Vladimir Putin and the Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy

Bobo Lo
Vladimir Putin and the Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy
The Royal Institute of International Affairs, at Chatham House in London, has provided an independent forum for discussion and debate on current international issues for over eighty years. Its resident research fellows, specialized information resources and range of publications, conferences and meetings span the fields of international politics, economics and security. The Institute is independent of government and other vested interests.

Chatham House Papers address contemporary issues of intellectual importance in a scholarly yet accessible way. In preparing the papers, authors are advised by a study group of experts convened by the RIIA, and publication of a paper indicates that the Institute regards it as an authoritative contribution to the public debate. The RIIA is, however, precluded by its Charter from having an institutional view. Opinions expressed in this publication are the responsibility of the author.
Contents

Acknowledgments vii
About the author ix

1 The Putin phenomenon 1

2 The inheritance 9
   Identity and self-perception 11
   The political context 18
   The institutional context 21
   The foreign policy panorama 23
   Conclusion 29

3 The policy-making environment 31
   A cast of thousands? 32
   The primacy of the individual and the making (and breaking) of policy 42
   All together now? 46
   Conclusion 49

4 The economic agenda 51
   The ‘unnaturalness’ of economics 51
   Foreign policy and economic reform 53
   The integration agenda and globalization 57
   The profit motive 61
   Geoeconomics and geopolitics 65
   Economization and a ‘balanced’ foreign policy 69

5 Security and geopolitics 72
   The geopolitical mindset 72
   Change and continuity in Russian strategic thinking 74
   The evolution of threat perceptions 83
## Contents

**The future of security and geopolitics – from anachronism to rebirth?**  
94

6  **Identity, values and civilization**  
   **The burden of the past**  
   98  
   **Integration with the West**  
   101  
   **Identification with the West and the evolution of the Russian world-view**  
   109  
   **Conclusion**  
   113

7  **11 September and after**  
   **Policy-making – image and reality**  
   115  
   **The economic agenda – Westernization with qualifications**  
   117  
   **A new conception of security?**  
   121  
   **The repackaging of identity**  
   123  
   **Strategic opportunism**  
   127  
   **Towards a sustainable foreign policy**  
   129  

Notes  
133

Index  
161
The cover of this book credits to one person the work of many. This has been very much a collective enterprise, and I owe an immense debt to numerous friends and colleagues. It is perhaps invidious to single out individuals, but I should like to thank three people in particular. Tania Keefe was an exceptional research assistant, unearthing a rich seam of information about contemporary Russian foreign policy as well as undertaking the ugly task of reading through the initial draft. Ole Lindeman brought to the project the indispensable perspective of the insider, offering critical insights and suggestions while shepherding me through lengthy periods of self-doubt. Finally, Roy Allison was the moving spirit behind the book, a never-ending source of ideas, energy and analytical rigour.

Two outstanding institutions have played central roles in this enterprise. The Royal Institute of International Affairs has provided inspiration and intellectual support from the outset. I shall always be grateful to the distinguished members of the Chatham House study group for their extremely constructive and perceptive comments on the draft text, and to James Nixey and Margaret May for their logistical and moral support. When I was living in Russia, the Carnegie Moscow Center became something of a home from home, and I am especially grateful to Dmitri Trenin and Bob Nurick without whom this book would never have been completed. Thank you, also, to Gareth Meyer and Timofei Bordachev for their invaluable suggestions on individual chapters.

It has been said that ‘no man is a failure who has good friends’, and I have been unusually blessed in this regard. Lizzy Fisher, Alex Pravda and Riitta Heino, Chris and Antonia Davis, Roy Allison, Ole and Berit Lindeman, and Laetitia Spetschinsky have had the dubious pleasure of putting me up in recent months, during which they offered friendship and support far exceeding any reasonable expectations. More generally, I should like to recognize the contribution of all my friends in helping me to get through some difficult
Acknowledgments

times. Thank you to Lyn and Bruce Minerds, Stephen Shay and Nicola Cade, Linda Kouvaras and Richard Ward, Gareth Meyer and Penny Xirakis, Justine Braithwaite and David Peebles, Glenn and Agnes Waller, Ros and Simon Harrison, Emily Gale, Jill Colgan, Rohi Jaggi, Tatiana Parkhalina, Kostya Eggert, and David and Lena Waterhouse. Last but certainly not least, I am indebted to my family: my mother, to whom this book is dedicated, my father, Helen, Hsiao, Didi and Ping.

December 2002

B.L.
Dr Bobo Lo is an Associate Fellow at the Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House, and the Visiting Fellow at the Carnegie Moscow Center. He has written extensively on Russian foreign and security policy as an independent researcher and, previously, as First Secretary and then Deputy Head of Mission at the Australian Embassy in Moscow (1995–99). He is the author of *Soviet Labour Ideology and the Collapse of the State* (2000) and *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Reality, Illusion and Myth-making* (2002).
To my mother
for keeping the faith
The phenomenon of Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin stands as one of the most remarkable of our times. In the space of three short years he has emerged from near-total obscurity to become one of the most talked-about figures in world politics. This metamorphosis, striking in itself, is all the more singular for having occurred with a minimum of fanfare. It is in many respects the triumph of an ‘unexceptional’ man. In contrast to his immediate predecessors, Putin has made a virtue out of appearing ordinary. He offers no compelling public persona, nor is he the purveyor of memorable ideas. If the West thinks of Yeltsin as ‘the man on the tank’ during the failed putsch of August 1991, and of Gorbachev as the statesman who brought us glasnost, perestroika and ‘new thinking’ in foreign policy, then Putin comes across as just another more or less respectable, more or less ‘normal’, international leader.

And yet the paradox is that this apparent blandness, the lack of obvious distinction, has struck a real chord both domestically and in Russia’s relations with the outside world. Vladimir Putin is in a critical sense a man of his time, when larger-than-life personalities like Yeltsin, Clinton, Kohl and Mitterrand have given way to a generation of unspectacular but businesslike leaders – George W. Bush, Tony Blair, Gerhard Schröder. To most Russians, tired of the turbulence of the post-Soviet decade, he represents the promise of a return to an idealized world of order and stability. His appeal to the international community, although more qualified, is similar: for the first time in years there is hope that Russian foreign policy is moving out of the vicious cycle of stagnation and unpredictability that characterized its conduct under Yeltsin. It is no surprise that Margaret Thatcher’s famous description of Gorbachev, as someone with whom the West could ‘do business’, has been applied to Putin more than once since his advent to power.

This image of ordinariness and relative normality is, however, only part of the story. Contrary to appearances, Russia’s president is an exceptionally complex and elusive figure. When he was first designated as Yeltsin’s successor,
Russian and Western commentators alike were quick to ask the question, ‘who is Mr Putin?’, and just as quick to try to supply answers. KGB apparatchik, authoritarian, reactionary, statist, advocate of law and order, Cold War warrior, progressive, modernizer, champion of liberal economic reform – the labels piled on top of one another, as people struggled to define and make sense of a man whose coming no one predicted and whose views were shrouded in the mystery of a secret past. Three years later, we are little the wiser. Putin the president is the most public of politicians, making clever use of every type of information media to outline government policies and project a carefully nurtured image of strength, reasonableness and enlightenment. Putin the man, however, remains an enigma who defies ready characterization and whose exterior serves to obscure multiple contradictions: at once accessible and distant, personable and intimidating, dispassionate and emotional.

This dichotomy between the public and the private recalls one of the dominant historical figures of the 20th century, Josef Stalin, with whom there are a number of striking parallels. Not, of course, in terms of psychological disposition but in explaining some of the reasons behind their astonishing political success. Like Stalin, Putin has transcended the limitations of an unfashionable administrative background to reach the summit. In the course of his ascent, he has also enjoyed the good fortune to be underestimated by peers and outsiders alike, the insight to tap into the popular and institutional mood, and the talent to capitalize on the weaknesses of others ostensibly better qualified to hold the highest office. He has managed to make an understated personal charisma disarming to his political rivals and attractive to the general public. Importantly, Putin has adopted an unsentimental attitude to ideological issues; not without beliefs, he nevertheless understands their instrumental uses and the need for flexibility and expediency when considerations of power are paramount. Like the shape-shifter of science fiction imagination, he has the rare ability to be all things to all people, as illustrated, for example, in his judicious use of the nationalist card. On the other hand, Putin has sought to use power not just for its own sake, but to promote an ambitious domestic and external policy agenda. He has demonstrated an enviable ability to get things done, assisted by a real interest in and grasp of detail – an attribute possessed by Stalin but notably absent in subsequent Soviet and Russian leaders.

The outcome of this mix of characteristics and circumstances is that Putin now commands an authority unprecedented since the death of Stalin in 1953. It is somewhat ironic that the post-Soviet era, with its powerful images of democracy and freedom, should give rise to a man whose political standing and control over policy exceeds that of more ‘authoritative’ figures of the past, such as Khrushchev, Gorbachev and Yeltsin. While the temper
of his era as well as personal disinclination have meant that Putin is far from being an absolutist tyrant, for the first time in decades the occupant of the Kremlin Palace embodies both the development of policy and a superior capacity to bring it to fruition. He may prefer to rule by consensus rather than fiat, but it is a consensus overwhelmingly on his terms. Recalling Louis XIV’s famous aphorism, ‘l’Etat, c’est moi’ (‘The state, I am the state’), government under Putin might be said to operate according to the principle, ‘le consensus, c’est moi’. Those who challenge, or are seen to threaten, his authority face extinction – albeit political rather than personal. It is no surprise, therefore, that something of a modern-day ‘cult of personality’ has grown around him. Putin’s representation in the Russian media is much more benign than the intimidating and unquestioning idolatry that surrounded Stalin, but it nevertheless exudes an aura of mastery, often of near infallibility. Whereas Stalin’s instrument of choice, the mass rally, was very much a product of the 1930s, Putin has opted for contemporary but equally effective means of self-projection and image-making – an ‘impromptu’ exhibition of his judo prowess, slick one-liners with world leaders and the foreign press, relaxed question-and-answer sessions on the internet or with Russian and foreign students, soundbites of meetings with government ministers in which he dispenses reasoned, but critical, opinions about their performance.

Present-day Russian foreign policy mirrors many of these realities. More so than other areas of government, it is intimately associated with Putin the individual. If the Yeltsin administration’s conduct of international relations revealed the primacy of competing sectional agendas over a consensus vision of the ‘national interest’, then today it is appropriate to speak about a genuinely ‘presidential’ foreign policy, one that reflects the characteristics of Putin himself. In the first instance, it combines the projection of selected images with the pursuit of substance. It is no coincidence that public diplomacy has become one of the key priorities of his administration, and not only in connection with Chechnya. Putin is the face of Russian foreign policy at home and abroad. There is no risk that current Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, or indeed any other figure, will absorb some of the international limelight as Andrei Kozyrev and Yevgenii Primakov did under Yeltsin, and Eduard Shevardnadze under Gorbachev. Indeed, Ivanov’s profile is lower even than that of Maxim Litvinov and Vyacheslav Molotov, foreign ministers under Stalin. The common notion that Putin is almost solely responsible for the pro-Western orientation in Russia’s external relations post-11 September is less a reflection of policy reality (see Chapter 7) than a measure of his political dominance, substantive and symbolic.

Russian foreign policy is also, in the most generous understanding of the term, ‘universalist’ – inclusive, multifaceted, and flexible as to means.