

## History

# Russia under Vladimir Putin (2000-2014)

Zurab Abashidze

*Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia*

(Presented by Academy Member Ramaz Khurodze)

**In his famous work “The Sources of Soviet Conduct“ (1947) the prominent American diplomat and historian George F. Kennan analyzed the reasons and goals of Soviet expansionism in Eastern Europe after the end of World War II. Kennan’s views were largely used by the authors of the US strategy towards the Soviet Union during the Cold War and they are still relevant to a certain extent. However, contemporary Russia and the modern world in general are much different from the Cold War era. During the presidency of Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999), several steps were made toward the democratization of Russia and establishing cooperative relations with the West. Since 2000 Vladimir Putin’s Russia has gradually changed its conduct from close cooperation with the Western countries toward total confrontation. Based on events and facts, this paper shows profound changes in political, social and economic order which Russia has seen in the period of 2000-2014. The study is mainly focused on Russia’s foreign policy and its relations with the West. © 2024 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.**

Russia, the West, NATO, confrontation, security, conduct

**First presidential term (2000-2004).** According to the vast majority of Russians, in 2000 Vladimir Putin inherited from Boris Yeltsin a decadent and criminalized state in a deep internal crisis and with a strongly damaged authority in the world.

As Putin assumed the power on 7 May, he set main goals for his presidency. First of all, he faced a problem every new Russian leader encounters: how to consolidate power. This goal went in line with his strategic vision for Russia, which in Putin’s mind was “going through one of the most difficult periods of its long history. For the first time in the last 200 to 300 years, it faces, let us say, a real danger of falling into the second, and even the third, rank of worlds states. To prevent this from

happening, we will have to expend all our nations intellectual, physical, and moral vigor. We need coordinated creative work. Nobody will do this for us. Everything now depends only on our ability to realize the degree of danger, to unite, to commit ourselves to long, arduous work” [1].

This vision and political agenda defined Putin’s subsequent conduct and Russia’s foreign policy.

One of the first decisions Putin made in 2000 was to introduce the institute of president’s Plenipotentiary Representatives in federal regions of Russia. The purpose of this decision was to consolidate the Russian federal system which was strongly shaken in 1990s.

The new owner of the Kremlin soon worked out a new Concept of Russia's national security. An amended law regulating political parties was introduced, which put limitations on small parties. The adopted new designs of the state flag, coat of arms and national anthem combined the symbols of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. This ended discussions going on since the 1990s, whether Russia was rejecting or not its Soviet past.

Russia's new leader inherited a pluralistic media and civil society. In 2000 a new Information Security Doctrine that reflected the new government's plans for the media was introduced. The General Prosecutor Office launched an investigation against Vladimir Gusinsky, the owner of one of the biggest media holdings. This was a clear message to Russian oligarchs, who controlled large media outlets along with various sectors of the economy. Gusinsky had to leave Russia soon. Boris Berezovsky and other influential oligarchs were obliged to follow suit.

The biggest challenge for Putin was the so-called Second Chechen War, which created a real threat to Russia's state integrity. Despite suffering great losses, the Russian army managed to capture Grozny at the start of 2000. However, this did not stop the armed resistance of the Chechens.

In the 2000, relations between Georgia and Russia have significantly deteriorated. Moscow accused Tbilisi of allegedly supporting Chechen separatism and claimed that among the Chechen refugees in Pankisi gorge of Georgia there were militants as well. Russian aircraft attacked the Gorge, there were casualties. As an act of additional punishment, Moscow introduced a visa regime for the citizens of Georgia (this regime did not apply to the residents of Abkhazia and Tskhivali Region/South Ossetia).

Moscow saw "the hand of the West" in the Chechen conflict, because Western countries continuously criticized Russia for using disproportionate force.

This situation changed drastically after the terrorist attack in New York on September 11,

2001. The Russian president was among the first world leaders to contact President George W. Bush and extend his full solidarity. Two months later, Putin paid an official visit to the United States. The visit was successful and bore tangible results. Remarks and comments made by two leaders seem unreal from today's perspective. The presidents tried their best to demonstrate good will and enthusiasm in enhancing US-Russian relations.

Moscow signaled an important shift in its geopolitical conduct by supporting President Bush's initiative to build US military bases in central Asia (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan). Since the 19th century, this large region has been part of the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union. However, Washington needed these bases for a military campaign in Afghanistan that started in October 2001. In return, Putin practically got a green light from the White House for his military operations in Chechnya.

After the terrorist attack in New York, President Bush signed the Patriot Act, which gave the US law enforcement agencies almost unlimited rights within declared Global War on terrorism. The Kremlin took advantage of such developments and made similar decisions in Chechnya using the following argument: "If the US can do it, so can we!"

In the following years, almost until 2010, solving the Chechen conflict was among the top priorities for Putin. There were many harrowing terrorist attacks and armed clashes, like Nord-Ost Moscow theater hostage crisis in 2002 and Beslan school siege in 2004.

Washington reacted positively on Moscow's decision to close its military base in Vietnam (Cam Rahn Bay) and its Signals Intelligence facility in Cuba (Lourdes) by the end of 2001. These expensive facilities were elements of Soviet military surveillance system during the Cold War.

At the same time, the US sponsored Train and Equip Program of 2001 aimed at enhancing Georgia's counter terrorism capabilities encountered Russia's strong opposition. Moscow portrayed this

program as US plans to deploy military bases in Georgia.

On December 13, 2001, Washington decided to leave the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty signed in Moscow in 1972. This treaty served as an important component of strategic stability. At the same time, President Bush announced plans to develop a large-scale Anti-ballistic System that would protect the USA and its allies from possible attacks from Iran and North Korea.

Initially, Putin's reaction was quite restrained. However, later, the criticism from the Kremlin intensified. Russia suspected that the real target of the US military plans was Moscow and not Tehran or Pyongyang.

On May 24, 2002, President Bush visited Moscow. The sides signed Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty (SORT), which would cut down the number of operationally deployed nuclear warheads of each country by a third.

Moscow was also quite actively cooperating with NATO. On May 28th, a decision to create a NATO-Russia Council (NRC) was made. Its purpose was to coordinate cooperation on military and political issues.

Putin used his authority to consolidate state control on the Russian economy and mainly on energy resources. In this regard, his goal was to weaken the influence of Russian oligarchs. The most important case was about the largest oil company Yukos and its main owner Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the wealthiest businessman in Russia. In the autumn of 2003, he was accused of financial misconduct and subsequently arrested. Later, Yukos declared bankruptcy.

The western countries condemned the campaign against Yukos and Khodorkovsky as manufactured for political reasons. However, this gave Putin the freedom to turn energy resources into an effective tool for his internal and foreign policy.

Control of energy resources and changes on the world market soon yielded favorable results for Kremlin. In 2000, the average price of a barrel of

oil was around 30 USD. The prices started rising in 2002 and reached historical heights in the summer of 2008 at 143,95 USD per barrel. Prices for natural gas followed the same pattern. In 2000, the price of 1000 cubic meters was 100 USD, and by 2005 this price had almost quadrupled.

Russia's revenues increased significantly and had a positive effect on the ordinary Russians living standards. One of the indicators of Russian economic growth was the creation of the Stabilization Fund in 2004, which would increase in the following period due to a surplus in federal budget revenues.

Improvement of economy helped Vladimir Putin to solidify his power, which happened at the cost of democratic standards. However, the majority of the population, which remembered the poverty and disastrous criminal situation of the 1990s, still supported Putin's heavy-handed approach

The US military campaign against Iraq in March 2003 produced a serious tension between Washington and Moscow. Russia protested against Washington's "blatant disregard" of the UN Charter and international law. Some European capitals voiced serious concern regarding this military operation as well. The US argued that Saddam Hussein was attempting to create weapons of mass destruction (WMD). However, none of the relevant international organizations could confirm it.

The US armed forces captured Baghdad relatively quickly and soon caught Saddam Hussein. However, there was no evidence that Iraq was manufacturing WMD. Deep crises and chaos engulfed the nation and the balance of power in Iraq changed in favor of the regional opponents of Washington.

In 2004, another wave of NATO enlargement took place, the most spectacular in the history of the Alliance. Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia joined its ranks. While these countries celebrated this historical achievement, Moscow was alarmed. Putin perceived these developments as disrespect toward him and a

serious challenge to Russia's security. Russian military were making strong statements: "NATO is already at our borders!" Moscow insisted that the West, spearheaded by the US, broke agreements made during the Cold War that NATO would not expend eastwards. As evidence, Moscow would present recorded verbal agreements between the Soviet and Western leaders during Mikhail Gorbachev's leadership.

These agreements appear to be authentic and even the West did not deny them. However, there are two circumstances that refute Russian arguments. First, there was never a relevant signed document between the West and the USSR or its successor, the Russian Federation. Second, verbal agreements were indeed reached with the Soviet leadership. However, this country ceased to exist in 1991.

In 2003, the so-called Rose Revolution erupted in Georgia. In 2004, the "Orange Revolution" swept over Ukraine. In 2005 the "Tulip Revolution" led to a regime change in Kyrgyzstan. Moscow saw behind these events Washington's efforts to push Russia out of the former Soviet republics. Democratic changes in Ukraine led by pro-western politicians became a particular challenge for Moscow. In that context Russia's political and expert circles constantly quoted Zbigniew Brzezinski that "without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire... If Moscow regains control over Ukraine, with its 52 million people and major resources as well as its access to Black Sea, Russia automatically again regains the wherewithal to become a powerful imperial state, spanning Europe and Asia" [2]. This aphorism, in many Russians mind, was a proof of Washington's will to split Russia-Ukrainian century old ties.

**Second Presidential term (2004-2008).** In March of 2004, Putin achieved a convincing victory in the presidential elections and took the reins of the country for the second term. He started this term under the popular slogan of Russian elite "Russia is

rising from its knees"! (Россия встает с колен!). Almost all sectors experienced the increased influence of the state and the weakening of democratic institutions. However, during his annual address to the Federal Assembly in 2005, Putin named "the strengthening of personal freedom and civil societies" among the main priorities for the country.

In 2005, new state institutions were formed in Chechnya and a local parliament was elected, which solidified this region's return to Russian federal control. This was a big victory for Putin. However, some challenges still remained in the region. After the death of Chechen leader Akhmad Kadyrov in a terrorist attack in 2004, his son Ramzan Kadyrov was tasked with maintaining control over Chechnya.

Since 2000, the Russian economy has been growing at a steady and impressive pace. Namely, in 2000, GDP growth was 10%, in 2001 – 5.7%, in 2002 – 4.9%, in 2003 – 7.3%, in 2004 – 7.2%, in 2005 – 6.4%, in 2006 – 7.7%, in 2007 – 8.1% and in 2008 – 5.6%. In 2009, after the 2008 world financial crisis, Russia's GDP was reduced by 7.9%; however, it grew again by 8.8% in 2010-2011. This period marks steady growth of investments. By 2011, annual investments reached 370 billion USD, i.e., one billion per day. The same year, inflation was 6.6%. After the turbulent 1990s, many sectors of the economy were reinvigorated, including processing industry (77% growth), manufacturing industry (91%), textile production (46%), food industry (64%), etc.

Stable revenue growth allowed Russia to allocate more resources for its military. In 2005, Moscow increased military spending by 28%, which was approximately 27 billion dollars. By 2014, the spending had reached 70 billion dollars. This sum was larger than any single European country's military budget and 14% of the US military budget.

An increase in military spending and the strengthening of the state in general was pushing Russia toward "restoring its rightful place in the

world.” The European countries were increasingly becoming dependent on Russia’s energy resources and it fueled Kremlin’s assertiveness.

Moscow continued to keep pressure on the former Soviet republics. In case of Georgia, Russia supported in every possible way separatist regimes in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia. Expressing dissatisfaction with Georgia’s efforts to keep the mentioned regions within the country’s internationally recognized borders, Moscow introduced strict embargo on Georgian goods in 2006. A significant number of Georgians were expelled from Russia in violation of international norms.

At the same time, Moscow continued to fulfill certain important international commitments. For example, after long and difficult negotiations Moscow finally made decision on completing by 2007 the withdrawal of its military bases from Georgia, according to the Georgian-Russian agreement reached in 1999 at the OSCE Istanbul Summit.

In 2007 elections to the State Duma the United Russia gained a constitutional majority. Thus, the party of power increased the control over central and regional politics.

The years between 2005 and 2007 marked the founding of Kremlin’s new ideological principles for the so-called sovereign democracy. This variety of “managed democracy” was worked out in Putin’s close circle and it was primarily based on perceived state interests. The core idea was patriotism and the respect of Russia’s traditional values as counterbalance to western liberalism. The goal of the “new model” was to create an ideological rationale for the monopoly of power for Putin’s ruling elite.

Death of the former Russian FSB officer Alexander Litvinenko in 2006 raised serious doubts in the West regarding this “new model”. Having received asylum in the UK, Litvinenko strongly criticized violations of human rights by Russian authorities. According to the UK investigation, Litvinenko was poisoned with polonium by

Russians secret service agents. This case seriously damaged Putin’s image, as well as Moscow’s relations with London and the West.

On February 10, 2007, during his speech at the Munich Security Conference, Vladimir Putin practically made a presentation for his sovereign democracy and Russia’s new visions for foreign policy. His main remarks were:

A unipolar world order, mostly led by the USA, was unacceptable for Moscow;

- US interests penetrated almost every country’s political, economic, and humanitarian spheres;
- Only the UN Security Council can make decisions on using force against a sovereign nation;
- NATO’s decision to expand eastwards opposes Russian interests and blatantly breaks promises that the alliance gave to Russia previously;
- Moscow will protect its sovereign interests!

Putin’s speech was a deep disappointment for many in the West. The change of Russia’s conduct posed unanswered questions about Moscow’s further steps. One could recall Winston Churchill: “I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma: but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interests” [3].

In the following period, international events moved rapidly to the detriment of Georgia. To a certain extent, these developments were related to the issue of Kosovo’s independence.

In accordance with the UN Security Council Resolution, from 1999 Kosovo was governed by the United Nations Interim Administration Mission (UNMIK). The UN SC resolution stated that Kosovo would remain part of Yugoslavia as an autonomous entity, while there would be international consultations about its future status. These consultations started in 2006, headed by a UN special representative and the former Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari. In 2007 he presented proposals to the UN SC, however, Russia demanded changes. Moscow categorically opposed any formulation that would question the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia.

The same year, a so-called “Troika” (EU, USA, and Russia) was created to work out an acceptable compromise that both Belgrade and Pristina would agree on. This was a very difficult endeavor because the sides had fully opposed positions: Belgrade was trying to keep Kosovo, while the latter wanted total independence. Negotiations reached a dead end. Despite Russia’s opposition, the US, UK, and France were leaning more toward Kosovo’s independence.

Kosovo declared independence on February 17, 2008. In the following days, numerous countries supported this decision, including the USA, most of EU member states, Turkey and other countries. Two members of the Security Council, Russia and China, refused to recognize the independence. According to President Putin, this decision by the Western countries undermined international order established after World War II and Moscow would not leave it unanswered. “We have counter options,” he said.

**Prime Minister Vladimir Putin (2008-2012).** In March of 2008, Dimitri Medvedev became Russian president. Vladimir Putin formally transferred his power for one term while taking the seat of the Prime Minister himself.

On April 2-3, 2008, at the NATO Summit in Bucharest it was decided that Georgia and Ukraine will join the alliance in the future. At the same time, the two countries were not offered the Membership Action Plan (MAP), which is almost a NATO candidate status. Some countries, including Germany and France, voiced their reservations about giving MAP to Georgia and Ukraine. One reason might have been that Vladimir Putin personally visited Bucharest during the Summit and tried to influence the NATO member states.

Tbilisi and Kyiv celebrated this historical decision by NATO. Moscow, on the other hand, was making alarming statements.

Later, it became known that US Ambassador to Russia William Burns (the current Director of the

CIA), in his cable of February 1, 2008 (“Nyet means Nyet: Russia’s NATO Enlargement Red-lines”) warned the State Secretary Condoleezza Rice that, “enlargement of NATO crosses the red line... Russia’s opposition to NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia is both emotional and based on perceived strategic concerns about the impact on the Russia’s interest in the region... This poses a grave threat to the region’s stability” [4].

Russia used the recognition of Kosovo’s independence by the US and other western countries, as well as the results of the NATO Bucharest summit as a pretext for its military intervention in Georgia in August 2008. Soon, Moscow used the same excuse to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and so-called South Ossetia. Unfortunately, some actions by the Georgian government were provocative, but it does not relieve in any way Moscow of responsibility for military aggression against sovereign country.

Russia practically paid no price for this military aggression. In just 2-3 months, relations between Russia and Western countries and international organizations, including NATO, went back to business as usual. No economic sanctions were imposed on Russia.

On March 6, 2009, i.e., 6 months after the 2008 August War, newly elected US president Barack Obama’s administration proposed to Kremlin the “reset” of bilateral relations. In Geneva, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton offered to her Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov a red button with the word “reset” on it. However, the word “reset” was mistranslated into Russian as “Perezruzka” (перезрузка) – meaning overload, instead of “Perezagruska” (перезагрузка), which was the intended meaning. This orthographic mistake soon became an unfortunate reality.

The start of the “reset” was quite promising. In July 2009 President Barack Obama visited Moscow and met for the first time Prime Minister Putin, top strong man of Russia. The meeting was moderately constructive.

In November 2009, Russian lawyer Sergei Magnitsky died in a Moscow prison. He was known for exposing Russian official's corruption. Magnitsky was an employee of the British investment fund Hermitage Capital Management. According to western sources, he died in the prison cell due to inhumane treatment. This caused wide international resonance. Magnitsky Act of 2012 introduced targeted sanctions against Russian officials.

In 2009, Brazil, China, India and Russia founded at the Summit in Yekaterinburg an Inter-governmental organization BRICS. With its development bank and plans for new payment system, this organization was clearly designed as a strategic counterweight to the US.

On April 8, 2010, Presidents Obama and Medvedev signed in Prague the Nuclear Arms reduction Treaty (New Start).

In 2011, with the support of the US, Russia became member of the World Trade Organization. Georgia was strongly advised by Washington to give green light to this move.

2010 marked the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring. Revolutionary events swept over countries of the Middle East and this led to serious political changes in the region. In 2011, there was a serious escalation in the Libyan civil war, where opponents of Muammar Gaddafi received arms supplies and military support from Western countries. Meanwhile, the UN Security Council resolution prohibited arms supplies and military assistance to opposing sides. According to Moscow, this resolution was ignored. Foreign Minister Lavrov stated, that "there has never been such a blatant and open disregard of decisions made by the UN Security Council" [5].

Since the Soviet times, Moscow had friendly ties with Libya and Gaddafi. So, when rebels captured and then violently executed him, voices of strong protest were heard in Moscow: "Today, Libya and Gaddafi, tomorrow may be Russia?!"

And in fact, strong wave of protests soon erupted in Russia. Mass demonstrations followed the

State Duma (2011) and the presidential elections, which Vladimir Putin won on March 4, 2012. Demonstrators demanded fair elections and protested against Putin.

Moscow and other cities of Russia were rocked by biggest demonstrations since the 1990-s, organized by opposition parties and public figures. Among them were Alexei Navalny, Boris Nemtsov, Sergei Udaltsov and others. On May 6, 2012, the "March of Millions" gathered on Bolotnaya Square of Moscow huge number of protesters. Authorities carried out mass arrests.

The mass protests of 2011 and 2012 had a huge impact on Vladimir Putin's consequent politics and conduct. Big part of Putin's elite saw the reasons of mass protests in Medvedev's "flirting with democracy" and "pro-western politics". The Kremlin made a key conclusion that western values are imposed on Russia and they lead to destabilization and civil unrest.

**And again the new Presidential term (2012-2018).** In 2012, after Putin's reelection as president, Russia started a period of profound changes that would later encompass politics, economy, media, human rights, civil society, etc.

In February 2014, the Winter Olympics were held in Sochi. Moscow had been preparing for this event for years. This was a test of its prestige both locally and internationally. The USA and other western countries did not send official delegations to the opening ceremony, while citing many reasons related to the violation of human rights. One such case was the arrest of Pussy Riot feminist group "for unsanctioned and provocative performances."

Today, looking at the world on the brink of a nuclear standoff, this scandal surrounding Pussy Riot seems quite trivial.

However, from today's perspective, events that started in 2014 in Ukraine became a real watershed in Russian-Western relations.

ისტორია

## ვლადიმირ პუტინის რუსეთი (2000-2014)

### ზ. აბაშიძე

*ივანე ჯავახიშვილის სახ. თბილისის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი, სოციალურ და პოლიტიკურ მეცნიერებათა ფაკულტეტი, თბილისი, საქართველო*

(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის რ. ხუროძის მიერ)

ამერიკელმა დიპლომატმა, შემდგომში ცნობილმა მეცნიერმა ჯორჯ კენანმა 1947 წლის პუბლიკაციაში „საბჭოთა ქვეყნის წყაროები“ გააანალიზა მეორე მსოფლიო ომის დასრულების შემდეგ აღმოსავლეთ ევროპაში საბჭოთა ექსპანსიონიზმის მიზეზები და ამოცანები. ჯ. კენანის მოსაზრებები საფუძვლად დაედო აშშ-ის სტრატეგიას საბჭოთა კავშირის მიმართ „ცივი ომის“ პერიოდში და ე.წ. შეკავების პოლიტიკას. ეს მოსაზრებები ამჟამად გარკვეულწილად აქტუალურია, თუმცა დღევანდელი რუსეთი და, ზოგადად, თანამედროვე მსოფლიო მნიშვნელოვნად განსხვავდება „ცივი ომის“ ეპოქისაგან. პრეზიდენტ ბორის ელცინის მმართველობის პერიოდში (1991-1999) გადაიდგა მნიშვნელოვანი ნაბიჯები ქვეყნის დემოკრატიზაციის, ასევე დასავლეთთან თანამშრომლობის კუთხით. მომდევნო პერიოდში, 2000 წლიდან დღემდე, ვლადიმირ პუტინის რეჟიმმა ფრიად საყურადღებო ტრეკტორია განვლო დასავლეთთან საკმაოდ მჭიდრო თანამშრომლობიდან ფაქტობრივად ტოტალურ კონფრონტაციამდე, ასევე ქვეყანაში მკაცრი პოლიტიკური რეჟიმის, რუსეთის სამხედრო და ეკონომიკური მომხრეების თვალსაზრისით. წინამდებარე სტატიაში, კონკრეტულ ფაქტებსა და მოვლენებზე დაყრდნობით, პრეზიდენტ ვ. პუტინის 2000-2014 წლებში მმართველობის პერიოდი განხილული, უმთავრესად საგარეო პოლიტიკის კუთხით.

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