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How Putin Destroyed his Legacy



Putin with his inner circle, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Alexander Bortnikov, Federal Security Service head. Photo Credit: Turcopolier

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Putin dressed up while reviewing military maneuvers, Photo Credit: CNN

Vladimir Putin has shaped the modern history and the future of the Russian Federation. In his 24 years in power, he shifted Russia from its post-Soviet path towards democracy to an authoritarian kleptocracy committed to destabilizing the liberal international order. Putin will be remembered as an autocratic dictator who could not stay in power without fear, corruption, and a cult of personality. His legacy will include his successful reduction of crime and Chechen terrorism, but more prominently, his legacy will be his brutal invasion of Ukraine, consolidation of power into autocracy, and repression of media, protestors, and opposition. His paranoia has helped to push more countries into NATO, and instead of securing Russian security, his aggression in Ukraine has made Russian security much more fragile.

In the early years of his presidency, Putin consolidated political power towards the presidency to combat crime, terrorism, and the perception of corruption. Throughout the 1990s,

Russia experienced high levels of violent crime and terrorism. The fall of the Soviet Union created *bespredel*, or lawlessness, that was quickly exploited by gangs and criminals.¹ Privatization led to the rise of contract killings, where some rival entrepreneurs murdered their competitors.² Contract killings and organized crime also killed an estimated 3,000 journalists between 1999-2000 alone.³ Widespread economic failures, stemming from hyperinflation, radical market reforms, and rising unemployment made people desperate for order, protection, and money. Many found this stability through organized crime.⁴ Putin's presidency lessened the indiscriminate violence on the streets, reducing the murder rate from 23 per 100,000 in 2001 to 11 per 100,000 in 2010,⁵ but organized crime remains prevalent in Russia today. To reduce crime, Putin had to take back control from criminal networks by imposing a more authoritarian rule.⁶

In addition to widespread organized and petty crime, Russia suffered from terrorism rising from conflicts in Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia. Chechen terrorists in particular used terrorism as an asymmetric warfare tactic against Russian troops in Chechnya. In 1995, rebel leader Shamil Basayev took 1,000 people hostage in a hospital in Russia. In 1996, Chechen General Dudayev threatened to use nuclear bombs in Moscow. His threats exposed the Russian government as weak and ineffective, forcing the prime minister to negotiate with the terrorists on television.⁷ In 1999, Russia invaded Chechnya following a series of apartment bombings in Russia. Putin was prime minister and running for president at this time. He recognized that Russians wanted a strong leader to tamp down on crime, terrorism, and government corruption, and ran on a platform of decisive action and competent leadership.⁸ Putin focused mostly on Chechen terrorism at the start, declaring that it needed to be "wiped out in an outhouse".⁹ To accomplish this, he consolidated power to himself and launched relentless attacks on the Chechen separatists, drawing reprimand

¹ Stephenson, "The Transformation of Gangs in the 1990s", p 44

² Trenin et al, "Russia and Anti-Terrorism"

³ Nichols, p 311

⁴ Ibid

⁵ "Несмотря На Двукратное Снижение..."

⁶ Sokolov, "From Guns to Briefcases"

⁷ Trenin et al, "Russia and Anti-Terrorism." p 99-101

⁸ Nichols, "Putin's First Two Years", p. 308

⁹ Trenin et al, "Russia and Anti-Terrorism", p 102

from the international community.¹⁰ Putin succeeded in decreasing terrorist attacks by fifteen times.¹¹ This data does not take into account the March 25, 2024 terrorist attack at a concert hall in Moscow, which killed over 130 people and injured 200 more.¹² ISIS-K claimed responsibility for the attack, blaming Putin for his support of the Syrian Assad regime and his brutality in Chechnya.¹³ Although Putin has claimed success against terrorism, the recent attack shows that his record is mixed at best. Regardless, Putin used terrorism as an excuse to consolidate federalism into an autocracy. Putin ended gubernatorial elections in 2004, sensing that the regions were implementing policies against the Kremlin. He used terrorism to justify his decision to consolidate power within the presidency, a choice that put him on a slippery slope towards authoritarianism.¹⁴ Putin also used overwhelming force in Chechnya, bombing cities and killing tens of thousands of civilians. His decisions in Chechnya mirror many of his current tactics in Ukraine, further showing that Putin's worship of overwhelming strength has defined his regime.¹⁵

After winning the presidency in 2000, Putin's main goals were to defeat terrorism and reign in the power of the oligarchs. Putin knew that Russian voters disliked Boris Yeltsin because they felt that he was surrounded by "corrupt and powerful figures who were running the government to their own benefit."¹⁶ In order to distance himself from the stain of corruption, Putin went after two of the most powerful oligarchs: Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky. Incidentally, both oligarchs owned prominent media companies, known as ORT and NTV. However, Putin did not go after other oligarchs. Putin's decision to go after these two oligarchs served to intimidate the journalistic community in Russia (already reduced by the murders throughout the 1990s and 2000s), take away the oligarchs' media power, and show that Putin was not subject to the oligarchs' whims.¹⁷

¹⁰ Trenin et al, "Russia and Anti-Terrorism"

¹¹ Finmarket.ru

¹² Radford, "March 25 Moscow Concert Hall Attack"

¹³ Lister, "How ISIS has Europe and US"

¹⁴ Sharafutdinova, "Gestalt Switch in Russian Federalism"

¹⁵ Myre, "Russia's Wars in Chechnya"

¹⁶ Nichols, "Putin's First Two Years", p. 309

¹⁷ Nichols, "Putin's First Two Years", p. 310



Boris Berezovsky



Vladimir Gusinsky

Photo Credit: Heintz, “Under Putin, The Uber-Wealthy Russians”, AP News

Despite Putin’s facade of dismantling government corruption, corruption has tainted his entire reign. Putin built his power around loyalty, rewarding those who supported him and disposing of those who challenged his rule. Among Putin’s closest allies are members of the Ozero housing cooperation, a group that managed dachas located near St. Petersburg. Putin grew close to several key members of the group during the 1990s.²⁰ Although it is difficult to know all the details of Putin’s rise to power, his transformation from a jobless ex-KGB agent to president in a mere three and a half years is largely thanks to his personal relationships, money laundering, and bribery.²¹ In exchange for their early support, Putin rewarded several with high-ranking government positions. Vladimir Yakunin became the head of Russian Railways, the state-run railroad company. Yuri Kovalchuk became the Minister of Education and an advisor to the Kremlin. In 2014, the US government sanctioned these men and specifically cited the Ozero group’s connection to Putin.²² Putin’s rewards-based web of power has also created a massive wealth gap in Russia. In 2014, according to Credit Suisse, only 110 billionaires controlled 35% of Russia’s wealth, making Russia the most unequal economy at the time. The billionaires’ wealth was protected and increased over time, provided that these powerful figures of society never challenged Putin.²³ Putin will be remembered for his blatant corruption and the loyalty-based regime that helped keep his friends and supporters in power.

¹⁸ Heintz, “Under Putin, The Uber-Wealthy Russians”

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Heritage, “Putin’s Lakeside ‘Notables’ Targeted”

²¹ Dawisha, “The Putin Principle”, p 14-15

²² Heritage, “Putin’s Lakeside ‘Notables’ Targeted”

²³ Dawisha, “The Putin Principle”, p. 14-15

Beyond rewarding his supporters, Putin also used intimidation and violence to counter his opposition. A long list of suspicious deaths connects to Putin, including Anna Politkovskaya, Anastasia Baburova, Stanislav Markolev, Boris Nemtsov, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and Alexei Navalny. Anna Politkovskaya, an investigative journalist, was killed in her Moscow apartment in 2006 following reporting on human rights abuses in Chechnya. Anastasia Baburova and Stanislav Markolev were shot dead in 2019 on a Moscow bridge. Both were journalists and human rights activists.²⁴ Boris Nemtsov, a Russian politician who exposed corruption and spoke out against the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine, was murdered in 2015. According to BBC, Bellingcat, and The Insider, in the weeks leading up to his assassination, Nemtsov had been followed by a shadowy government agent linked to the FSB.²⁵ In June 2023, Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of the paramilitary group Wagner, staged a coup against Putin. He captured the town of Rostov-on-Don and began to march towards Moscow before he made a deal with the Kremlin to end his mutiny in exchange for the chance to escape to Belarus. In August 2023, Prigozhin's plane crashed in Russia under suspicious circumstances, killing everyone on board.²⁶

Most recently, prominent political activist Alexei Navalny died after collapsing in prison. The Russian government detained Navalny in IK-3, a prison in the Arctic Circle, reportedly denying him medical care. Navalny had been recovering from a nerve agent attack, also linked to the Kremlin. The Russian government has thus far refused to release Navalny's body for a third-party autopsy.²⁷ In late March, journalist Antonina Farkoskaya, the last journalist to film Navalny before his death, was detained on charges of extremism.²⁸ The Kremlin has been purging the Russian journalist community of anyone who has shown support for Navalny's Anti-Corruption work, following the pattern of state repression that has characterized Putin's rule.

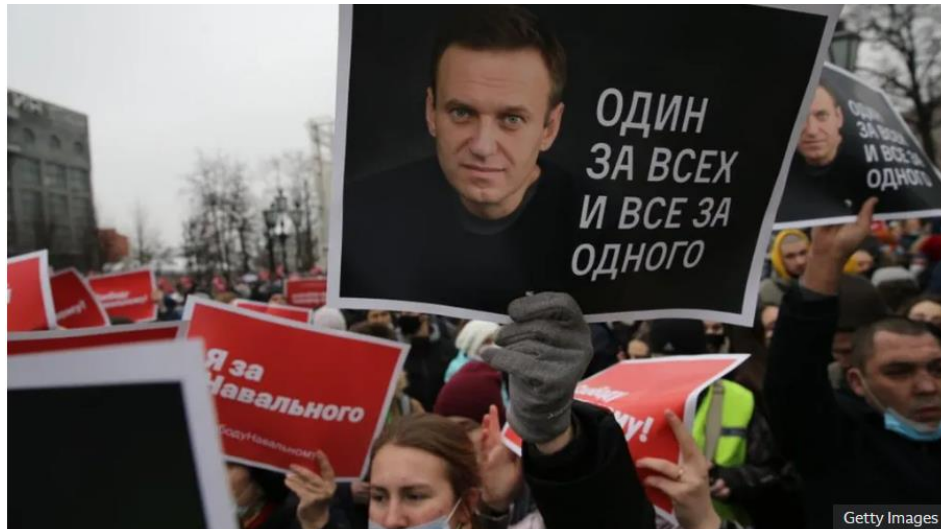
²⁴ Brugen, "Full List of Putin Critics."

²⁵ BBC Eye Investigations. "Boris Nemtsov: Murdered Putin Rival"

²⁶ Hopkins, "Yevgeny Prigozhin, Renegade Mercenary"

²⁷ Baker, "What We Know about Alexei Navalny's Death"

²⁸ Irwin, "Russian Journalist Who Covered Navalny's Trial"



Protesters call for Navalny's release in a protest in Moscow in 2021

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Photo Credit: Baker, "What We Know about Alexei Navalny's Death", BBC News

Putin has created a cult of personality to counter his weak position as president, using authoritarianism and brutality to hide his failings. After the Soviet Union fell in 1991, many Russians felt the loss of Soviet identity. When Putin became president, he took this as an opportunity to cultivate the ideal Russian identity. He created his image to be a hyper-masculine leader that was physically fit, sober, competent, and reminiscent of the Soviet Union's strength. This tailored image served as a useful distraction from the many failures of Putin's regime, such as the progressively weakening economy. Putin's pictures and biography were implemented in Russian schools, and his likeness has appeared widely across Russia. Consequently, Putin has consistently had high approval ratings despite the economic and political struggles that represent his presidency.³⁰ It is highly likely that even after his grip on power finally loosens, Putin's cult of personality will ensure that Russians will view his legacy more positively than the rest of the world. Putin's grip on power enabled the Russian invasion of Ukraine. His government uses the manipulation of information spread through media to influence the Russian public's perception of the war. State-controlled television, the main source of news for over 60% of the population, villainizes the Ukrainian government and the West, reporting that Ukrainian nationalism and Western aggression posed a threat to Russian security. State-controlled media, and Putin himself, also push the narrative that Russia has a historical right to take back Ukraine and reestablish Russia

²⁹ Baker, "What We Know about Alexei Navalny's Death"

³⁰ Cassidy and Johnson, "Putin, Putiana, and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality"

as an imperial power. Internet infrastructure further amplifies this narrative by promoting state-run sources and limiting contrary sources. Putin is using his established control of Russian media to create support for his invasion of Ukraine while repressing alternative views.³¹

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and Putin's legacy cannot be separated. His invasion defines his career as bloody, aggressive, and remarkably weak. Putin has cited several main reasons for invading Ukraine, including NATO aggression and a historical right for Russia to rule Ukraine. The war has devastated Ukraine but has also revealed the weaknesses of the Russian military and government. In the months leading up to the invasion, military and political elites expected a swift and easy victory, aided by downtrodden Ukrainians who truly wanted Russian rule. These elites did not expect the fierce resistance from the Ukrainians, which has embarrassed Russia and shattered its image as a superpower. Instead of a quick victory, the war has stretched into its third year, with each side often gaining only meters of territory at a time.³² Putin's carefully curated image of overwhelming strength and competency has been threatened by the war, but his desire to be seen as masculine and strong prevents him from withdrawing from this disastrous campaign. The war has become a test of endurance, and it remains to be seen whether Ukraine or Russia will be able to stand for longer.

In addition to exposing the Kremlin's weakness, Putin's invasion of Ukraine has also revealed his brutality. Russian soldiers have committed countless war crimes against Ukrainian civilians. One of the most notable examples of this barbarity is the massacre of Bucha, a suburb west of Kyiv. In March 2022, Russian troops entered the city and murdered 458 Ukrainians, leaving many in the streets and mass graves. Russian soldiers also sexually assaulted hundreds of Ukrainian women and children ranging in age from 4 to 82. Soldiers set up torture chambers in the basements of houses, killing civilians en masse. Following the month-long "cleansing operation", Putin rewarded the soldiers' actions in Bucha, presenting them with medals and praising their "heroism and valor".³³ Bucha is just one example of Russian brutality in Ukraine, echoing the human rights abuses of Chechnya and embodying the glorification of violence in Putin's government.

³¹ Alyukov, "Propaganda, Authoritarianism, and Russia's Invasion of Ukraine"

³² Dickinson, "Putin's Faltering Ukraine Invasion"

³³ Cleave, "Putin's 'butchers of Bucha'"



Mass graves outside Bucha built to bury the 458 killed by Russian troops

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Photo Credit: Cleave, "Putin's 'butchers of Bucha'", The Sun



Satellite images show bodies of civilians lying on the 'road of death' in Bucha

Credit: Maxar Technologies

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Photo Credit: Cleave, "Putin's 'butchers of Bucha'", The Sun

Putin's most recent sham election in 2024 represents his false reign. He "won" 87% of the vote, but because the process was not transparent and Putin declared his main opponent, Boris Nadezhdin, illegitimate, this election merely signals the extent to which Russia has fallen into a restrictive autocracy. Some Russians organized a time to come to the polls in the "Noon Against Putin" protests. Although these protests did not have a large effect on the results, they reveal that

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid

Russians are still protesting against Putin's illegitimate and undemocratic reign.³⁶ Putin continues to extend his presidency, changing the term length from four to six years and removing term limits. His autocratic repression of opposition, including the deaths of Yevgeny Prigozhin and Alexei Navalny, ensures that anyone who speaks out against Putin faces harsh reprisals.³⁷ Despite overwhelming propaganda aimed at improving Putin's image, he will be remembered as a weak but bullying leader who could not stay in power without the violent repression of his opposition.

Putin has claimed that he invaded Ukraine to protect Russia from NATO's expanding threat. The opposite is true. His aggression towards neighboring countries has instead pushed formerly neutral countries, most notably Sweden and Finland, to align themselves with the West. Throughout the Cold War and into the early 2000s, Sweden and Finland have relied on the political and military stability in northern Europe for protection, although both have been NATO partners since 1994. Following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, both countries have become full members of the alliance. Sweden and Finland add approximately 337,000 troops and over 800 miles of NATO territory to Russia's northwest border.³⁸

³⁶ Troianovski, and Heitmann. "With New Six-Year Term"

³⁷ Edwards, Christian. "Putin Extends One-Man Rule"

³⁸ Chatterjee, "How Sweden and Finland Went from Neutral to NATO."

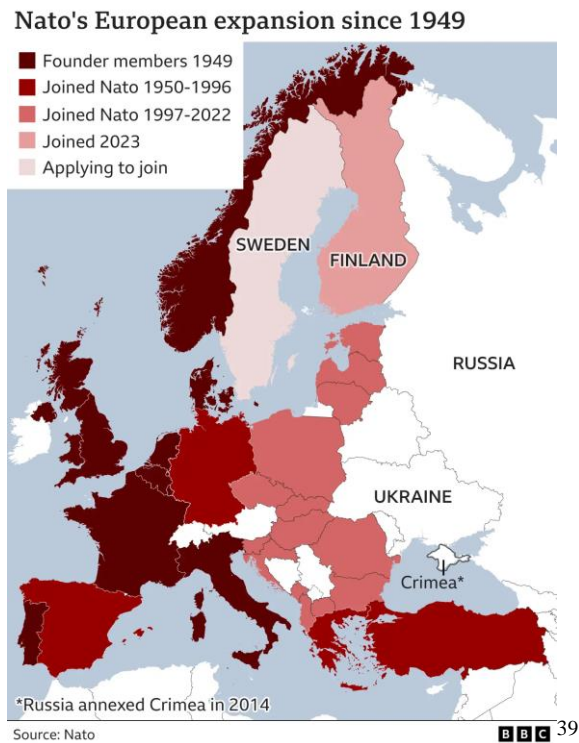


Photo Credit: Chatterjee, “How Sweden and Finland Went from Neutral to NATO.”, BBC News

Putin’s reign has plunged Russia from a budding democracy into an autocratic regime dependent on propaganda and violence to keep power. Putin made some early gains in his presidency that benefited the Russian people, such as decreasing the impact of crime and terrorism on ordinary Russians. However, this came at the expense of a free and fair society. Putin used these civil issues as an excuse to consolidate power for himself. His regime has removed key opposition figures, including Alexei Navalny, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and dozens of journalists through brutal murders and convenient “accidents”. Putin has wrestled control of the media, ensuring that state-controlled propaganda could be distributed to the Russian public. His cult of personality, based on extreme masculinity and strength, reveals the weakness of his presidency. A truly competent leader does not need to resort to such crude methods of maintaining power. Putin’s tight circle of supporters and friends keeps him in power through the establishment of a kleptocracy. His viper-like grip on the government enabled Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which has revealed the true weakness of both the Russian government and its military. The indiscriminate killing of civilians and systematic cleansing of Ukrainian culture reveals Putin’s brutality. Instead of upholding Russian security, the invasion of Ukraine has made Russian security remarkably brittle

³⁹ Chatterjee, “How Sweden and Finland Went from Neutral to NATO.”

and driven formerly neutral countries into NATO. Putin's legacy is a long string of failures punctuated by his never-ending brutality used as a tool to distract from his incompetence and underlying weak governance.

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