstanding journalists such as Anna Politkovskaya were gunned down after revealing too much (in her case about the Russian military’s misdeeds in Chechnya). Opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was audaciously assassinated within yards of the Kremlin, albeit not – it seems - by forces under Putin’s direct command. Later, Alexi Navalny would be poisoned, and, after miraculously escaping with his life and returning to Russia after medical treatment in Germany, imprisoned on trumped up charges. In late February 2022, Navalny appeared in court to face fresh charges which could keep him in prison for another decade. The trial is indicative of Putin’s increasing vindictiveness and desire to punish anybody deemed a threat to his position.

These are just some of the headline acts of regime terror in two decades of escalating legal harassment of civil society and media, ritual abuse of authority and epic kleptocracy among Putin’s close circle of accomplices. For every Navalny there are tens of thousands of unknown individuals who live “under the radar” but have paid the price for standing up to the tyranny of Putin’s mafia state.

Russia’s LGBT+ population has been under violent assault for most of the last decade and a half. In 2006, Moscow’s first gay pride march saw riot police attack the marchers. Within a short period regional administrations across Russia began passing anti-gay legislation which, for example, made it illegal to discuss LGBT+ themes with minors, or to distribute such information to them, even if this information was entirely focused on health issues. Gay activists have been hounded out of their jobs, subject to constant harassment online and often had to endure extreme physical violence, including beatings and kidnappings by vigilantes. LGBT+ civil society organisations have been targeted as part of new anti-“foreign agent” legislation, subject to invasive tax inspections, and in many cases forced to close down. As it became more and more difficult to provide information on sexual health, incidents of HIV transmission have gone through the roof over the last decade, especially among young people aged between fifteen and twenty-four. Russia is thus one of the few parts of the world where incidences of HIV infection have been on the rise in recent years.

Russia has lost a large number of cases before the European Court of Human Rights, and the court has said, explicitly and repeatedly, that it has failed to establish a legal framework to effectively combat domestic violence. Indeed Vladimir Putin signed into law,

in 2017, a measure easing penalties for domestic violence, citing a need to reduce state meddling in family life. It made “moderate” violence within families an administrative rather than criminal offence. Beatings of spouses or children that result in bruising or bleeding, but not broken bones, are punishable by fifteen days in prison or a fine, if they do not happen more than once a year. Formerly, they carried a maximum sentence of two years. Human Rights Watch states that decriminalisation has significantly weakened guarantees of protection from violence and made more difficult the prosecution of abusers.

Putin’s misogyny was on open display recently at a press conference when he outrageously quoted Soviet-era punk band Red Mold’s lyrics about rape and necrophilia. Criticising Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskiy, Putin implied that Ukraine would have to take whatever Russia threw at it: “whether you like it or not, bear with it, my beauty”. The analogy with rape was immediately obvious and widely commented on.

Russian authorities have relied on increasingly repressive tactics to quieten dissent at home, passing legislation institutionalising administrative and criminal punishment for participation in unsanctioned rallies, and tightening the rules for receiving permits for protests. Between 2007 and 2020, about 20 per cent of protests brought police intervention, suggesting that Russian authorities exercised at least some degree of restraint. By contrast, 68 per cent of demonstrations in January-March 2021 were met with state intervention, some of which involved the use of excessive force by the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardiya) Special Purpose Mobile Unit (OMON) riot police of the Ministry of Interior (MVD) and military police. During these “Navalny rallies” more than eleven thousand people were detained across 130 cities and towns. Multiple cases of torture, threats and inhumane treatment were registered. In addition to Rosgvardiya, created in 2016, the Federal Security Service (FSB), Presidential Security Service (SBP), Investigative Committee (SK) and Prosecutor General’s Office have all grown considerably in size and power in recent years. In 2020, more than 10 per cent of government spending went on internal security while the combined internal security and defence budget reached almost 30 per cent of Russia’s annual budget, vastly more than any comparable country, including the United States.

Putin’s security forces are also policing the online world with much more vigour. In November 2019, a “sovereign internet” law was passed requiring internet service providers to install surveillance equipment for tracking, filtering and rerouting internet traffic. Putin explicitly said that protesters who took part in unsanctioned rallies were “provoking” security forces, who were thus justified in employing violence.

The violence did not, of course, stop at Russia’s borders after Putin’s elevation to power. It followed many who chose to leave Russia out of fear of Putin’s regime. Targeted assassinations have been a regular feature of the operating style of the Putinite regime, taking place in Berlin, Istanbul, Vienna and many other cities. Some “spectaculars”, like the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko and attempted murder of Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia, in Salisbury, England, attracted vast global media attention and provoked plenty of outrage but very little in the way of a substantive response from Western

authorities. That weak response from the international community further emboldened Putin and encouraged him to take his violence across the boundaries of neighbouring states.

Typically, leaders who have been in power for long periods tend to lose touch with reality. The leadership circle grows increasingly timid and incapable of speaking truth to power. Within such dictatorial regimes, the consequences of speaking out are made clear via show trials (like the Khodorkovsky and Navalny ones) and the ritual pursuit of vendettas against those perceived to be disloyal (Litvinenko, Skripal). The coronavirus pandemic led to Putin isolating himself for long periods over the last two years, further limiting the opportunities of those around him to influence his thinking.

To add to the increasing evidence of radicalism, there are also substantial signs of megalomania. Putin's rambling summer 2021 essay on the indivisibility of the history of Russia and Ukraine hints at someone who sees himself as a figure of truly historic importance, with the burden of righting history's wrongs. The cult of personality developed from the earliest days of his rule with the help of Surkov and other "political technologists", has now taken on distinctly sacral elements, with Putin depicted as the messianic saviour, destined to save Russia from the predatory forces to its west. The megalomania inherent in this manifests itself in episodes like the five-hour history lesson Putin dished out to Emmanuel Macron in their recent encounter. Macron reportedly told his aides that the Putin of this meeting was noticeably tougher and more unreachable than in previous meetings.

For much of the last two decades there have been many in our midst who were in denial about the true nature of Putin and his regime. They argued that Russia had its own, unique, developmental path, so we should not expect it to converge towards democratic norms or judge it by Western standards of pluralism. The "whataboutists" have responded to charges of Russian imperialism with counter-charges that the United States has been guilty of far worse conduct. Others have presented Russia's leadership structure as a pyramid, a structure which militates against the rebirth of tyranny. This model of heterogeneous polyarchy presents Putin as no more than *primus inter pares*, a balancer-in-chief who has had to navigate the treacherous waters of factional rivalry and competition. This in itself provided a regime dynamic of moderation, it was claimed. "Realists" argued that we had no choice but to do business with Putin and his regime of thugs. They argued that behind the creeping totalitarianism there was a rational mind that was amenable to compromise and negotiation, that appeals to the "better angels" of Putin's nature could work and that the fundamental realities of Great Power politics demanded accommodation with Moscow.

Even in the face of vast evidence of the regime's criminality and escalating dictatorship, many people who should have known better argued that the West should appease Putin. Thus there was no meaningful response to the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008. Nor the 2014 occupation of Crimea and the Russian incursion into the Donbas. Similarly, there was no substantive response to Russia's extra-territorial assassination attempts or the state-sponsored cyber-attacks against Estonia and other members of the Western

alliance, or to manifest interference in the domestic elections of many European states, not to mention the US presidential election of 2016 and the Brexit referendum in the UK. Putin sought, through a mixture of coercion, blackmail, bribery and co-option, to destabilise and keep pliable as many European states as possible. This extends to the western Balkans, where Russia has invested considerably in strategies designed to separate these states from the EU. The zero sum mentality which prevails in Moscow insists that each time one of these states opts to join the EU or NATO it constitutes a body blow to Russia's prestige and geopolitical position. They never seem to ask why every single state in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe voluntarily opted for integration into the West as equals over absorption into the Russian sphere of influence as subalterns.

There were unwelcome reminders of this culture of appeasement in the period leading up to the invasion. Germany refused to supply Ukraine with even defensive weapons and equivocated on the future of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. President Macron allowed himself to be harangued for five hours by Putin, despite knowing his counterpart's *modus operandi* only too well. Sergei Lavrov, the salty-tongued long-serving foreign minister, sought to embarrass the British foreign secretary, Liz Truss, by leaking confidential details of their discussions. This, after Lavrov had roundly humiliated Josep Borrell, the EU high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, on a 2021 visit to Moscow. The lessons about the pointlessness of such encounters should have been learned after Hilary Clinton and Barack Obama sought to "reset" relations with Russia when they came to office in 2009. It didn't take long for them to realise that Putin's murderous regime was not for changing its spots.

The EU and NATO are paying a high price for not developing a tougher, more coherent approach to Putin's banditry at an earlier stage. But it is, of course, Ukraine that is now the focus of Putin's homicidal energy and paying the most devastating price for this wider collective failure to confront the Russian president's sociopathic violence. The symmetry between Putin's consolidation of dictatorship at home and military aggression towards neighbouring states is almost complete. There can be no doubt that it is he who is directing both the tempo and shape of the military campaign. His appetite for predation is stronger than ever. Violence and ruthlessness define him, both at home and abroad. He is the contemporary embodiment of what the historian Golo Mann called the "repulsive subject". His savage campaign to reconstruct the Russian imperium will not stop at Ukraine. We can't say we didn't know.

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*John O'Brennan holds the Jean Monnet Chair in the Department of Sociology at Maynooth University and is director of the Maynooth Centre of European and Eurasian Studies: <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/faculty-social-sciences/our-people/john-obrennan>*

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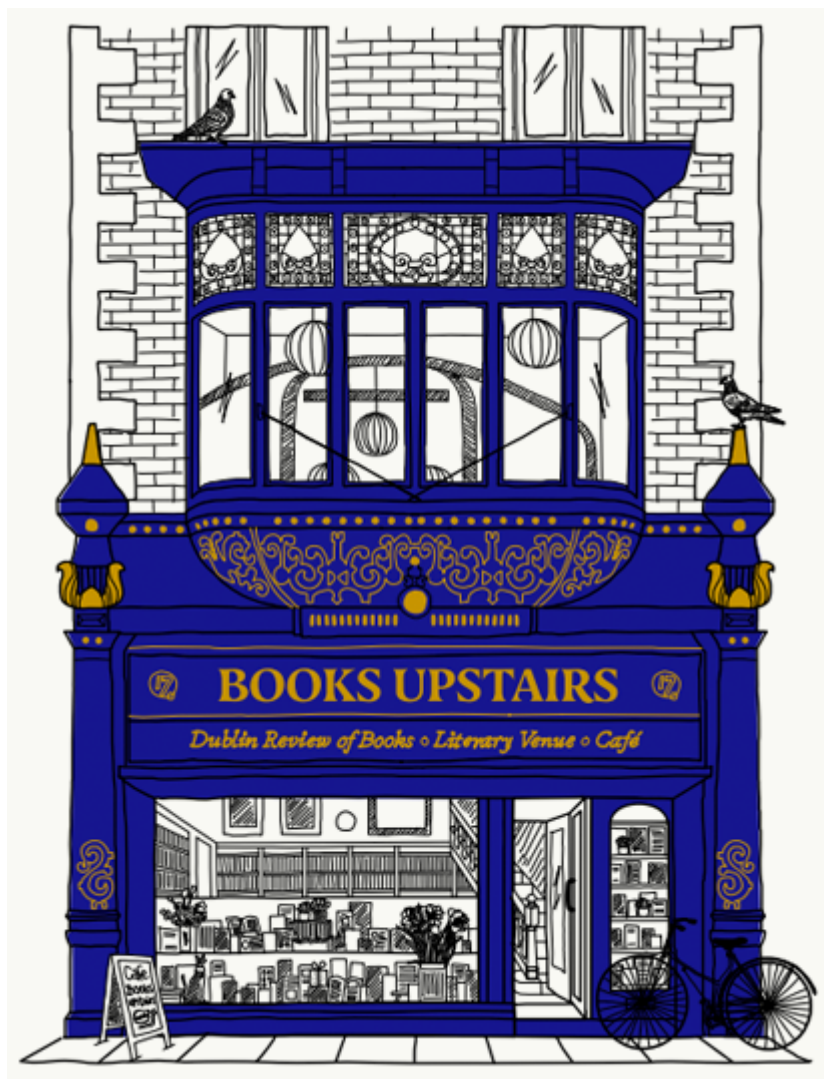
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