

CHAPTER ONE

WHO IS MR. PUTIN?

WHO IS MR. PUTIN? This question has never been fully answered. Vladimir Putin has been Russia's dominant political figure for more than a dozen years since he first became prime minister and then president in 1999–2000. But in the years Putin has been in power we have seen almost no additional information provided about his background beyond what is available in early biographies. These relate that Vladimir Putin was born in the Soviet city of Leningrad in October 1952 and was his parents' only surviving child. Putin's childhood was spent in Leningrad, where his youthful pursuits included training first in sambo (a martial art combining judo and wrestling that was first developed by the Soviet Red Army) and then in judo. After school, Putin studied law at Leningrad State University, graduated in 1975, and immediately joined the Soviet intelligence service, the KGB. He was posted to Dresden in East Germany in 1985, after completing a year of study at the KGB's academy in Moscow. He was recalled from Dresden to Leningrad in 1990, just as the USSR was on the verge of collapse.

During his time in the KGB, Putin worked as a case officer and attained the rank of lieutenant colonel. In 1990–91, he moved into the intelligence service's "active reserve" and returned to Leningrad University as a deputy to the vice rector. He became an adviser to

WHO IS MR. PUTIN?

one of his former law professors, Anatoly Sobchak, who left the university to become chairman of Leningrad's city soviet, or council. Putin worked with Sobchak during Sobchak's successful electoral campaign to become the first democratically elected mayor of what was now St. Petersburg. In June 1991, Putin became a deputy mayor of St. Petersburg and was put in charge of the city's Committee for External Relations. He officially resigned from the KGB in August 1991.

In 1996, after Mayor Sobchak lost his bid for reelection, Vladimir Putin moved to Moscow to work in the Kremlin, in the department that managed presidential property. In March 1997, Putin was elevated to deputy chief of the presidential staff. He assumed a number of other responsibilities within the Kremlin before being appointed head of the Russian Federal Security Service (the FSB, the successor to the KGB) in July 1998. A year later, in August 1999, Vladimir Putin was named, in rapid succession, one of Russia's first deputy prime ministers and then acting prime minister by Russian President Boris Yeltsin, who also indicated that Putin was his preferred successor as president. Finally, on December 31, 1999, Putin became acting president of Russia after Yeltsin resigned. He was officially elected to the position of president in March 2000. Putin served two terms as Russia's president from 2000 to 2004 and from 2004 to 2008, before stepping aside—in line with Russia's constitutional prohibition against three consecutive presidential terms—to assume the position of prime minister. In March 2012, Putin was reelected as Russian president until 2018, thanks to a law pushed through by then President Dmitry Medvedev in December 2008 extending the presidential term from four to six years.

These basic facts have been covered in books and newspaper articles. There is some uncertainty in the sources about specific dates and the sequencing of Vladimir Putin's professional trajectory. This is especially the case for his KGB service, but also for some of the period he was in the St. Petersburg mayor's office, including how long he was technically part of the KGB's "active reserve." Personal

information, including on key childhood events, his 1983 marriage to his wife Lyudmila, the birth of two daughters in 1985 and 1986 (Maria and Yekaterina), and his friendships with politicians and businessmen from Leningrad/St. Petersburg, is remarkably scant for such a prominent public figure. His wife, daughters, and other family members, for example, are conspicuously absent from the public domain. Information about him that was available at the beginning of his presidency has also been suppressed, distorted, or lost in a morass of competing and often contradictory versions swirling with rumor and innuendo. Some materials, related to a notorious 1990s food scandal in St. Petersburg, which almost upended Putin's early political career, have been expunged, along with those with access to them. When it comes to Mr. Putin, very little information is definitive, confirmable, or reliable.

As a result, some observers say that Vladimir Putin has no face, no substance, no soul. He is a "man from nowhere," who can appear to be anybody to anyone. Indeed, as president and prime minister, Mr. Putin has turned himself into the ultimate political performance artist. Over the last several years, his public relations team has pushed his image in multiple directions, pitching him as everything from big game hunter and conservationist to scuba diver to biker—even nightclub crooner. Leaders of other countries have gained notoriety for their flamboyant or patriotic style of dressing to appeal to and rally the masses—like Fidel Castro's and Hugo Chavez's military fatigues, Yasser Arafat's ubiquitous keffiyeh scarf, Muammar Qaddafi's robes (and tent), Hamid Karzai's carefully calculated blend of traditional Afghan tribal dress, and Yulia Tymoshenko's ultra-chic Ukrainian-peasant blonde braids—but Vladimir Putin has out-dressed them all. He has appeared in an endless number of guises for encounters with the press or Russian special interest groups, or at times of crisis, as during raging peat bog fires around Moscow in 2010, when he was transformed into a fire-fighting airplane pilot. All this with the assistance, it would seem, of the Kremlin's inexhaustible wardrobe and special props department.

THE KREMLIN SPECIAL PROPS DEPARTMENT

Mr. Putin's antics are reminiscent of a much-beloved children's book and animated cartoon series in the United Kingdom, *Mr. Benn*. Each morning, Mr. Benn, a non-descript British man in a standard issue bowler hat and business suit, strolls down his street and is beckoned into a mysterious costume shop by a mustachioed, fez-wearing shopkeeper. The shopkeeper whisks Mr. Benn into a changing room. Mr. Benn puts on a costume that has already been laid out by the shopkeeper, walks out a secret door, and assumes a new costume-appropriate identity, as if by magic. In every episode, Mr. Benn solves a problem for the people he encounters during his adventure, until summoned back to reality by the shopkeeper. At the start of every episode a spinning wheel stops at the costume and adventure of the day.¹ The Mr. Putin(s) pinwheel we use for the book cover is a tribute to the opening sequence of *Mr. Benn*. Like his cartoon analogue, Mr. Putin, with the assistance of his press secretary, Dmitry Peskov (mustachioed but without the fez), and a coterie of press people, as if by magic embarks on a series of adventures (some of which oddly enough overlap with Mr. Benn's). In the course of his adventures, Mr. Putin pulls off every costume and performance with aplomb, a straight face, and a demonstration of skill.

Vladimir Putin and his PR team—which closely monitor the public reactions to the Mr. Putin episodes—are aware that these performances lack universal appeal and have sparked amusement at home and abroad at their elaborate and very obvious staging.² But Russian intellectual elites, the Russian political opposition to Mr. Putin, and overseas commentators are not the target audience. Each episode of Mr. Putin has a specific purpose. They are all based on feedback from opinion polls suggesting the Kremlin needs to reach out and create a direct connection to a particular group among the Russian population. Press Secretary Peskov admitted this in a meeting with the press in August 2011 after Mr. Putin

dove to the bottom of the Black Sea to retrieve some suspiciously immaculate amphorae.³ Putin himself has asserted in biographical interviews that one of his main skills is to get people—in this case the Russian people, his audience(s)—to see him as what *they* want him to be, not what he really is. These performances portray Putin as the ultimate Russian action man, capable of dealing with every eventuality. Collectively, they have been one of the reasons why Vladimir Putin has consistently polled as Russia's most popular politician for the best part of a decade.

PERSONALIZED POLITICS

As the PR performances underscore, the political system Putin has built around himself as Russian president and prime minister is highly personalized. Its legitimacy and stability are heavily dependent on Putin's personal popularity. The Russian economic and political systems are private and informal. A small number of trusted figures around Mr. Putin, perhaps twenty to thirty people, make the key decisions. At the very top is an even tighter inner circle of about half a dozen individuals, all with close ties to Putin, who have worked together for twenty years, beginning in St. Petersburg and continuing in Moscow. Real decisionmaking power resides inside the inner circle, while Russia's formal political institutions have to varying degrees been emasculated.

Within the system, Mr. Putin has developed his own idealized view of himself as CEO of "Russia, Inc." In reality, his leadership style is more like that of a mafia family Don. Everyone is interdependent, as well as dependent on the informal system, which provides access to prestigious positions and a whole array of perks and privileges, including the possibility of self-enrichment. The enforcement of rules and norms is based on powerful reciprocal ties and threats, not on positive incentives. Core individuals collect and amass detailed compromising material (*kompromat* in Russian) that can be used as leverage on every key figure inside and outside government. Mr. Putin the CEO has not been the

executive of a transparent public corporation. He has operated in the closed boardroom of a privately held corporation, with no genuine accountability to anyone outside the inner circle. The corporation's operating style is now in question, however. Since the Russian parliamentary (Duma) elections in December 2011, members of the public have taken to the streets of Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other cities to assert their rights as stakeholders and demand that Putin the CEO be held accountable for the failings of Russia, Inc.

After Putin first became president in 2000, the tight inner circle around him created an array of mechanisms—like Putin's PR stunts—to construct a feedback loop with Russia's diverse societal and political constituencies and keep a close eye on public opinion. Putin and his political system derived legitimacy from periodic parliamentary and presidential elections, but otherwise the Kremlin closed off political competition. The Kremlin did this by aggressively championing a dominant political party, *Yedinaya Rossiya*, or United Russia, by controlling opposition parties and by marginalizing especially charismatic independent politicians or other public figures. Mr. Putin also deliberately usurped the agendas of nationalist and religiously motivated political groups that could provide alternative means for public mobilization.

PUTIN'S PERMANENT CAMPAIGN

In many respects, Putin and the Kremlin were in permanent campaign mode for more than a decade leading up to the December 2011 elections. To maintain Putin's personal popularity, they constantly adjusted their approach at the first signs of trouble. The permanent campaign was given an extra imperative and dimension in the early 2000s, when so-called color revolutions unseated unpopular leaders in Georgia, Ukraine, and other former Soviet states. The "Arab Spring" of 2011, which overturned authoritarian regimes in North Africa and the Middle East, including some with close ties to Moscow, provided another political jolt. Through

constant polling and surveys—including an annual televised mass call-in session—Putin and the Kremlin tried to gauge the Russian public mood. They moved quickly to defuse sensitive issues that could become destabilizing focal points for anger and bring people out into the streets to protest.

Over the course of the 2000s, heavy manipulation of the media, from television and newspapers to the Internet, became an increasing feature of the Russian political system. Unlike China, the Kremlin did not immediately move to censor the Internet. Instead, it sought to fill the available political and public information space with its own content and to co-opt or in some cases create new media outlets. Businessmen (the so-called oligarchs) close to the Kremlin capitalized on this tactic to become some of the richest men in the world, penetrating global social media markets. The circle around Putin kept close tabs on critical commentators and prominent bloggers. Putin's team convened Kremlin focus groups specifically intended to counter dissenters and critics (from abroad as well as at home). They set up training sessions for loyal bloggers. The Kremlin also hired leading Russian and international public relations firms to help improve its media strategy. For most of 2011, the Kremlin seemed relatively confident that it could avoid Russia's own version of Egypt's Tahrir Square and the Arab Spring.

By fall 2011, Vladimir Putin's brand of personalized politics seemed to grow stale. A September 24, 2011, almost pro forma, off-hand, announcement that he would return to the presidency was not universally well received. In 2007–08, Putin initiated a tandem power-sharing arrangement with longtime colleague Dmitry Medvedev. Medvedev was put forward as the new Russian president, while Putin stepped into the role of prime minister. Medvedev's tenure as president was viewed with a degree of skepticism by the Russian public. Mr. Putin was still seen as firmly in charge. Nonetheless, Medvedev and his political advisers championed a wide-ranging debate about Russia's future. This created an atmosphere of change as well as anticipation of significant reforms that

WHO IS MR. PUTIN?

might open up the political and economic system. Russian professional and elite circles saw Putin's abrupt demotion of Medvedev in 2011 as a retrograde step. The December 4, 2011, Duma elections underscored a growing sense of dissatisfaction among segments of the Russian population with the system and its mechanisms, especially with United Russia as the nominal ruling party. United Russia kept its majority in parliament but got far less than its anticipated 50 percent of the popular vote. United Russia's poor electoral performance significantly undercut the ruling party's legitimacy and tarnished Putin's political brand in the period leading up to the March 2012 presidential election.

TIME TO RECALIBRATE?

Events after December 2011 suggested the Putin team would have to recalculate and recalibrate. During the last decade, the Russian public has become more politically sophisticated and has developed different expectations. Russians now rank among the world's heaviest social networkers. They have multiple sources of information beyond the state-controlled media. In December 2011, the Internet, cell phones, video cameras, and Twitter played instrumental roles in publicizing parliamentary election violations. Tens of thousands of people—especially young urban professionals—moved their protests from the Internet to the streets of Moscow and St. Petersburg, changing the way of doing politics in Russia.

The Kremlin was hard-pressed to figure out how to tackle this discontent in advance of the March 4, 2012, presidential election. Putin and his team had to pull out all the stops to boost his ratings and get the electorate to the voting booths to ensure a decisive majority in the first phase of the election and avoid the specter of a second round. Russia has clearly evolved and changed since Putin first vaulted to the top of the political system in 1999–2000. The most pertinent questions raised by this situation are: Is Mr. Putin still the person best suited for the task of governing Russia over

the next decade? Has he evolved and changed along with the rest of the country?

THE REAL MR. PUTINS

In this book, we pick up the idea of multiple Mr. Putins from his PR stunts to create a portrait that attempts to provide some answers to these questions. We argue that uncovering the multiple “real Putins” requires looking beyond the staged performances and the deliberately assumed phony guises that constitute the Putin political brand. For most of the first decade of the 2000s, Putin displayed remarkable strength as a political actor in the Russian context. This strength was derived from the combination of the six individual identities we discuss and highlight in the book, not from his staged performances. We term these identities the Statist, the History Man, the Survivalist, the Outsider, the Free Marketeer, and the Case Officer. We discuss each in detail, looking at their central elements and evolution, and their roots in Russian history, culture, and politics. Our goal is not to endorse any of these identities as being exclusively accurate, but to use them to help understand who—and what—Vladimir Putin is as a composite of them.

We begin with an initial set of three identities—the Statist, the History Man, and the Survivalist. These are the most generic. They can be applied to a larger group of Russians than just Mr. Putin, especially Russian politicians in Putin’s general age cohort who began their careers during the Soviet period and launched themselves onto the national political stage in the 1990s. These first three identities provide the foundation for Mr. Putin’s views about the Russian state, his political philosophy, and his conception of his first presidential terms in the 2000s. The 1990s, the Russian Federation’s first decade as a stand-alone, independent country after the dissolution of the USSR—when Russia fell into economic and political crisis and Moscow lost its authority over the rest of the former Soviet republics, including lands that had previously

been part of the Russian Empire—is a central element in the Statist, History Man, and Survivalist identities. It provides the overarching context for the identities as well as for Vladimir Putin's personal political narrative. Putin began his tenure as acting Russian president with a December 1999 treatise on the lessons from Russia's experience in the 1990s and how he would address them. During his 2012 presidential election campaign, Putin returned to the themes of this earlier treatise. He made frequent explicit reference to what he described as the chaos of Russia in the 1990s under President Boris Yeltsin. He sharply contrasted this to the decade of political and economic stability he believes that he, personally, brought to the country after taking office in 1999. Putin essentially ran his 2012 campaign against the past, specifically the 1990s, rather than against another candidate. Mr. Putin clearly sees his presidency as the product of, as well as the answer to, Russia of the 1990s. Before we move to the details of the first three identities, we offer a brief review of some of the events and developments of this decade that are most pertinent to the Putin presidency.

The second part of the book is devoted to the last three identities: the Outsider, the Free Marketeer, and the Case Officer. These are much more specific to Mr. Putin. They offer the most illustrative and parsimonious way of narrowing down his unique combination of skills and experiences. As we will explain, these are the identities that helped propel Vladimir Putin into the Kremlin in 1999–2000. Over time, however, they have begun to show signs of age. All three identities are deeply rooted in Mr. Putin's life and career before he came to the Kremlin. They have not been refreshed and have not kept pace with the changes in Russia over the decade since he rose to the top of the state. They are also not the identities of a national political leader. They are identities that made Vladimir Putin an effective behind-the-scenes operator and are identities rooted in Russia's Soviet past. The fact that Mr. Putin's core identities are so closely associated with his own and Russia's past is becoming more apparent to a growing and important segment

of Russia's population. This is a source of weakness for Mr. Putin personally and a fundamental vulnerability for the system of governance he has created around himself. Key elements of these three identities have prevented Mr. Putin from relating and connecting to the Russian citizens who took to the streets in protest after the 2011 parliamentary and 2012 presidential elections.

A CONTEXTUAL PORTRAIT OF VLADIMIR PUTIN

This book is not intended to be a definitive biography or a comprehensive study of everything about Vladimir Putin. Although personal and even intimate life experiences shape the way an individual thinks and views the world, we do not delve into Vladimir Putin's family life or close friendships. We also do not critique all the different stories about him, and we try to avoid retreading ground that has been covered in other biographies and analyses. As a result, there are many important and enduring mysteries about Vladimir Putin that we will not address in detail in this book, including the specific circumstances of his first rise to power as Russian president. In three short years from 1997 to 1999, Vladimir Putin was promoted to increasingly lofty positions, from deputy chief of the presidential staff, to head of the FSB, to prime minister, then to acting president. There are multiple competing versions of how Mr. Putin was selected to be Boris Yeltsin's successor in 1999. The different stories of "who chose Putin?" are among the reasons we decided to write this book and to adopt the specific approach we have. All the versions of who decided that Vladimir Putin should be Yeltsin's successor are based on retrospective accounts, including from Boris Yeltsin himself in his memoir *Midnight Diaries*. Almost nothing comes from real-time statements or actions. Even then—if this kind of information were available—we would not know what really happened behind the scenes. It is clear that many of the after-the-fact statements are self-serving. None of them seem completely credible. They are from people trying to claim credit, or avoid blame, for a set of decisions that proved monumental for Russia.

Rather than spending time parsing the course of events in this period and analyzing the various people who may or may not have influenced the decision to install Vladimir Putin as Boris Yeltsin's successor, we parse and analyze Putin himself. We focus on a series of vignettes from his basic biography that form part of a more coherent, larger story. We also emphasize Putin's own role in getting where he did. We stress the one thing we are certain about: Putin shaped his own fate, in large part because of the nature of his six core identities. We do not deny there was an element of accident or chance in his ultimate rise to power. Nor do we deny there were real people who acted on his behalf—people who thought at a particular time that he was “their man” who would promote their interests. But what Mr. Putin did is the most critical element in his biography, not what other people did.

Like a good KGB case officer, Vladimir Putin kept his own ambitions tightly under wraps. Like most ambitious people, he took advantage of the opportunities that presented themselves. Mr. Putin paid close attention to individuals who might further his career. He studied them, strengthened his personal and professional ties to them, did favors for them, and manipulated them. He allowed—even actively encouraged—people to underestimate him as he maneuvered himself into influential positions and quietly accumulated real power. Instead of providing a “Who's Who” of Vladimir Putin's political circle, we highlight some of the people who played important roles for Putin at different junctures. These include Russian historical figures whose biographies and ideas Putin appropriated and tailored to suit his own personal narrative. They also include a few people from the inner circle whose relationships and roles illuminate the connections Putin developed to put himself in a position to become Russian president and, more important, to become a president with the power to implement his goals. None of Vladimir Putin's personal ties, however, made his rise to power inevitable.

In a similar vein, for many people the most important stories about Mr. Putin are those devoted to his reported accumulation of vast personal wealth and the scale of corruption within the inner circle of Russia, Inc. These stories date back to Putin's time in the St. Petersburg mayor's office, they implicate his family, and they have been frequently featured in Russian as well as Western media. There is, however, little hard documentary evidence to back up even the most credible reporting. Some of the world's top financial institutions have conducted serious research on how the corrupt hide their stolen assets.⁴ We did not have the means to undertake the kind of technical work necessary to pursue Mr. Putin's purported ill-gotten gains, nor did we want to engage in further speculation on this subject. As we indicate in the book, there is notable circumstantial evidence—including expensive watches and suits—of Mr. Putin's luxury lifestyle beyond the official trappings of the Russian presidency. People with close and long-standing personal ties to Vladimir Putin now occupy positions of great responsibility within the Russian economy and are some of Russia's (and the world's) richest men. In interviews, they are remarkably frank in discussing the links between their connections, their economic roles, and their money. There might also be political reasons for Putin to accumulate and flaunt personal wealth. Indeed, some of the stories in the Russian press, and some related to us by Russian colleagues, suggest that Mr. Putin might even encourage rumors that he is the richest of the rich to curb political ambitions among Russia's billionaire businessmen.

Even if Vladimir Putin has enriched himself and those around him, we do not believe a quest for personal wealth is primarily what drives him, and we need to understand what else motivates his actions as head of the Russian state. The ultimate purpose of our analysis is thus to provide a portrait of Mr. Putin's mental outlook, his worldview, and the individual aspects or identities that comprise this worldview. Like everyone else, Putin is an amalgam,

a composite, of his life experiences. Putin's identities are parallel, not sequential. They blend into each other and are not mutually exclusive. In many respects they could be packaged differently from the way we present them in the book. The most generic identities—the Statist, the History Man, and the Survivalist—could be merged together. They overlap in some obvious ways and have some themes in common. Nonetheless, there are key distinctions in each of them that we seek to tease out. Putin's outlook has been shaped by many influences: a combination of the Soviet and Russian contexts in which he grew up, lived, and worked; a personal interest in Russian history and literature; his legal studies at Leningrad State University (LGU); his KGB training; his KGB service in Dresden in East Germany; his experiences in 1990s St. Petersburg; his early days in Moscow in 1996–99; and his time at the helm of the Russian state since 2000. Instead of trying to track down all the Putin stories to fit with these experiences, we have built a contextual narrative based on the known parts of Putin's biography, a close examination of his public pronouncements over more than a decade, and, not least, our own personal encounters with Mr. Putin through the annual Valdai Discussion Club.⁵

Just as we do not know who exactly selected Mr. Putin to be Boris Yeltsin's successor in 1999, we do not know specifically what Putin did during his 16 years in the KGB. We do, however, know the context of the KGB during the period when Vladimir Putin operated in it. So, for example, we have examined the careers, published writings, and memoirs of leading KGB officials such as Yury Andropov and Filipp Bobkov—the people who shaped the institution and thus Putin. Similarly, Putin constantly refers to Russia's "time of troubles" in the 1990s as the negative reference point for his presidency and premiership. Although we do not know what Putin was thinking about in the 1990s, we know a great deal about the events and debates of this decade in which people around him were closely involved. We also have ample evidence, in Mr. Putin's own writings and speeches from 1999 to 2012, of his

appropriation of the core concepts and language of an identifiable body of political and legal thought from the 1990s. In short, we know what others around Mr. Putin said or did in a certain time-frame, even if we cannot always prove what Putin himself was up to. We focus on what seems the most credible in a particular context to draw out information relevant to Putin's specific identities.

In the final chapter, we explain why the current Russian political system can best be understood as a logical result of the combination of Putin's six identities, along with the set of personal and professional relationships he formed over several decades in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Putin did not appear out of the blue or from "nowhere" when he arrived in Moscow in 1996 to take up a position in the Russian presidential administration. He most demonstrably came from St. Petersburg. He also came from a group around Mayor Anatoly Sobchak to which he had first gravitated in the 1970s when he was a student in LGU's law faculty and Sobchak was a lecturer there. Vladimir Putin's KGB superiors later assigned him to work at LGU in 1990, bringing him back into Anatoly Sobchak's orbit. Features of Mr. Putin's personality then drew him into the center of Sobchak's team as the former law professor campaigned to become mayor of St. Petersburg. Because of his real identities—and particular (often unsavory) skills associated with his role as a former KGB case officer—Vladimir Putin was subsequently determined by the St. Petersburg mayor and his close circle of associates to be uniquely well-suited for the task of enforcing informal rules and making corrupt businesses deliver in the freewheeling days of the 1990s. Putin became widely known as "Sobchak's fixer," and some of the activities he engaged in, while in St. Petersburg, helped pave his way to power in Moscow.