

## **Understanding Putin's Russia: A lecture by Mark Galeotti, 19.6.2019**

Most of us have been confronted with eye-rolling national stereotypes at least once in our life. Especially Russians face an abundance of clichéd presumptions, expectations, and blatant accusations. However, how many of these stereotypes do, in fact, ring true? Mark Galeotti explores and dispels several myths surrounding Russia and the man at the centre of it – Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin – in a lecture introducing his new book “We need to talk about Putin: How the West gets him wrong”. Mr. Galeotti takes the audience through Putin's earliest career steps, the structures of Russian politics and how things get done and explains why the West's fears of Russian expansionist tactics are overblown and somewhat obsolete.

Mr. Galeotti begins his myth-busting by pointing out the general lack of knowledge about Putin we have in western countries and the misinformed assumptions that nonetheless shape his reputation and power. It is not uncommon to be reminded by the media of Putin's KGB-background and his extensive experience as a spy – but none of this is true. That is, Putin did indeed start his career in the KGB, but he was in no way the ingenious “master spy” that he has been made out to be by the media and politicians. He was employed in KGB local headquarters in Dresden in the 1980s, watching from the side-lines as the Soviet Union collapsed. In the political chaos that followed, he leaped up to the rank of director of the FSB, the leading domestic counter-intelligence service that succeeded the KGB. Putin never had to rise through ranks, remaining unfamiliar with institutional culture and hierarchy. Instead, he has had his fair share of influential contacts helping him, whom he has kept close in a tight circle. Indeed, the president relies heavier on these cronies than he would like us to know. Though Putin may not have been a top-tier spy, his time at the KGB must have influenced his preferred sources of information. According to Mr. Galeotti, Putin relies heavily on the daily dossiers he receives from his three intelligence services, the formerly mentioned FSB, the SVR (Russia's primary foreign espionage agency), and the FSO (a more elite-focussed intel service). Unlike the extensively dismissed foreign ministry reports, these dossiers are written up in a “competitive, almost cannibalistic” environment, in which everyone is fighting for Putin's attention and approval. Thus, many of these reports try to please him, placing the

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blame of any mishap on foreign influences, as no one likes to bring bad news to the boss. This paranoid, Russia-as-a-victim portrayal of the world is pushed onto Putin and plays into the already harsh political environment.

The second myth (possibly the most destructive geopolitically speaking) is the ongoing fear that Russia is trying to expand westwards and down the Caucasus. Keeping in mind the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and the 2014 annexation of Crimea, this angst may not be far-fetched, but Mr. Galeotti stresses that this is not the case. Putin may want to “make Russia great again”, but not in the sense of territorial expansion. Crimea was not the first step to taking all of Ukraine – it was instead a demographic move in a territory that was primarily regarded by Russians (and Crimean Russians) as rightfully Russian. Political motives aside, Putin’s attempt to revive Russia’s vital role as a global power does not equate to restoring Soviet borders. He is, in essence, a pragmatic man, who understands that cooperation with the West is an undesired necessity. This was, at least, his policy when he first came to power. He has aged since then, and his priorities have shifted, though much economic cooperation with the West remains on his agenda, exemplified through the controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline plans. The underlying issue is that Putin still sees through goggles of early 20<sup>th</sup> century realism, whereby influence is won through satellite states and power is portrayed militarily, simply adjusted to fit today’s technological standards.

The combining of military power and technology leads on to the third myth: the concept of hybrid warfare. Though the term has been sensationalised and colloquialised through politics, it is in essence “muddled and meaningless”. War has always been hybrid. Humankind has never limited itself to one form of warfare, instead combining different methods and strategies. As we have developed, so have these methods, but the practice of combining is not new. Instead, the term is used to install fear in people and cause misdirection in foreign policy. Modern war has become too expensive, both politically and economically. However, globalisation and increased interconnectivity has made it easier to meddle in other countries’ business. Putin is not seeking to kill the West. What he wants is divide, distract, and demoralise it. The aim of division seems well on its way. With Trump in office, Brexit in

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(albeit almost satirical) negotiation, and a highly polarised European Union, discrepancies within the West are on the rise. Distracting us from Russia's endeavours has proven less simple. Putin views the West as an "ADHD community", whose focus jumps from one disaster to the next with ease, a characteristic that played into the Donbas decision. The intervention was expected to receive short-lived attention and should run smoothly with minimal interference. The resulting international outcry was surprising, but, much to Putin's dismay, may be linked to Russia's efforts to demoralise the West. Russia wants to keep (or rather revive) its status as a global power; it *wants* us to think it is dangerous and unpredictable. An action that plays into this narrative should therefore presume a tempered reaction by the West, rather than blatant ignorance of possible expansionist objectives. This miscalculation aside, division, distraction, and demoralisation seem to work. Crises and corruptible western politicians are in Russia's favour, and the distractions they cause, Russia can use to its advantage. In the end, the West is not weakened by Russia, it creates its own weaknesses, which can then be exploited.

The final myth concerns Putin's political image, which is greatly influenced by the first myth. Putin was not a master spy, nor is he a geopolitical chess player. There does not exist a grand Russian strategy for world domination. Mr. Galeotti portrays Russia as an adhococracy. Although Putin may hold the central position, he is not the master planner. Much rather, political action is based on individuals – oligarchs, minigarchs, disposable 'friends', and cronies – approaching the president with plans, which they believe will be successful and in Russian interests, though usually serve only themselves. It is a scramble for approval and support, for small favours and convenient overlookings of unlawful activities. The West sees Russia as a hyper-organised entity, not unlike that of the Soviet Union. In reality, it is governed by whispers and hints, individual initiatives of what Russia needs.

What happens after Putin sits out his term remains open, both in and out of Russia. It is doubtful that the president will be content with relinquishing all political power and living out the rest of his life on the beach. He may aim for a constitutional position where he remains untouchable. But there is no hint of a possible successor, the man (or woman) who will

ultimately be the next counterpart to Western leaders. The West's perception of Putin is very much like its perception of Russia: cunning, tactical, conniving, with a pinch of insidiousness. Given the historical tensions that stretched over half a century, these trepidations may not be unwarranted. However, the Russian Federation is not a mirror-system of the Soviet Union, nor does its economy boast the statistics of a global power. It seems that while Russia has changed dramatically over the past two decades, the West's image of it has not. Whether this perception will improve after a transfer of the presidency is unlikely, but as things stand, the future remains unpredictable.