



PUTIN THE SPOILER

Preserving Personal Power at Any Cost, Russia's Leader
Unleashes Forces He Cannot Control

By Lilia Shevtsova

The year 2014 will go down in history as the year when Russian leader Vladimir Putin kicked over the world chess board and destroyed the post-Cold War system of mutual security commitments. By demanding to reorder the system of the international relations that Putin's Kremlin views as unjust, Russia has emerged as the revanchist nuclear power. Putin's actions raise many questions. Are they the result of his leadership model—and its evolution? Or are we seeing the logic of the Russian system of personalized power, with Putin simply its current embodiment?

Mr. Nobody

I remember December 31, 1999, when Russian TV broadcast the spectacle of Boris Yeltsin, the first post-communist Russian president, leaving office. The cameras showed him turning to Vladimir Putin, and then gesturing to the Kremlin surroundings as if he was leaving him a gift. Here, now you are the master of all this. Putin looked pale and tense; there was no expression on his face—his gaze was remote. He had to be overwhelmed at that moment: a boy from St. Petersburg, a regular guy from a worker's family, a recent gofer, was receiving a huge country to rule. Yeltsin handed Putin a present, which was Russia.

But why Putin? Why had Yeltsin's political entourage chosen a man with no experience in public politics, who was virtually unknown to the public at the time? Several reasons explain that unexpected move. Yeltsin's family and the oligarchs around him needed a loyal person without excessive ambitions ready to defend the interests of his mentors. Yeltsin's ruling team did not want another charismatic leader; it did not want a heavyweight with his own power base. It wanted an individual close to the security services ready to defend the regime and someone who was predictable. Putin was the right man, in the right place, at the right time.

◁ Russian President Vladimir Putin, St. Petersburg, Sept. 5, 2013. *Andy Adams/Polaris*

Putin coped brilliantly with the tasks entrusted to him. He not only ensured the safety of the ruling corporation, but also managed to fulfill the hopes of society that longed for stability and predictability. True, soon Yeltsin's family was removed from power and the oligarchs who had hoped to handle Putin were pushed out of the Kremlin. However, the basic interests of the outgoing team were secured: Putin proved that he could guarantee his part of the deal. Having unexpectedly become the Russian leader, Putin at the beginning treaded with caution, diligently acquiring the Kremlin's art of rule, which demanded that he reassert total control over the power resources—something Putin would ultimately achieve. Putin set about to create his own base and create a super presidency based on effective one-man rule, emphasizing subordination, strengthening the role of the power structures, bringing its members into the government, and eradicating opposition. By 2004, Putin had created a regime that resembled the bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes of Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. This is the system of rule where power is concentrated in the hands of a leader who relies on the state apparatus, security forces, and big business.

For some time during Putin's first presidency from 2000 to 2008, Russia's liberals hoped that this regime had some reformist potential. However, by the period from 2005 to 2007 it became clear that Putin's agenda and the mechanisms of rule he had created had only one goal—preserving power at any cost and reproducing it. He subjugated the independent television and press; cracked down on the ambitious oligarchs; the prosecutor's office and the courts were pressed into service; the parliament was made a rubber stamp of the Kremlin; the opposition was silenced. The elite and the society helped Putin to put them in chains and lock them in cages by trading their freedoms for stability and a well-being based on the rising oil price. As for Putin's behavior and policy, the more he stayed in power the more apparent his authoritarian style became: the urge to control everything around him, his suspicion toward any plurality of views.

Why did Putin go this way? Was this his political outlook? Or was it the result of the system of personalized power built by Yeltsin? I would argue that Putin's views and his understanding of power have become instrumental to the survival of the Russian model of personalized power. Putin not only preserved the Russian matrix of one-man rule revived by Yeltsin, but created a much more efficient and tough instrument of personalized power due to his personal mentality and background.

Putin's KGB experience, a suspicion of the West that he had difficulty concealing, the deep complexes formed in his youth, a desperate desire to succeed by traversing the murkiest corridors of power, his reliance on shady deals and the mafia-style loyalty of close friends, his disrespect for law (demonstrated during his tenure as St. Petersburg Mayor Anatoly Sobchak's lieutenant), his belief in raw force as an argument, and his

tenacity and acumen in pursuing his agenda—all of these hardly prepared Putin for transformative leadership or even for a moderate reformist agenda that might give at least some independence to society and the business class. Looking back, one could see the existence of the two personal qualities that had an imprint on his leadership style: his indifference to the price of his actions, and his low bar for risk taking. In any case, caution, deliberation, willingness to be a team player, respect for law, and an ability to work on a strategic agenda have never been counted among Putin's personality characteristics. Besides, before he had been picked to be the guarantor of Yeltsin's legacy, he had never been a leader even among his own gang and had not been successful in his KGB career—a strong desire to compensate for these personal deficits might explain his penchant for macho behavior and bullying.

Putin went even further, in fact, eliminating the counterbalances within the vertical power structure that had existed in the post-Stalin period, which prevented total absorption of power by one team or leader—Communist Party control over the security services was one of these balances. For the first time in Russian history, the Russian praetorians (the representatives of the special services), who had been the gate keepers, became rulers, opening the way for them to acquire total control over all areas of public and state activity.

During his first presidency, Putin worked within a paradigm we might call “Join the West and Pretend to Accept its Standards.” Between 2000 and 2003, Putin even toyed with the idea of joining NATO, and he became America's partner in the anti-terrorist coalition. He created the illusion that he was a pro-Western economic modernizer with authoritarian aspirations—an acceptable profile for the West. Apparently at the time Putin was deliberating on the mechanisms of his rule, the degree of subjugation of society, and the nature of compromises he could allow with the West. He was trying to balance his provincial longing to engage with the most powerful leaders and his suspicion of the West. Vanity was not the only explanation of his “partnership” period; he was learning to use the West to pursue his own ambitions. Putin's foreign policy made it easier for the Russian elite to integrate personally into Western society while keeping Russian society closed off from the West. This policy looked ideal for a leader who was turning Russia into an energy superpower that functioned by cooperating with the West.

The Soviet Union survived through rejection of the West, whereas Putin's regime has experimented with glomming on to the West. The Kremlin's imitation of the Western norms and institutions helped Putin to use Western resources for the regime's needs. The emergence in the West of the powerful lobby that serves the interests of the Russian rent-seeking elite has become a factor in both the Kremlin's international impact and preservation of the Russian domestic status quo.

Regrettably, the pro-Kremlin lobby in the West includes expert and intellectual circles ready to take part in the staged events hosted by the Russian president and the Kremlin team like the annual Valdai Club that are used to legitimize the regime on the international scene. One would agree that the experts would be curious to see the objects of their research in person. However, if this were really the clubgoers' motivations, a single visit would be enough. One would understand if the participants of the Valdai Club use this opportunity to tell the Russian leaders how the outside world views their policy. But judging from the transcripts, the guests are embarrassed to discuss problems that the Russian elite might find too uncomfortable to answer. Perhaps they do not wish to appear rude, but in that case one would ask what purpose these meetings serve, and who really benefits from them.

During his period of romancing the West, Putin apparently arrived at some truths that now guide his policy toward the community of liberal democracies: the West uses values as a tool of geopolitics and geo-economics; everybody in the Western world has his or her price; there is no united West and there are therefore many vulnerable points for Trojan horses; Western leaders are ready to accept double standards and imitation of norms if they see some economic reward for doing so; the West has no courage when it comes to responding to bullying. When in 2011 Putin and his talking heads—such as Foreign Affairs Minister Sergei Lavrov—began to speak about the “decay of the West,” invoking the German historian Oswald Spengler, they surely believed what they were saying.

The Putin Doctrine

The Russian system has undergone several reincarnations since it emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. It initially survived by dumping its former state shell—the USSR—and by acquiring legitimacy through the adoption of an anti-communist and reformist character. Since then, the system has been preserving itself through a process of gradual evolution of the regime. At the beginning of the 1990s, it adopted a soft authoritarian rule that imitated liberal standards and professed a readiness for partnership with the West. Today, the liberal dress-up game is a thing of the past; the system has turned to a harsh authoritarianism and harbors ambitions to become the antithesis of the West. Isn't this an unusual phenomenon? A nuclear superpower perishes in a time of peace, and re-emerges decades later in another geographical configuration but preserving its predecessor's key characteristics.

From the time of the Soviet collapse until recently, the Russian regime—the engine of the Russian system—had based its rule on the following premises: it recognized liberal civilization's dominant role; it declared its adherence to Western norms; it partnered with the West to advance its interests; its elite integrated into Western society on

a personal level. Imitation of Western institutions and norms, the emergence of a comprador rent-seeking class, the relative freedom citizens enjoyed in the private domain, and the limited pluralism of political life (as long as it didn't threaten the ruling class's monopoly on power)—all of these variables helped both Yeltsin and Putin to survive. The postmodern, post-Cold War world, with its shifting and indeterminate ideological lines, was an ideal arena for Russia's game of "Let's Pretend."

During the last decade, the Russian regime's growing institutional rigidity, its turn toward repression, and the failure of its social contract—a guarantee of the people's well-being in exchange for submission—all pointed to the degeneration of the Russian system. This process of decay could have continued indefinitely, fueled by high oil prices, corruption, public indifference, and the lack of alternatives. However, with the start of Putin's second term as president in 2012 (having been prime minister during the handpicked presidency of Dmitry Medvedev in the interim) the Kremlin was forced to change tactics and adopt a new survival strategy: the Putin Doctrine legitimizes a harsher rule and a more assertive stance abroad. Circumstances forced the Kremlin's hand here: the rise of protest activity in 2011, and the fear that even mild political struggle could threaten the regime, pushed Putin to stabilize the situation by rejecting the modernization that was threatening to upset the status quo, and by setting up the machinery of coercion before a new wave of protests struck. All of these developments unfolded according to the logic of the personalized power system, which feels threatened even in situations of limited political pluralism. Putin's fears fit the trajectory of the system at the stage of decay.

By the beginning of 2014, the Kremlin presented a new political outlook based on the following assumptions: the world is in crisis, and the West—in terminal decline—no longer dominates the global economy and international politics; a "polycentric system of international relations" has emerged; competition between Russia and the West "takes place on a civilizational level"; Western ideology is doomed since it has rejected "traditional values" and has tried the "absolutization of individual rights and liberties." By declaring the impending end of the liberal democracies, Putin was formally closing off the pro-Western period of Russian history that began in 1991 and included parts of his own tenure in office.

Ukraine and the War President

The Ukrainian political crisis and Russia's undeclared war on Ukraine in 2014 didn't just give the Kremlin an opportunity to put the Putin Doctrine into practice; it also enriched it with new elements. The Kremlin has used Ukraine to justify Russian society's military-patriotic mobilization around the regime and its transformation into a "besieged fortress"—the siege-laying enemy in this case being an "internal"

one, a Ukraine within Russia's sphere of influence that receives support from an external adversary.

Ukraine has long been Putin's personal project. He experienced a defeat with the country's Orange Revolution in 2004, in which protests against vote fraud forced a runoff presidential election. Then in 2014, pro-Europe protesters forced the ouster of President Viktor Yanukovich after he rejected a European Union association agreement and opted to strengthen ties and pursue an economic bailout with Russia. The Kremlin is now taking revenge for past and present uprisings, as well as teaching the rebellious Ukrainians a lesson and warning the Russians about the price of insubordination and the attempt to get out of the Russian matrix. There is another angle, too. The Russian lesson to Ukrainians is a warning to the West: "Don't meddle—this is our playground!" But this is not the end for the Kremlin's agenda. Ukraine is supposed to test the West's ability to accept Putin's rules of the game. Let us not forget that this test had previously been conducted in Georgia—when Russia launched a military intervention over the South Ossetia crisis.

At the same time, the Ukrainian crisis has allowed the Kremlin to test a new way of manipulating mass consciousness: it justifies the "besieged fortress" modality by exploiting the people's respect for Russia's World War II history and its popular hatred of fascism to create a phantom enemy, represented by the "Ukrainian fascists" and their Western mentors who "threaten the Russian World." The regime has manipulated public consciousness by injecting a series of blatant propaganda lies directly into the Russian psyche. The tactic has worked, too, creating unprecedented public consolidation around the country's leader: 83 percent of Russia's citizens supported Putin's "wartime presidency" as of May 2014. Even Russians who were otherwise critical of Putin's rule found it prudent to rally around the War President, lest they be accused of unpatriotic behavior.

These media manipulation techniques have helped the Russian authorities to mobilize the population around the flag in defense of the Motherland, feeding off the growing discontent of the Russian public, its anticipation of the looming troubles, their memory of failed reforms, and, at the same time, their longing for hope and reassurance. There are deeper reasons for the success of Putin's mobilization, too. Russian society today resembles a sand heap lacking cultural and moral regulators. There is an irony here: the "traditional values" that once consolidated Russian society were demolished by the Stalin regime, which subjugated individuals to the state and its leader. Since then, the atomization of Russian society and the lack of the cohesive social networks existing in other societies—for instance, Confucianism plays this inhibiting role in China—have left Russians totally at the mercy of the state and its operational kit. Disoriented and demoralized, individuals compensate for their helplessness by

seeking meaning in a collective national “success” that would bring them together and restore their feelings of security and pride. The annexation of Crimea has become one such “success”—a bloodless and peaceful one, in fact; it has given ordinary Russians a chance to forget their everyday problems and experience a surge, albeit temporary, of vicarious optimism.

Of course, the remnants of the Soviet great power mentality and the longing for expansionism have facilitated the work of this compensatory mechanism. However, it would be a mistake to consider the great power complex and imperialism as eradicable characteristics of the Russian psyche. In 1991, only 16 percent of Russians spoke of the “common bond” between them and the citizens of other Soviet republics. Russia owes the sharp increase in its citizens’ great-power aspirations to the Kremlin’s efforts to reconstruct the Soviet mentality.

Russian Uniqueness

In its quest to discover new forms of popular indoctrination, the Kremlin dared to play the ethnic card for the first time. On April 17, 2014, Putin stated: “The Russian people have a very powerful genetic code... And this genetic code of ours is probably, and in fact almost certainly, one of our main competitive advantages in today’s world... It seems to me that the Russian person or, on a broader scale, a person of the Russian World, primarily thinks about his or her highest moral designation, some highest moral truths...” Moreover, Putin declared that an ability and willingness to die in public is one of the main features of the Russian genetic code. “I think only our people could have come up with the famous saying: ‘Meeting your death is no fear when you have got people around you.’ Why? Death is horrible, isn’t it? But no, it appears it may be beautiful if it serves the people: death for one’s friends, one’s people, or for the homeland...” This is a wartime slogan—a sign that the Kremlin is experimenting with putting Russia on a war paradigm. Putin has begun a dangerous game, one aimed at reviving the worst of Russia’s national complexes.

This shift toward militarization won’t be limited to an increased military budget and a growing role for the military industrial complex. Russian militarism is a unique form of the state based on order, which is an alternative to the rule of law state. What this shows us is that the current regime can only control society by engaging in the search for an “enemy,” which calls for a militaristic framework. Although turning Russia into a Stalin-era army-state is no longer possible, the Kremlin is militarizing certain walks of life, or imitating militarization in other areas where it cannot achieve the genuine article.

This is of course not the first time the Kremlin has attempted to solve its problems by means of a military-patriotic mobilization: it also did so during the 1999 second Chechen war as well as in the 2008 Russia-Georgia war. But, as we saw in both of

these cases, this type of mobilization turns out to be short-lived and requires the constant validation of additional triumphs over the enemy—whether that enemy is real or imagined. It's equally important that these triumphs yield zero or limited casualties, since large losses of life can undermine the leader's support base. It is ironic that a country whose population is so easily drugged by militarist propaganda is at the same time so afraid of bloodshed. In past instances in which Russians rallied around their leader in the wake of military threats, the conflict was over in a matter of months. The Crimean consolidation is going to last longer, but the resulting hangover will eventually wear off. When it does, the Kremlin will once again be forced to distract Russians from their worries and frustrations with the regime. Meanwhile, the Kremlin now has fewer distraction strategies up its sleeve, especially in light of the fact that it has played its trump card: war and the threat of war.

Through the summer of 2014, as the Kremlin continued its experiment with the war paradigm, it seemed that the process had slipped out of its bonds and acquired a logic of its own. Putin can't return the country to a peacetime footing, because he can't provide for the people's welfare and stability; he needs to find enemies in order to justify his continued rule, but his war strategy unleashes suicidal forces that he can't control. In fact, Russia's undeclared war with Ukraine has yielded consequences that the Kremlin can barely manage. Among these consequences: the consolidation of Russia's hawks, who demand "victory" over Ukraine; pressure from the military-industrial complex, which wants a bigger share of the budget; growing frustration among the Russian nationalists and imperialists, who expected Putin to go ahead with a full-scale invasion of Ukraine; possible emergence of new national "icons" in the form of pro-Russia separatist leaders who would compete for hero status with Putin if they returned to Russia; the growing internal and external costs of the military adventurism; and crippling Western sanctions.

Putin has been trapped and this became apparent after the September 2014 ceasefire in Ukraine negotiated with his participation. The truce appeared to be illusionary, only a pause before Russia resumed helping the pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine not only to build their self-proclaimed statelets, but to continue their attempts to expand their influence by seizing new parts of Ukrainian territory. By creating the situation of no peace-no war, the Kremlin has established a source of permanent tension in seeking to turn Ukraine into a failed state.

And so the Russian leader continues to search for new ideas for justifying his right to perpetual and unrestrained rule. Putin's set of ideas resembles a stew cooked with whatever the chef could find in the pantry: Sovietism, nationalism, imperialism, military patriotism, Russian Orthodox fundamentalism, and economic liberalism. He easily juggles ideas borrowed from both Russian conservatives and right-wing

ideologues from the West. Putin likes to cite the Russian philosopher Ivan Ilyin, an opponent of the West who considered fascism “a healthy phenomenon” during the rise of the Nazi Germany. “Western nations cannot stand Russian uniqueness... They seek to dismember Russia,” Ilyin complained as he called for a “Russian national dictatorship.” Putin has not yet talked of such a dictatorship, but he loves to complain about Western efforts to back Russia into a corner.

Experts close to the Kremlin have long been citing German philosopher Carl Schmitt, who was an influential thinker in the development of national socialism in Germany. Schmitt proposed subordinating law to certain political goals, thus contrasting the abstract legitimacy of the rule of law state to the “substantive legitimacy” derived from a unified nation—ideas that resonate in Putin’s rhetoric. Pro-Kremlin political analysts are especially fond of Schmitt’s “state of emergency” theory, according to which a regime’s sovereignty implies its ability to push beyond legal boundaries and abstract law. Putin essentially operates within this realm, discarding constitutional norms and the principles of global order and creating new norms on the fly. True, Putin has not yet actually declared a state of emergency in Russia, but the legislative basis for doing so already exists.

The Kremlin’s experiments with the Putin Doctrine in Ukraine justify fears of a predatory world. Putin intentionally keeps the world in suspense, forcing the West to guess at his next move. And as he plunges Russia back into the past, he nevertheless keeps repeating the mantra that “Russian values do not differ dramatically from European values. We belong to the same civilization. We are different... but we have the same ingrained values.” Having said that, Putin began using another mantra in the fall of 2014: the West constantly humiliates Russia; the West has ruined the world order and triggered the state of chaos. Consciously or not, this is a textbook case of cognitive dissonance; he is endorsing contradictory truths, thus disorienting the world and making chaos his field of play.

Putin’s new survival concept is intended to legitimize the political regime that he has been building. This regime does not fall into traditional categories based on the dichotomy between democracy and authoritarianism. Traditional definitions fail to capture the uniqueness of the Russian personalized power system, which encompasses elements of praetorianism, imperial longing, nuclear power status, the petro-state, a claim for special recognition by the outside world, and a readiness to deter the West even as it maintains membership in Western clubs. This is definitely a much tougher form of authoritarianism—one with dictatorial tendencies, and one which views projection of its might abroad as a critical component of its survival.

The Kremlin, however, has not yet crossed the final line into mass repressions. But the iron law of coercion, once begun, will take on a life of its own. If the regime resorts

to violence—even if it does so only selectively at the outset—it will find it difficult to stop. It will find it necessary to continually reassert its strength; any sign of weakness will immediately rally those who are angry, dissatisfied, or thirst for revenge, which, sooner or later, will provoke more coercion.

There are three reasons that the turn to repressive violence will result in a downward spiral. First, the fact that Russia is currently ruled (for the first time in its history) by representatives of the security apparatus—which is accustomed to repressive means of activity and which isn't about to give up power—increases the chances of further repression. Second, a regime whose resources to bribe the population are diminishing may sooner or later turn to state violence or even state terror to keep the public under control. And third, the ruling team's fear of losing power is what creates the impetus for repressive behavior: the more it fears it, the more prepared it is to commit violence. In other words, the clenched fist has been raised; the only questions are when it will fall, and upon whom. Putin's regime is in bobsleigh mode; it has no choice but to slide down the track until it hits the bottom.

Meanwhile, Russian society, drugged by militarist propaganda, remains dissatisfied and angry. In the fall of 2014, only 7 percent of survey respondents were ready to take part in public protests. But only 22 percent of Russians view the rulers “as a team of honest professionals”; the majority viewed them as pursuing their own interests. Even more important: while 47 percent of Russians said that the interests of the state are more important than those of the individual, 37 percent believed it should be the other way around. Despite the desperate attempts to return Russians to a mindset of total subjugation to the state, more than a third of them still want to live in a different system.

Tactical Victory, Strategic Defeat

Never before has the West had such powerful mechanisms of influencing Russia, thanks to the integration of the Russian elite into Western society. At the same time, never has the West been so incapable of influencing Russia thanks to the ability of the Russian elite (and Ukrainian, and Kazakh) to corrupt and demoralize the Western political and business establishment. The former oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky was correct in saying that Russia exports to the West commodities and corruption.

Does the West have the means to pacify a Russian leader who has started to play hard ball in the global arena? The American fleet in the Black Sea? It will only give another pretext to the Kremlin to prove that the West is a threat to Russia. Cutting investments in Russia? Don't you think that Putin considered such consequences? If he is ready to face them then that means that the logic of regime survival is stronger than the logic of investment growth. A European gas boycott? Who really believes that it would happen today?

Let's imagine a situation when the West decides that it is ready to start dismantling the laundromat the Russian elite has built with the assistance of the Western "service lobby." Will it be a moment of truth for the Kremlin and the Russian ruling class? I am not sure. The Kremlin has prepared for this eventuality. In fact, Putin, having declared the need for "nationalization" of the Russian elite (this means that the elite has to return its wealth back to Russia), is ready for a new challenge. Moreover, any Western decision to stop co-opting the Russian elite will help Putin to tighten control over the political and business establishment. Those members of the political class who decide to return will be his loyalist base. Others, they will become traitors. One could conclude that Putin is ready to close the country, that he is prepared to accept Russia's growing isolation as the price for keeping power. Putin wants to remain a member of the western clubs—the G-8, NATO-Russia Council, the World Trade Organization? I am not certain of that, either. He would like to stay there—but with his own agenda. He does not necessarily want to take Russia from the international system. But he wants to change this system according to his wishes and he wants to get endorsement for his right to break the rules. If the West is not ready for that, Putin will be ready to get out. From now on he will be breaking the rules—with or without the West's consent.

In any event, we are dealing with the Russian leader who started operating in bobsleigh mode—he has jumped into a sleigh and is hurtling down the track so that it is no longer possible to stop him. He is acting to preserve his power. The more he tries to preserve it the more damage he inflicts on his country, but he can no longer reverse his course. German Chancellor Angela Merkel was wrong saying that Putin is living in another world. He actually fits into his system of power. He has started to protect his lifelong rule, and every new step he takes makes his departure from power ever more improbable, forcing him to take greater and greater risks.

Putin may have the conviction that he is succeeding. He may think that the West is tamed and is ready only to wag his finger at Russia. If this is true, we are facing a dangerous new era in international relations. Putin has won the support of a nation that yesterday seemed to be so tired of him. He has retaken control of the elites, too. He is back on the scene as the War President. He became hostage to the Kremlin logic. He can try to save the regime only by showing might, aggressiveness, and recklessness. The moment he stops, he is politically dead and there are too many forces wanting for their chance to retaliate.

Yet, Putin's moves have triggered the law of unintended consequences. His tactical victory will inevitably result in his strategic defeat. The Kremlin may fortify the walls of its decaying fortress while undermining its foundation. The incursion into Crimea has already triggered the collapse of the Russian ruble. The Putin Doctrine

turns the country into a perpetually mobilized command economy state, which in 1991 brought about the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The law of unintended consequences is also at work in the Ukraine crisis. The Kremlin did what no Ukrainian political force previously could achieve—the Russian invasion united Ukraine’s disparate political forces—liberals, nationalists, the left, oligarchs, communists, and even the Party of Regions. It is possible that Putin will only help Ukrainians to strengthen their national identity on the basis of a national liberation struggle.

Vladimir Putin has unleashed processes that he can’t contain any more. He still can play and pretend; he can blackmail the world unprepared for a maverick at the helm of a nuclear power. He can be the spoiler, forcing others to seek appeasement in fear of cornering him. But he cannot win: he has already lost. He has prevented modernization of Russia and turned the country toward the past. He will not be able to contain the inevitable tide of Russian frustration when the people discover that he lied to them and that he can’t guarantee them a normal and dignified life. The grapes of future wrath are growing. The question remains, what will be the final price of Putin’s departure?