



Photo: Maria Joner

Who Is Vladimir Putin?

Why Do the US Government and the Western Media Demonise Him?

by Sharon Tennison © 2014–2016

Countering the Accusations

As the Ukraine situation has worsened, unconscionable misinformation and hype are being poured on Russia and President Vladimir Putin. Journalists and pundits must scour the Internet and thesauruses to come up with fiendish new epithets to describe both.

Wherever I make presentations across America, the first question ominously asked during Q&As is always: "What about Putin?" It's time to share my thoughts.

Putin obviously has his faults and makes mistakes. Based on my earlier experience with him and the experiences of trusted people including US officials who have worked closely with him over a period of years, Putin most likely is a straight, reliable and exceptionally inventive man. He is obviously a long-term thinker and planner and has proven to be an excellent analyst and strategist. He is a leader who can quietly work towards

his goals under mounds of accusations and myths that have been steadily levelled at him since he became Russia's second President.

I've stood by silently, watching the demonisation of Putin grow since it began in the early 2000s, and I've pondered on computer my thoughts and concerns, hoping eventually to include them in a book (published in 2012 as *The Power of Impossible Ideas*). The book explains my observations more thoroughly than this article does.

Like others who have had direct experience with this little-known man, I've tried to no avail to avoid being labelled as a "Putin apologist". If one is even neutral about him, this is considered as being "soft on Putin" by pundits and newshounds as well as by average citizens who obtain their news from CNN, Fox and MSNBC.

I don't pretend to be an expert; I'm just a program developer who's worked in the USSR and Russia for the



Palace Square, featuring the triumphal arch and the General Staff Building, St Petersburg, Russia.
(Photo: Josep Renalias)

past 30 years. But during this time, I've had far more direct, on-ground contact with Russians of all stripes across 11 time zones than any of the Western reporters or, for that matter, any of Washington's officials. I've been in the country long enough to ponder Russian history and culture deeply, to study the psychology and conditioning, and to understand the marked differences between American and Russian mentalities which so complicate our political relations with their leaders. As with personalities in a family, a civic club or a city hall, it takes understanding and compromise to be able to create workable relationships when basic conditionings are different. Washington has been notoriously disinterested in understanding these differences and attempting to meet Russia halfway.

In addition to my personal experience with Putin, I've had discussions with numerous American officials and businesspeople who've had years of experience working with him, and I believe that it's safe to say that none would describe him as "brutal" or "thuggish" or would turn to the other slanderous adjectives and nouns that are repeatedly used in the Western media.

I met Putin years before he'd ever dreamed of being President of Russia, as did many of us working in St Petersburg during the 1990s. Since all of the slander started, I've become nearly obsessed with understanding Putin's character. I think I've read every major speech that Putin has given—including the full texts of his annual, hours-long telephone "talk-ins" with Russian citizens. I've been trying to ascertain whether he has changed for the worse since being elevated to the presidency, or whether he is a straight character cast into a role that he never anticipated—and is using his sheer wits to try to do the best he can to deal with Washington under extremely difficult circumstances. If the latter is the case, and I think it is, he should receive high marks for his performance

since 2000 when he came to power.

It's not by accident that *Forbes* declared Putin number one on its list of The World's Most Powerful People of 2013, replacing US President Barack Obama who was given the title for 2012.

St Petersburg, 1992

The following is my one personal experience with Vladimir Putin. It was in 1992, two years after the implosion of communism. The place was St Petersburg. For years I had been creating programs to open up relations between the two countries in the hope of helping the people go beyond their entrenched top-down mentalities. A new program possibility emerged in my head. Since I expected it might require a signature from the Marienskii City Hall, an appointment was made.

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My friend Volodya Shestakov and I showed up at a side door entrance to the Marienskii building. We found ourselves in a small, dull-brown office, facing a rather trim, nondescript man in a brown suit. He enquired about my reason for coming in. After scanning the proposal I provided, he began by asking intelligent questions. After each of my answers, he asked the next relevant question.

I became aware that this interviewer was different from other bureaucrats who always seemed to fall into chummy conversations with foreigners in the hope of obtaining bribes in exchange for the Americans' requests.

The CCI [Center for Citizen Initiatives] stood on the principle that we would never, ever give bribes.

This bureaucrat was open, enquiring and impersonal in demeanour. After more than an hour of careful questions and answers, he quietly explained that he had tried hard to determine if the proposal was legal. Then he said that unfortunately at the time it was not. He uttered a few good words about the proposal. That was all. He simply and kindly showed us to the door.

Out on the sidewalk, I said to my colleague: "Volodya, this is the first time we have ever dealt with a Soviet bureaucrat who didn't ask us for a trip to the US or something valuable!"

I remember looking at the bureaucrat's business card in the sunlight. It read: "Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin".

St Petersburg, 1994

US Consul General Jack Gosnell put in an SOS call to me in St Petersburg. He had 14 Congress members and the new US Ambassador to Russia, Thomas Pickering, coming to St Petersburg in the next three days. He needed immediate help.

I scurried over to the consulate and learned that Jack intended me to brief this auspicious delegation and the incoming ambassador. I was stunned, but he insisted. They were coming from Moscow and were furious about how US funding was being wasted there. Jack wanted them to hear the "good news" about CCI's programs that were showing fine results.

In the next 24 hours, Jack and I also set up "home" meetings in a dozen Russian entrepreneurs' small apartments for the arriving dignitaries (St Petersburg State Department people were aghast, since it had never been done before—but Jack overruled them).

Only later, in 2000, did I learn of Jack's three-year experience with Vladimir Putin in the 1990s while the latter was running the city for Mayor Sobchak.

Moscow, 1999–2000

With no warning, at the turn of the year 1999 President Boris Yeltsin announced to the world that from the next day forward he was vacating his office and leaving Russia in the hands of the little-known Vladimir Putin.

On hearing the news, I thought that surely this was not the Putin I'd remembered; he could never lead Russia. The next day, a *New York Times* article included a photo. Yes, it was the same Putin I'd met years ago!

I was shocked and dismayed, telling friends: "This is a disaster for Russia. I've spent time with this guy. He is too introverted and too intelligent. He will

never be able to relate to Russia's masses."

Further, I lamented: "For Russia to get up off its knees, two things must happen: (1) the arrogant young oligarchs have to be removed by force from the Kremlin; and (2) a way must be found to remove the regional bosses (governors) from their fiefdoms across Russia's 89 regions." It was clear to me that the man in the brown suit would never have the instincts or guts to tackle Russia's overriding twin challenges.

Moscow, 2000

Almost immediately, Putin began putting Russia's oligarchs on edge. In February 2000, a question about the oligarchs came up. He clarified with a question and answer: "What should be the relationship with the so-called oligarchs? The same as anyone else. The same as the owner of a small bakery or a shoe repair shop."

This was the first signal that the tycoons would no longer be able to flaunt government regulations or count on special access in the Kremlin. It also made the West's capitalists nervous. After all, these oligarchs were wealthy, untouchable businessmen, good capitalists. Never mind that their enterprises were illegal and they were putting their profits into offshore banks.

Four months later, Putin called a meeting with the oligarchs and gave them his deal: they could keep their illegally gained, wealth-producing enterprises and these would not be nationalised...if taxes were paid on their revenues and if they personally stayed out of politics. This was the first of Putin's "elegant solutions" to the near-impossible challenges facing the new Russia.

But the deal also put Putin in the crosshairs with US media and officials who then began to champion the oligarchs, particularly Mikhail Khodorkovsky. The latter



President Boris Yeltsin, handing over the "presidential" copy of the Russian Constitution to the new Acting President, Vladimir Putin, on 31 December 1999 at the Kremlin, Moscow.



Russia's President Vladimir Putin and US President Barack Obama held talks in June 2012 at the G20 summit in Los Cabos, Mexico.

became highly political and didn't pay taxes, and prior to his being apprehended and imprisoned was in the process of selling a major portion of Russia's largest private oil company, Yukos, to ExxonMobil. Unfortunately, to US media and governing structures, Khodorkovsky became a martyr (and remains so up to today).

St Petersburg, March 2000

I arrived in St Petersburg. A Russian friend (a psychologist) since 1983 came for our usual visit. My first question was: "Lena, what do you think about your new President?" She laughed and retorted: "Volodya! I went to school with him!"

Lena described Putin as a quiet youngster, poor and fond of martial arts, who stood up for kids being bullied in the playground. She remembered him as a patriotic youth who applied for the KGB prematurely after graduating from secondary school. He was told to get an education and was sent away. He went to law school. Later, he reapplied for the KGB and was accepted.

I must have grimaced at this, because Lena said: "Sharon, in those days we all admired the KGB and believed that those who worked there were patriots and were keeping the country safe. We thought it was natural for Volodya to choose this career."

My next question was: "What do you think he will do with Yeltsin's criminals in the Kremlin?" Putting on her psychologist hat, she pondered and replied: "If left to his normal behaviours, he will watch them for a while to be sure what is going on. Then, he will throw up some flares to let them know that he is watching. If they don't respond, he will address them personally. Then, if the behaviours don't change...some will be in prison in a couple of years."

I congratulated Lena via email when her predictions began to show up in real time.

St Petersburg, 2000s

St Petersburg's many CCI alumni were being interviewed to determine how the PEP [productivity enhancement program] business training scheme was working and how we could make the US experience more valuable for their new small businesses. Most believed that the program had been enormously important, even life changing.

At the end of the program, each was asked: "So what do you think of your new President?" None responded negatively, even though entrepreneurs hated Russia's

bureaucrats at that time. Most answered similarly: "Putin registered my business a few years ago." Next question: "So, how much did it cost you?" To a person, they replied: "Putin didn't charge anything." One said: "We went to Putin's desk because the others providing registrations at the Marienskii were getting 'rich on their seats'."

Into Putin's first year as Russia's President, US officials seemed to me to suspect that he would be antithetical to America's interests. His every move was being called into question in the American media. I couldn't understand why, and I was chronicling these happenings on my computer and in my newsletters.

Into Putin's first year as Russia's President, US officials seemed to me to suspect that he would be antithetical to America's interests.

Jack Gosnell (the now former US Consul General mentioned earlier) explained his relationship with Putin when the latter was Deputy Mayor of St Petersburg. The two of them had worked closely to create joint ventures and other ways to promote relations between the two countries.

Jack related that Vladimir Putin was always straight up, courteous and helpful. When Putin's wife, Lyudmila, was in a severe auto accident, Jack took the liberty (before informing Putin) to arrange for her to have medical care in Finland. He reported that when he told Putin, the latter was overcome by the generous offer but said that he couldn't accept this favour, that Lyudmila would have to recover in a Russian hospital. She did, although medical

care in Russia was abominably bad in the 1990s.

A senior CSIS [Center for Strategic & International Studies] officer, who was a friend in the 2000s, worked closely with Putin on a number of joint ventures during the 1990s. He reported that he'd had no dealings with Putin that were questionable, that he respected him, and that he believed Putin was acquiring an undeserved, dour reputation from the US media. As a matter of fact, he closed the door at the CSIS when we started talking about Putin. I guessed that his comments wouldn't have been acceptable if others were listening.

A former US official, who goes unidentified, also reported working closely with Putin, saying that there was never any hint of bribery or pressuring; nothing but respectable behaviours and helpfulness.

US State Department Encounters, 2013

I had two encounters in 2013 with US State Department officials regarding Putin.

At the first one, I felt free to ask the question that I'd previously yearned to have answered: "When did Putin become unacceptable to Washington officials and why?" Without hesitating, the official came back with the answer: "'The knives were drawn' when it was announced that Putin would be the next President." I questioned: "Why?" The answer: "I could never find out why; maybe because he was KGB." I offered that Bush number one was head of the CIA. The reply was: "That would have made no difference. He was our guy."

The second was a former official with whom I'd recently shared a radio interview on Russia. Afterwards, when we were chatting, I remarked: "You might be interested to know that I've collected experiences of Putin from numerous people, some over a period of years, and they all say they had no negative experiences with Putin and there was no evidence of taking bribes." He firmly replied: "No one has ever been able to come up with a bribery charge against Putin."

Trips throughout Russia, 2001–2014

From 2001, I've watched the negative US media mounting against Putin. There have even been accusations of assassinations and poisonings, and comparisons with Hitler. No one yet has come up with any concrete evidence for these allegations.

During this period, I travelled throughout Russia several times every year and watched the country slowly change under Putin's watch. Taxes were lowered, inflation was lessened, and laws were slowly being put into place. Schools and hospitals began improving. Small businesses were growing, agriculture was showing improvement, and stores were becoming stocked with food. Alcohol challenges were becoming less obvious, smoking was banned from buildings, and life expectancy began increasing. Highways were being laid across the country, new railways and modern trains were appearing

even in far-distant places, and the banking industry was becoming dependable. Russia was beginning to look like a decent country—certainly not where Russians hoped it to be in the long term, but improving incrementally for the first time in their memories.

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In September 2013, as well as visiting St Petersburg and Moscow I travelled out to the Ural Mountains and spent time in Ekaterinburg, Chelyabinsk and Perm. We travelled between cities via autos and rail. I found that the fields and forests were looking healthy, and small towns were sporting new paint and construction. I saw that today's Russians were dressing like Americans (we buy the same clothing from China). Old concrete Khrushchev blockhouses were giving way to new multistorey private residential complexes which are lovely. High-rise business centres, fine hotels and great restaurants were becoming commonplace—and ordinary Russians were frequenting these places. Two- and three-storey private homes were rimming these Russian cities far from Moscow. We visited new museums, municipal buildings and huge supermarkets. We noticed that streets were in good repair, highways were new and well marked, and service stations looked like those dotting American highways.

In January 2014, I went to Novosibirsk in Siberia where I noted similar new architecture. I saw that the streets were kept navigable with constant snowploughing, modern lighting was keeping the city bright all night, and

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Sharon Tennison, Founder and President of the US-based Center for Citizen Initiatives (CCI)

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lots of new traffic lights (with seconds counting down to light change) were appearing.

It is astounding to me how much progress Russia has made since a little-known man with limited political experience walked into Russia's presidency and took over a country that was flat on its belly.

Reflections on our Projections

So why do our leaders and media demean and demonise Putin and Russia? Like Lady Macbeth, do they protest too much?

Psychologists tell us that people (and countries?) project onto others what they don't want to face in themselves. Others carry our "shadow" when we refuse to own it. We confer on others the very traits that we are horrified to acknowledge in ourselves.

Could this be why we constantly find fault with Putin and Russia?

Could it be that we project onto Putin the sins of ourselves and our leaders?

Could it be that we condemn Russia's corruption, acting as if the corruption within our corporate world doesn't exist?

Could it be that we condemn Russia's human rights and LGBT issues, not facing the fact that we haven't solved our own?

Could it be that we accuse Russia of "reconstituting the

USSR" because of what we do to remain the world's "hegemon"?

Could it be that we project nationalistic behaviours onto Russia because we ourselves have become nationalistic and we don't want to face it?

Could it be that we project warmongering onto Russia because of what we have done over the past several US administrations? ∞

About the Author:

Sharon Tennison is the Founder and President of the US-based Center for Citizen Initiatives (CCI). An American, Tennison established the CCI in 1983 to bring about a constructive relationship with the then Soviet Union and has continued this work in the new Russia. She is the author of *The Power of Impossible Ideas: Citizens' Extraordinary Efforts to Avert International Crisis* (Odenwald Press, 2012).

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