



The  
**Life** &  
Faith **of**  
**V**ladimir  
**P**utin



**DENISON FORUM**  
ON TRUTH AND CULTURE

## **The life and faith of Vladimir Putin**

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Vladimir Putin was born in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) on October 7, 1952. His father, Vladimir Spiridonovich Putin, was a factory foreman who served in Soviet armed forces. His mother was a factory worker. He graduated from Leningrad State University in 1975 with a law degree, writing his final thesis on international law. He joined the KGB that same year as a Soviet intelligence officer.

In 1983, Putin married his wife Lyudmilla; the couple had two daughters. Putin worked in East Germany during the latter half of the 1980s. He took a job at Leningrad State University in 1990, then began working as an aide to Anatoly Sobchak, who would become mayor of St. Petersburg. Putin served in Sobchak's government in the early-to-mid 1990s. In 1996, he moved to Moscow and began his rapid rise to the highest levels of Russian leadership.

In August 1999, Russian President Boris Yeltsin tapped Putin as acting prime minister. A few months later, Yeltsin resigned the presidency and elevated the 47-year-old Putin to acting president. In March 2000 Putin won the presidency, and was re-elected in 2004. Due to term limits, he left the office in 2008 but was installed as prime minister by his successor, Dmitry Medvedev. In 2012, he was once again elected president.

Putin holds a black belt in Judo. He plays the piano, sings, paints, and is famous for driving racecars, skiing, flying military jets, scuba diving, and riding horses. He and his wife split in June 2013 and were divorced on April 2, 2014. Putin has been linked to various affairs over the years, but has denied such rumors.

He is fluent in German and conversational in English and Swedish. In 2007, *Time* magazine named him "Person of the Year."

### **What is Putin's faith?**

Putin's father was militantly atheistic, but his mother was a devout Russian Orthodox Christian who had Putin secretly baptized into her church. However, her son conformed to Soviet secular convention until two events in his adult life caused him to reexamine his religious beliefs.

In 1993, his wife was involved in a car accident; three years later, his family was traumatized by a life-threatening house fire. Putin then began questioning his atheism. Before he departed for a diplomatic trip to Israel, his mother gave him a baptismal cross. He said of the occasion: "I did as she said and then put the cross around my neck. I have not taken it off since." In a nation where soldiers were forbidden from wearing crosses to the end of the U.S.S.R., his statement has been widely noted.

Putin states, "First and foremost we should be governed by common sense. But common sense should be based on moral principles first. And it is not possible today to have morality separated from religious values." He has proposed compulsory classes in religion and ethics for Russian students.

And Putin has been a staunch supporter of the Russian Orthodox Church. He affirms the claim that Russia became the successor to the Byzantine Empire (the Eastern half of Christendom) in 1453 and remains the conservator of orthodox Christianity. As a result, the Russian Orthodox Church has experienced a renaissance under his leadership.

A new law returned all church property that had been seized during the Soviet era, likely making the Moscow Patriarchate the largest landowner in Russia. State-owned energy companies have contributed billions of rubles to reconstructing some 23,000 churches around the country. Ninety percent of the population now identifies as Russian Orthodox (though only 10 percent attend church regularly and 30 percent call themselves atheists).

The church has asked Putin to protect Christians worldwide, and the president has agreed. The Russian Orthodox Church claims that a Christian is killed somewhere in the world every five minutes as a direct result of following the teachings of Jesus. The church is especially concerned about the persecution of Christians in Afghanistan, Syria, and Egypt, countries with large Christian populations over the centuries. In response, Putin has agreed to make defending Christians part of his overall foreign policy.

For instance, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad has a long record of defending Christians and churches; there is now growing violence against them in areas controlled by rebel forces. As a result, Putin has denied numerous U.N. resolutions demanding that al-Assad abdicate his position, citing the need for religious protection. He has spoken out in defense of Christians in the Middle East and North Africa. And he has been honored in Bethlehem, where a street is named for him.

Once seen as a liberal on social issues, Putin has embraced the church's conservative positions on abortion and gay rights. Father Alexey Kulberg, an influential Russian Orthodox priest, states: "There are no conflicts between the church and the state. The President's ideology for developing Russia coincides with the direction of the Russian Orthodox Church."

### **What does Putin think?**

What does Vladimir Putin think about the world? The West? What beliefs help explain his actions in Ukraine and with the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17?

#### *How he views the world*

David Brooks wrote a revealing column on Putin's worldview in the March 3, 2014 *New York Times*. According to Brooks, Putin commonly quotes three Russian philosophers from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900), Nikolai Berdyaev

(1874-1948), and Ivan Ilyin (1883-1954). He has even assigned works from the three to regional governors.

Solovyov claimed that Russia, located between the Catholic West and the non-Christian East, has a unique mission in leading the way to human unification. Russia could thus transcend secularism and atheism to create a unified spiritual kingdom. According to Berdyaev, "The Russian messianic conception always exalts Russia as a country that would help to solve the problems of humanity."

And in *Our Tasks*, Ilyin wrote: "We trust and are confident that the hour will come when Russia will rise from disintegration and humiliation and begin an epoch of new development and greatness." Ilyin embraced Russian exceptionalism, the claim that Russia has its own unique spiritual purpose and status. He also advocated devotion to the Russian Orthodox faith and commitment to autocracy.

Ilyin believed that democracy would be ineffective in Russia, claiming that its people need a "united and strong state power, dictatorial in the scope of its powers." At the same time, he argued that the ruler must have popular support, legality must be preserved, and freedom of conscience, speech, and assembly must be guaranteed. Putin has followed Ilyin's lead in affirming the doctrine of "sovereign democracy"—the state should be limited, but should be sovereign where it does operate.

#### *How he views the West*

The Russian Orthodox Church claims that Russian culture should be separate from the West. Putin clearly agrees. With church support, he signed last year an "anti-homosexual propaganda" law that prohibits the publication of any material that portrays lesbians, gays, bisexuals, or transgendered people as normal. It also supports a Kremlin move to ban the advertising of abortion services.

Putin has been influenced by Ivan Ilych's warning that the West seeks to corrupt the spiritual purity of Russia: "The West exported this anti-Christian virus to Russia. Having lost our bond with God and the Christian tradition, mankind has been morally blinded, gripped by materialism, irrationalism and nihilism." In a 1948 essay, Ilyin claimed that the West is trying to "divide the united Russian broom into twigs to break these twigs one by one."

Putin apparently believes that such encroachment is continuing and must be resisted. Another philosopher, the Russian political scientist Alexander Dugin, has described Russia's relation with the West in even starker terms.

Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, Anton Barbashin and Hannah Thoburn highlight Dugin's work and influence on Putin. In a 1991 pamphlet, "The War of the Continents," Dugin describes an ongoing geopolitical struggle between two kinds of global powers. On one side are land powers, or "Eternal Rome," which are based on the principles of statehood,

communality, idealism, and the superiority of the common good. On the other are sea powers, or "Eternal Carthage," which are based on individualism, trade, and materialism.

According to Dugin, "Eternal Carthage" was embodied by Athenian democracy and the Dutch and British Empires. Now it is represented globally by the United States. "Eternal Rome" is embodied by Russia. Dugin believes that the conflict between the two will continue until one destroys the other. He advocates a conservative revolution in Russia that will enable them to defeat the U.S.

### *How he views leadership*

In *The American Conservative*, Paul Robinson focuses more fully on Putin's understanding of democracy and state sovereignty. To Western thinkers, social reform requires democratic governance. To Russian author A. V. Vasilenko, another strong influence on Putin's thinking, "a strong state is needed not instead of liberal reform, but for reform. Without a strong state, liberal reforms are impossible."

Vladimir Solovyov agreed. He claimed that Christian love, embodied in the church, is the supreme political value, but it must be expressed through a strong state which respects the dignity and rights of individuals.

Putin especially admires Pyotr Stolypin (1862-1911), prime minister of Russia from 1906-1911. Stolypin repressed the revolution he inherited so violently that the hangman's noose was known as "Stolypin's necktie." But he also pursued reforms in social and economic spheres such as giving peasants ownership of their land.

Putin chairs a committee that is organizing a memorial to Stolypin in Moscow, and has called him "a true patriot and a wise politician." According to Putin, Stolypin "saw that both all kinds of radical sentiment and procrastination, a refusal to launch the necessary reform, were dangerous to the country, and that only a strong and effective government relying on business and the civil initiative of millions could ensure progressive development."

Is he a Communist? Despite widespread claims that Putin is trying to bring back the U.S.S.R., he has spoken against Communism and "the outrageous price our country and its people had to pay for that Bolshevik experiment." In 2005 he stated that the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. was a disaster, but he was referring to the chaotic way the Soviet empire collapsed, not the fact that it ended. In that same speech he stated clearly, "I consider the development of Russia as a free and democratic state to be our main political and ideological goal."

Is he a dictator? According to Putin, "History proves all dictatorships, all authoritarian forms of government, are transient. Only democratic systems are intransient." However, critics claim that his leadership of Russia has become increasingly totalitarian.

Ivan Ilych advocated freedom of assembly, speech, and the press, but pro-Kremlin television networks are now the main source of information for 90 percent of Russians. Independent news websites continue to face pressure from the government. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 50 journalists were murdered for their professional activity between 1992 and 2006. Amnesty International warns of a "climate of growing intolerance towards independent views." And according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, only Iraq and Algeria outrank Russia on the list of most life-threatening nations for the press.

Putin's inner circle calls him "Tsar." He may justify such autocratic leadership as necessary to bring about the advances Russians need. However, skeptics will note that dictators typically promise democratic reforms that never come.

### **Why Ukraine?**

Five factors help explain why Putin takes a very different view of Ukraine than the West does. The first is **demographic**: Russian is the native tongue for most people living in eastern Ukraine. In the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election, pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich did not win the election but received more than 60 percent of the vote in every sector where Russian is the native tongue. In the sectors most being contested by pro-Russian separatists today, he got more than 90 percent of the vote. To Putin, the people living in these areas deserve to decide whether they want to be part of Russia or part of Ukraine.

The second is **cultural**. Kiev, the capital city of Ukraine, has often been called "the mother of Russian cities." From the 18<sup>th</sup> century to 1918, Ukraine was a formal part of Russia. In 1918, Ukraine declared its independence from the Russian Republic, but in 1922 it became a founding member of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and remained part of the U.S.S.R. until the Soviet Union was dissolved in 1991.

In the 2005 speech where he addressed the fall of the Soviet Union, Putin grieved that "tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory." Presumably he included Ukrainians in their number. From 1991 to today, most Ukrainians in the east have maintained cultural and emotional ties to Russia.

The third is **political**. In 2010, Viktor Yanukovich became the most pro-Russian president in Ukrainian history. On December 17, 2013, Yanukovich signed a treaty with Russia that brought economic relief to the country but gave Russia significant naval concessions. Protests against the treaty and Yanukovich's leadership led to his ouster in February 2014.

On March 1, the exiled president asked Russia to send military forces "to establish legitimacy, peace, law and order, stability and defending the people of Ukraine." The next day, Putin sent forces which took control of the Crimean Peninsula. On March 6, the Crimean Parliament voted to "enter into the Russian Federation with the rights of a

subject of the Russian Federation." Twelve days later, Russia and Crimea formalized this relationship.

On May 25, 2014, Petro Poroshenko was elected president on a pro-European Union platform. Putin insists that the ouster of Yanukovich was unlawful and that Poroshenko is an illegitimate president. He claims to be supporting Russians living in Ukraine who wish to align themselves more fully with their mother country.

The fourth is **economic**. Putin is working to establish a Eurasian Economic Union to counter NATO and the European Union. One of his reasons for supporting pro-Russian nationalists in Ukraine is that the new Ukrainian president rejected Putin's Eurasian Union.

The fifth is **military**. Russia has been invaded repeatedly from the west. Examples include Mongols under Genghis Khan in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Napoleon's armies in 1812, and Hitler and the Third Reich during World War II. Many in the West forget that more Russians than Jews died during the second World War. To Putin, the territory of Ukraine is crucial to buttressing and defending Russia's western border.

He has personal reasons to remember invaders against his homeland. Putin's brother Viktor died from diphtheria during the siege of Leningrad in World War II. His maternal grandmother was killed by Germans in 1941; his maternal uncles died in the war as well.

He and the Russian people remember armies across the centuries marching through Ukraine and invading Russia. They view Ukraine and other countries on their western border as essential to their sovereignty and security. Mobilizing state forces to defend the nation is one of the roles Putin has assigned himself.

### **What should the West do?**

Given his worldview, Putin is likely to be less susceptible to Western pressure than we might think. Economic sanctions will be interpreted as further Western intrusion and persecution of the great Russian people.

And strenuous sanctions will be difficult for Europeans to support, since 54 percent of the European Union's current total energy needs are met by Russia. Finland and the Baltic States are 100 percent dependent on Russia for energy; Slovakia, Hungary, Serbia, Bulgaria and Moldova are nearly entirely dependent.

So what will happen?

Alexander J. Motyl blogs weekly about Ukraine for *World Affairs*. He suggests four options: a cold war in which tensions with the West continue to escalate; a cold peace, in which Russia keeps Crimea but backs off on Ukraine; a hot war, in which Russia invades Ukraine and provokes military confrontation with the West; and a hot peace, in which Russia recognizes the new government in Kiev and de-annexes Crimea.

Motyl believes cold war or cold peace are the most likely outcomes. Cold peace is more assured if Ukraine strengthens its own security, jump-starts its economy to become less reliant on Russia, and embeds itself with the West as soon as possible. In the face of such circumstances, Putin would be less likely to continue his advance on Ukraine.

Simon Shuster is less optimistic. In *Time* magazine's cover story for August 4, 2014, he calls the current conflict with Russia "Cold War II" and explains why "the West is losing Putin's dangerous game." Shuster sees European leaders who depend on Russian energy and do not want to threaten economic stability, coupled with an American president whose people oppose any military intervention in Ukraine. Sanctions are the West's most likely—and likely ineffective—response.

## Conclusion

"Vladimir" is Russian for "to rule with greatness." His supporters believe that he is fulfilling his name and calling. The Russian priest Alexey Kulberg says he would like to see Russia return to the "theocratic values" of tsarist times and believes Putin is the man to lead the country in this direction. "I don't want to idealize the President," he says, "but I can understand Putin's words and Putin's decisions. As a citizen, I trust him."

His critics view him as a modern-day Tsar bent on recreating the Soviet Union. They see him as an autocratic dictator who threatens the stability of Europe and the security of the West.

A third view is somewhere in the middle: Putin is a reflection of the worldview that (1) posits Russian exceptionalism as the conservator of orthodox Christian values; (2) encourages autocratic rule as the best pathway to social progress and reform; and (3) requires strong military defense against the West. He is no friend of America and the West. His military ambitions do in fact threaten those states that lie on his western border. But he is not seeking to build not the Soviet Union but a greater Mother Russia.

There is a famous Chinese curse that says, "May you live in interesting times," interesting being the opposite of tranquil and peaceful. With regard to Putin's resurgent Russia, we are clearly living in such times today.

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