1. THE NATURE OF VLADIMIR PUTIN’S REGIME IN RUSSIA

1.1. Former KGB lieutenant colonel Vladimir Putin came to power in Russia in the final days of 1999, appointed by incumbent president Boris Yeltsin to better guarantee Putin’s election in the election on March 26, 2000. The Russian election system had already been severely damaged by that point, and the power of the government was heavily abused to promote Putin over the “usual suspects” from the Communists and Liberals. The threat of a return to Communist rule was still potent in Russia and abroad in 1996 and 2000.

1.2. Putin had shown his ruthless nature as Yeltsin’s prime minister in charge of the Chechen War, carpet-bombing civilians while razing the capital Grozny to the ground. As is now well-documented, the Russian security forces staged several “false flag” terrorist operations—the infamous apartment bombings—to rally support for these brutal policies and Putin.

1.2.1. (As with future atrocities at home and abroad, including the Beslan school and Nord-Ost theater terrorist hostage crises, the murder of Alexander Litvinenko in London, and the shooting down of Malaysia Air flight 17, the facts of Russian intelligence knowledge or complicity are well-documented. Massive Russian propaganda campaigns have succeeded in creating doubt where none should exist.)

1.3. Putin was by most viewed optimistically as a boring technocrat, but he quickly proved that he had never abandoned his KGB roots. His statements about the collapse of the USSR being the worst catastrophe of the 20th century and “once KGB, always KGB” were not idle remarks. One of his first acts as president was to restore the Soviet anthem, a clear symbol.

1.4. Putin began to crack down on the free press by targeting media owners for prosecution, a model he would soon expand to other spheres. Owners who didn’t sell their companies to Putin’s allies would face personal and corporate legal attacks, with the courts always deciding against them. The myth is that Putin “cleaned up the town” by cracking down on corruption and the oligarchs, when the truth is he twisted court system in order to consolidate the media, the energy and resource sectors, and eventually the rest of the largest companies in Russia under a small group of oligarchs loyal to him. Those he didn’t trust were jailed, exiled, or killed. Corruption wasn’t ended, it was made official—as long as it was in Putin’s service.

1.4.1. Russia’s wealthiest man, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, was imprisoned in 2003 for a decade, while one of Putin’s mentors, Boris Berezovsky, gained asylum in the UK that same year before dying under suspicious circumstances in 2013, as with so many people who were at odds with Putin.
1.4.2. This grey-zone, public/private kleptocracy is a mafia economy, not a centralized economy. It’s based on favoritism that is based on loyalty to the center, the big boss. Everyone knows there are lines, clearer every year for 18 years, and everyone knows who the real boss is. There is a market, but it isn’t free. There are private companies, technically, but Putin has made it clear that you do business in Russia at his pleasure—and the KGB is a very activist shareholder. Toe the line, watch your mouth, or you could be jailed, exiled, or worse.

1.4.3. For example, the US government recently banned the Russian anti-virus software Kaspersky. The question isn’t how much active control the Kremlin has of its security products right now, but the simple fact that if it wanted total control at any time, it would have it, and it how long it would take to find out. Similar to Chinese tech companies, there’s no reason to give benefit of the doubt that Russian companies are independent of the state in any meaningful way—and it is a huge risk to give that benefit.

1.4.4. **The oligarchs leave Russia, buy dual citizenship, or spend most of their time abroad, because they know that nothing inside Russia is truly theirs.** Not their billions, not their companies, not their bodies, their freedom. It’s Putin’s, they are only renting it from him. (Much like Putin’s riches will only last for as long as he is in power.) They are in a race to get as much treasure out of Russia before his favor changes or the regime falls. They want their families out in European and American schools so they don’t become hostages. They want them educated and comfortable abroad because they know better than anyone that Putin’s regime could collapse at any moment.

1.5. **Putin’s Russia is a mafia regime.** Putin does not operate for any Russian national interest, only for the enrichment of Putin and his friends. It is essential to understand this in order to understand Putin’s motivations and how to predict and alter his behavior. There is no ideology. Putin isn’t a Communist, a nationalist, or anything else. Like any dictator, Putin is only worried about how to stay in power—because without power in Russia his wealth and likely his life would be forfeit.

1.5.1. **As any mafia, loyalty is the glue that holds Putin’s regime together.** In exchange for the loyalty of foreign leaders like Assad, Russian oligarchs, generals, operatives, and every functionary on down to the lowliest hitman, Putin provides a guarantee that he will take care of them and their fortunes. As long as they do his bidding without question, they will never pay a price for corruption or even torture and murder. **Targeting this loyalty by proving that Putin cannot protect his loyalists is therefore the key to pressuring him and changing his behavior.**

1.5.2. **There are no systemic checks on Putin’s authority.** The legislature (Duma) and the courts are fully under Putin’s control. There is some effort made to pass laws,
use the courts, hold elections, and maintain the other trappings of a functioning
democratic state, but it is no more a democracy than was the USSR.

1.5.3. **Civil society barely exists.** Just seven years ago you could speak of
opposition organizations and people dreaming about democratic ways Putin might
be obligated to abandon power. Those dreams were swept away in 2012, when Putin
returned officially to the presidency (obviously he had never left power), and
brutally cracked down on every protester and movement. The murder of opposition
leader and former prime minister Boris Nemtsov on Feb 27, 2015, in view of the
Kremlin, was the final demonstration that Putin would be president for life.

1.5.4. **There is no free media in Russia today.** Most outlets are directly controlled by
Putin’s closest allies and are part of a well-coordinated propaganda machine that
covers television, print, radio, and internet. A few outlets are allowed to criticize the
regime within accepted boundaries. After over eighteen years of Putin’s reign,
everyone knows where the invisible lines are, and what happens they are crossed.
Despite this, live television is nearly non-existent, and blocking internet sites is
becoming more common.

1.5.4.1. Aside from media control and censorship, Russia employs a “flood not a
dam” model of controlling the information. Instead of a labor-intensive
Chinese system of direct censorship of words and stories, a KGB-style
disinformation system was developed beginning around 2006. Instead of a
“Pravda” with a single official story, now there are dozens, or hundreds, to
obscure the truth and steer people to the official position. This model was the
basis for the fake news industry and troll factories that attacked the Russian
near-abroad in starting in 2008 during the Georgian War, peaking in 2014 after
Putin invaded Ukraine, and became fully weaponized internationally in time
for Brexit and the US elections in 2015-16. This model adapts easily to the
internet, although direct censorship and blocking there is increasing as well.

1.5.4.2. For the last decade, and increasing intensely since 2014, Russian media is
full of hatred and aggression toward the West, especially the United States and
Europe. Putin is portrayed as the heroic defender of a Russia encircled by
enemies.

1.6. Russian media’s hateful rhetoric fits with the typical final stage of a dictatorship, when
critics and opposition have been crushed and there are few available domestic
scapegoats for how bad things are going for the country after so many years of rule by
one man. How can things be so bad for Russians when the great Putin has been in total
control for over 18 years? Enemies, of course! And they must be big ones like the US,
the UK, and NATO.
1.7. **Putin needs a constant level of escalating international confrontation because it is the only way to justify his eternal grip on power in Russia.** This is why he will never stop. He will always find more provocations, wars, and other conflicts with the West. Putin can never make any honorable peace with the West; there is no way back without contradicting his entire reason for existing. **Putin can only be deterred by making his aggression an even more serious threat to his grip on power in Russia than backing down from his campaigns of propaganda and hybrid war against the free world.**

2. **HOW TO FIGHT BACK**

2.1. Putin only cares about money and the power in Russia required to acquire and keep more of it. It’s banal and boring, but undeniable. To deter him, his cronies must be convinced that they are better off without Putin, come what may, if he continues his course of aggression. Currently, they are rarely faced with any tough choices. They have their billions and their visas and their homes and families abroad while enabling and obeying a brutal dictatorship in Russia. The goal must be to make them choose between Putin and the lavish life they have abroad.

2.1.1. Key to this is treating them like the gangsters they are. **They are agents of a rogue Russian criminal regime, not businessmen.** They are complicit in Putin’s countless crimes. Their money is not truly theirs, it is Russia’s. Their companies are not mere international corporations, but the means to launder money and spread corruption and influence. If there aren’t laws on the books to target this type of nation-state gangsterism, they must be written. They aren’t playing by the same old rulebook.

2.1.2. Responding will take courage and innovative thinking to match. The double-standards must end. Turning a blind eye to the spread of Russian corruption and influence must end. **You can’t have Putin’s money, Putin’s friends, and Putin’s corruption without giving up a lot more in return, sooner or later.**

2.1.3. **Targeted sanctions against individual oligarchs and their families and companies and assets are the most effective tactic at hand.** They must be strong and comprehensive, not superficial. Inconvenience is not enough to turn someone against Putin. It must be enough for them to make a serious choice about whether they are better off with Putin or without him, enough to risk going against him.

2.1.4. **The good news is that the UK still has tremendous leverage precisely because it was such an attractive destination for all of these things for so long** due to the opaqueness of the asset ownership system and the ease of flooding the financial and political spheres with foreign money. But when gangsters feel at home, with a sense of impunity, they quickly start acting like gangsters. Putin and his cronies don’t
believe the British government can or will go after their assets or access, which was exactly the plan.

2.1.5. **Sectoral and national sanctions are also important.** The goal is not to cripple the Russian economy or persecute the Russian people. Putin is going a great job of both things already. The goal is to make Russia’s position as a rogue state clear to all, and that it will never change until his behavior changes. Russia enjoys participation in myriad international conventions, trade organizations, law enforcement and judicial systems, etc. and its presence is an indictment of those organizations. **Once again, good faith engagement with Putin’s mafia state is abused by Putin and spreads corruption; it is not a vehicle for positive change.**

2.2. Putin’s methods of attack fit his background and profile: indirect, not open, always maintaining plausible (or implausible) deniability. He cannot afford any open confrontation that could lead to a clear defeat. He must be able to spin every setback as something only he can rescue Russia / his loyalists from.

2.3. Putin’s aggression abroad is essential to his staying in power in Russia. It serves no Russian national interest, only Putin’s.

2.3.1. Assassinations send a message about what will happen to anyone who betrays him.

2.3.2. Otherwise senseless invasions and other international adventures like Ukraine and Syria feed his domestic propaganda.

2.3.3. Hybrid war and propaganda operations abroad weaken the countries and institutions that could stand against him. They exploit the openness of the free world regarding media and corporate ownership, freedom of speech and media, and open and closed-door lobbying and political donations. Russian propaganda broadcasts freely in the West, ironic considering the total control Putin demands of the media in Russia.

2.3.4. The subtler operation—again fitting with Putin’s KGB background—is the spread of corruption and influence via oligarchs and Russian companies in the West. Economic engagement with Russia has not liberalized Russia, not cleaned up Russian business, etc. Instead, the flow has been one-way in the other direction, spreading hundreds of billions of dollars of looted Russian money to launder and spread influence in the West. Again, the loyalty of these people and their investments should not be doubted. As long as they and their fortunes are tied in any way to Russia, they are tied to Putin and remain loyal to him in some way.

2.4. **Putin cannot risk a serious geopolitical defeat that would ruin his image as an invincible Superman at home.** Even with total media control, it would be very hard to spin Assad’s removal in Syria, for example, or a full retreat from Ukraine and the return
of Crimea. But despite having massive military superiority, the free world has refused to stand up to Russian aggression, to call Putin’s bluffs. This has given him more and more confidence and increased his aura of invincibility at home. This increases the chance of a real catastrophe because eventually he will push too far. It is paramount to stand up to him because otherwise the inevitable clash will only be worse. Appeasement over relatively small affairs is easy, but it always leads to bigger conflicts. **Putin cannot and will not stop.**

2.4.1. Nor can he risk a major defeat, which is why he picks at the fringes of NATO in places like Ukraine and Syria. This allows him to claim big enemies while he assumes the US, NATO, and other major powers will not bother to defend these interests. But the price will just keep going up.

2.5. Other strategies include ‘dictatorship substitution to escape from the tactics of blackmail and extortion. Much of Europe still depending on Russian energy over four years after Putin invaded a European country is damning, as is the willingness of many in Europe to continue with pipeline plans that would only increase Putin’s leverage and cash flow. **It’s a war, and your enemy cannot be your partner at the same time if you want to win.**

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