CHAPTER ONE

WHO IS MR. PUTIN?

ON MARCH 18, 2014, still bathed in the afterglow of the Winter Olympics that he had hosted in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, Russian president Vladimir Putin stepped up to a podium in the Kremlin to address the nation. Before an assembly of Russian officials and parliamentarians, Putin signed the documents officially reuniting the Russian Federation and the peninsular republic of Crimea, the home base of Russia's Black Sea Fleet. Crimea had seceded from Ukraine only two days earlier, on March 16. The Russian president gave what was intended to be a historic speech. The events were fresh, but his address was laden with references to several centuries of Russian history.

Putin invoked the origins of Orthodox Christianity in Russia. He referenced military victories on land and sea that had helped forge the Russian Empire. He noted the grievances that had festered in Russia since the 1990s, when the state was unable to protect its interests after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. At the center of his narrative was Crimea. Crimea "has always been an inseparable part of Russia," Putin declared. Moscow's decision to annex Crimea was rooted in the need to right an "outrageous historical injustice." That injustice began with the Bolsheviks, who put lands that Russia had conquered into their new Soviet republic of Ukraine. Then, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev made the fateful decision in 1954 to transfer Crimea from the Russian Federation to Ukraine. When the Soviet state fell apart in 1991, Russian-speaking Crimea was left in Ukraine "like a sack of potatoes," Putin said.[1] The Russian nation was divided by borders.

Vladimir Putin's speech and the ceremony reuniting Russia with its "lost province" came after several months of political upheaval in Ukraine. Demonstrations that had begun in late November 2013 as a protest against Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych's decision to back out of the planned signing of an association agreement with the European Union soon turned into a large-scale protest movement against his government. By February 2014, protesters were engaged in clashes with Ukrainian police that left over 100 people dead on both sides.[2] On February 21, 2014, talks between Yanukovych and the opposition were brokered by outside parties, including Russia. A provisional agreement, intended to end the violence and pave the way for new presidential elections at the end of 2014, was upended when Yanukovych abruptly fled the country. After several days of confusion, Yanukovych resurfaced in Russia. Meanwhile, the opposition in Ukraine formed an interim government and set presidential elections for May 25, 2014.

At about the same time that Yanukovych left Ukraine, unidentified armed men began to seize control of strategic infrastructure on the Crimean Peninsula. On March 6, the Crimean parliament voted to hold a snap referendum on independence and the prospect of joining Russia. On March 16, the results of the referendum indicated that 97 percent of those voting had opted to unite with Russia. It was this referendum that Putin used to justify Russia's reincorporation, its annexation, of Crimea. He opened his speech with a reference to the referendum and how more than 82 percent of eligible voters had turned out to make this momentous and overwhelming choice in favor of becoming part of Russia. The people of Crimea had exercised their right—the right of all nations—to self-determination. They had chosen to restore the unity of the Russian world and historical Russia. But by annexing the Crimean Peninsula, immediately after the referendum, Putin had dealt the greatest blow to European security since the end of the Cold War. In the eyes of most external observers, Putin's Russia was now a definitively revisionist power. In a short span of time, between February 21 and March 18, 2014, Russia had moved from brokering peace to taking a piece of Ukraine.

As Western leaders deliberated how to punish Putin for seizing Crimea and deter him from similar actions in the rest of Ukraine and elsewhere, questions arose: Why did Putin do this? What does he want? Many

commentators turned back to questions that had been asked nearly 15 years earlier, when Vladimir Putin first emerged from near-obscurity to become the leader of Russia: "Who is Mr. Putin?" For some observers, the answer was easy: Putin was who he had always been—a corrupt, avaricious, and power-hungry authoritarian leader. What Putin did in Ukraine was just a logical next step to what he had been doing in Russia since 2000: trying to tighten his grip on power. Annexing Crimea and the nationalist rhetoric Putin used to justify it were merely ploys to bolster his flagging public support and distract the population from problems at home. Other commentators saw Putin's shift toward nationalist rhetoric and his decision to annex Crimea as evidence of new "imperial" thinking, and as dangerously genuine. Putin's goal, they proposed, was to restore the Soviet Union or the old Russian Empire. But if that was true, where were the patterns and key indicators of neo-imperialist revisionism in Putin's past behavior? Many world leaders and analysts wondered what they had missed. Unable to reconcile their old understanding of Putin with his behavior in Ukraine, some concluded that Putin himself had changed. A "new Putin" must have appeared in the Kremlin.

If, in fact, Putin's behavior in the Ukraine crisis was really different from the past, it could provide an opportunity to understand him better. In his 2014 book, *A Sense of the Enemy: The High-Stakes History of Reading Your Rival's Mind,* Zachary Shore argues that it is precisely when people break with previous patterns of behavior that we can begin to gain an understanding of their real character. Patterns of past behavior are a poor predictor of how a person will act in the future. Contexts change and alter people's actions. Pattern breaks are key for analyzing individual behavior. They push us to focus on the invariant aspects of the person's self. They help reveal the hidden drivers, the underlying motivations, and what an actor, a leader, values most.[3]

This is the essence of our approach in this book. The book is an effort to figure out who Mr. Putin is in terms of his motivations—what drives him to act as he does? Rather than present a chronicle of events in which Putin played a role, we concentrate on events that *shaped* him. We look at formative experiences of Putin's past. And where we do examine his actions, we focus on the *circumstances* in which he acted. Our reasoning is that if Putin's actions and words differed during the crisis in Ukraine in 2014 from what we might have expected in the past,

it is likely that the circumstances changed. Indeed, as we will lay out and describe in the two parts of this book, Vladimir Putin's behavior is driven by the imperative to adapt and respond to changing—especially, unpredicted—circumstances.

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 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 extensively in other analyses and biographies. Our purpose is to look for new insights in all the material we have on Vladimir Putin.

THE ELUSIVE NATURE OF FACTS

It is remarkable—almost hard to believe—that for 15 years there has not been a single substantive biography published in Russian, by a Russian, of President Putin. It is true that a few very incomplete books—limited in their scope—appeared in his first months as president. There is also, of course, Putin's own autobiography, *Ot pervogo litsa* (First person), which appeared in early 2000.[4] Arguably the only other true biography with wide circulation in Russia is a translation of Alexander Rahr's *Wladimir Putin: Der "Deutsche" im Kreml* (Vladimir Putin: the "German" in the Kremlin).[5] By contrast, there have been a number of serious biographies of Putin in English. The West, particularly the United States, is used to a steady flow of memoirs, and tell-alls, from former associates of our leaders. There has been nothing like that in Russia. Rather than the flow of information about the man who has led the country for a decade and a half growing stronger, it has actually declined over time. Above all, the information that does emerge has been increasingly controlled and manipulated. Instead of independently verifiable new facts from identified sources, there are only "stories" about Putin from unidentified sources, sources who are—we are invariably assured by those who tell the stories—"close to the Kremlin." There is also the phenomenon of old stories being recycled as astonishing new revelations.

Attempting to write about Vladimir Putin is thus a challenge for many reasons. One that we ourselves never imagined until we were well into this venture is that, like it or not, when you delve into his hidden aspects,

whether in the past or present, you are playing a game with Putin. It is a game where he is in charge. He controls the facts and the "stories." For that reason, every apparent fact or story needs to be regarded with suspicion. It has to be traced back to original sources. If that turns out to be impossible, or the source seems unreliable, what does one do with the information? As the reader will soon find out, we too use stories about Putin. But we do so with caution. We have tested the sources. When we were unable to do so to the fullest extent, we make that clear. Most important, we have learned to ask the question, "Why has this story been circulated?"

The most obvious reason we cannot take any story or so-called fact at face value when it comes to Vladimir Putin is that we are dealing with someone who is a master at manipulating information, suppressing information, and creating pseudo-information. In the course of studying Putin, and Putin's Russia, we have learned this the hard way. In today's world of social media, the public has the impression that we know, or easily can know, everything about everybody. Nothing, it seems, is private or secret. And still, after 15 years, we remain ignorant of some of the most basic facts about a man who is arguably the most powerful individual in the world, the leader of an important nation. When there is no certifiably real and solid information, any tidbit becomes precious.

THE PUTIN BIOGRAPHY

Where then do we start? The basic biographical data, surely, are beyond dispute. Vladimir Putin was born in the Soviet city of Leningrad in October 1952 and was his parents' only surviving child. His childhood was spent in Leningrad, where his youthful pursuits included training first in sambo (a martial art combining judo and wrestling that was developed by the Soviet Red Army) and then in judo. After school, Putin studied law at Leningrad State University (LGU), 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 (the "operative" of our title) and attained the rank of lieutenant colonel. In 1990–91, he moved into the intelligence service's "active reserve" and

returned to Leningrad State University as a deputy to the vice rector. He became an adviser to 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 prime minister by President Boris Yeltsin, who also indicated 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 to serve another term as Russia's president until 2018, thanks to a constitutional amendment 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. Yet 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 when 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 (whom he divorced in 2014), 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, there are many important and enduring mysteries about Vladimir Putin that we will not address in detail in this book. Take something so fundamental as his initial rise to power as Russian president. In less than two-and-a-half years from 1997 to 99, 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. How could this happen? Who facilitated Putin's rise? Putin does not have a story about that in his official biographical interviews. He leaves it to others to spin their versions. The fact that there are multiple competing answers to such a basic question as who chose Putin to be Boris Yeltsin's successor in 1999 is one of the reasons we decided to write this book and to adopt the specific approach we have. All the versions of who made this important decision are based on retrospective accounts, including from Boris Yeltsin himself in his memoir *Midnight Diaries*. Almost nothing comes from real-time statements or reliable accounts of actions taken. 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. 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, for us, it was what Mr. Putin did that is the most critical element in his biography.

As a good KGB operative, 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 even 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 his 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.

To understand our approach, it might be useful to present a couple of examples of the specious "stories" that have circulated about Putin and have been taken at face value by some authors. One is the story of Putin's alleged personal fortune. The other relates to an apparent KGB assessment of Putin as a dangerously risk-prone individual who likes to gamble.

PUTIN'S PERSONAL WEALTH

In the wake of Putin's actions in Ukraine in the spring of 2014 and the search by politicians in the West for effective levers to "punish Putin," one tempting option was to focus on the Russian president's personal wealth. Over the years, there have been repeated stories about how Mr. Putin had accumulated a vast fortune thanks to massive corruption within the inner circle of what we call Russia, Inc.[6] Early on, it was rumored that Putin's net worth was $20 billion. With each retelling, the number grew—$30 billion, $40 billion, $70 billion, up (at last count) to

$100 billion. These stories date back to Putin's time in the St. Petersburg mayor's office, they implicate his family and close associates, 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.[7]

Some of the world's top financial institutions have conducted serious research on how the corrupt hide their stolen assets.[8] We did not have the means to undertake the kind of detailed and laborious technical work necessary to pursue Mr. Putin's purported ill-gotten gains, nor did we want to engage in further conjecture on this subject. As we indicate in the book, there is notable circumstantial evidence—including expensive watches and suits—of Mr. Putin's supposedly luxurious lifestyle beyond the official trappings of the Russian presidency. These extravagances on their own do not make the case that he has amassed a fortune in the tens of billions of dollars. There are competing narratives that Putin's day-to-day lifestyle is ascetic rather than luxurious. It is certainly true that individuals 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 political 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 himself might even encourage rumors that he is the richest of the rich to curb political ambitions among Russia's billionaire businessmen, the so-called oligarchs. They cannot even compete in the realm of personal wealth with Vladimir Putin, and it is he who has supreme power in Russia. But this is all speculation about facts that remain, for now, unproven.

The problem arises when this so-called fact of huge personal wealth leads to the conclusion that greed must necessarily be Vladimir Putin's principal motivation, or that somehow the fear of losing his personal fortune, or his associates' fortunes, would restrain his actions in the international arena. 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. We need to understand what else motivates Putin's actions as head of the Russian state.

A "DIMINISHED SENSE OF DANGER"

One idea that gained currency during the crisis in Ukraine is that Putin is a reckless gambler who takes dangerous risks.[9] This argument is based on the alleged fact that Putin's KGB trainers deemed that he suffered from a "diminished sense of danger" (*ponizhennoye chuvstvo opasnosti*). Although presented in a couple of recent books about Putin as if it were a new revelation, this is a story familiar to anyone who has read Putin's 2000 book, *Ot pervogo litsa*.[10] There, Putin describes how, when he was studying at the KGB academy, one characteristic ascribed to him as a "negative trait" was a "diminished" or "lowered sense of danger"—a deficiency that was considered very serious, he noted.[11]

In fact, the Putin book turns out to be the only source for this story, something that ought to have set off alarm bells. *Ot pervogo litsa* was intended to be a campaign biography, or "semi-autobiography." The publication of the book was orchestrated by Putin's staff in the spring of 2000 based on a series of one-on-one interviews with a carefully selected troika of Russian journalists. Putin's team's task was to stage-manage the initial presentation, to all of Russia, of this relatively unknown person who was now standing for election as president of the country. It was crafted as a set of conversations with Putin himself, his wife, and other people close to him in his childhood and early life. Every vignette, every new fact presented in the book was chosen for a specific political purpose. The journalists who interviewed Putin also used some of the material for articles in their own newspapers and other publications.

What, then, could Putin's purpose have been in revealing such a character flaw? The answer becomes evident when one reflects on the curious ending of the book. *Ot pervogo litsa* ends with the interviewers noting that Putin seems, after all the episodes in his life that they have gone through, to be a predictable and rather boring person. Had he never done anything on a whim perhaps? Putin responded by recounting an incident when he risked his own life and that of his passenger, his martial arts coach, while driving on a road outside Leningrad (in fact when he was at university). He tried to grab a piece of hay through his open car window from a passing farm truck and very nearly lost control of the car. At the end of the harrowing ride, his white-faced (and presumably furious) coach turned to Putin and said, "You take risks." Why did Putin do

that? "I guess I thought the hay smelled good" (*Navernoye, seno vkusno pakhlo*), said Putin.[12] This is the last line in the book. The reader clearly is meant to identify with Putin's coach and ask: "Wait! What was that all about? Just who is this guy?"

This story offers a classic case of Putin and his team imparting and spinning information in a confusing manner so that it can be interpreted in multiple ways. Putin tells contradictory versions of the story in the same passages of his book. Immediately after stating that the characteristic was ascribed to him during his KGB studies, Putin then suggests that his "lowered sense of danger" was well-known to him and all his friends already in his university days (that is, before he was ever in the KGB).[13] Putin wants people to see him in certain ways, and yet be confused. He promotes the idea of himself both as a risk-taker and as someone who takes calculated risks and always has a fallback option. Which version is the real one? Both have a certain power and useful effect. The end result of Putin's misinformation and contradictory information is to create the image that he is unknowable and unpredictable and therefore even dangerous. It is part of his play in the domestic and international political game—to keep everyone guessing about, and in some cases fearing, how he might react.

Putin is hardly the first world leader to engage in this sort of conscious image manipulation to create doubts about their rationality or even sanity. Richard Nixon's notorious "Madman Theory" during the Vietnam War is a case in point. In 1972, believing he had a chance to bluff the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table to end the war, Nixon instructed his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, to convey the message to the North Vietnamese, via their Soviet backers, that Nixon was prepared to use a nuclear weapon. As James Rosen and Luke Nichter write in a recent article, "Nixon wanted to impress upon the Soviets that the president of the United States was, in a word, mad: unstable, erratic in his decision-making, and capable of anything."[14] In a memoir, former White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman wrote that Nixon had carefully scripted it all. According to Haldeman, Nixon told him, "I call it the Madman Theory. . . . I want the North Vietnamese to believe I've reached the point where I might do anything to stop the war. We'll just slip the word to them that, 'for God's sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about communism. We can't restrain him when he's

angry—and he has his hand on the nuclear button,' and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace."[15]

In reality, Putin's goal in planting stories about himself is more complicated than Nixon's. He is not simply trying to project a specific image of himself or even to sow confusion about the "real" Putin. He also wants to track how the initial seeding of an idea is carried forward, and by whom. Putin wants to see how the original version is embellished and then how it ultimately is played back to him again. This is an exercise. It is Putin's own version of an American children's game, "telephone" (known in the United Kingdom as "Chinese whispers," where it was also called, in earlier versions, "Russian scandal"). In seeding intrigue, Putin wants to see how others interpret what he says and then how they react. The focus is on people's perceptions rather than reality. Figuring out how others think and act, when they know nothing about him or how he operates, gives Mr. Putin a tactical political advantage.

As we have concluded over the course of writing this book, for Vladimir Putin the main thing about information is not whether it is true or not. It is how words and deeds are perceived by others. Putin is less interested in presenting a particular version of reality than in seeing how others react to the information. For him, others are participants in a game he directs. He chooses inputs, they react. He judges. Their responses to his input tell him who they think he is—but by responding they also tell him who *they* are, what *they* want, what *they* care about. For his part, Vladimir Putin reveals very little in return. Indeed, he goes to great, often elaborate, lengths to throw other participants off track. As president and prime minister, he has presented himself as a myriad of different personas. Since 2000, Mr. Putin has been the ultimate international political performance artist.

THE KREMLIN SPECIAL PROPS DEPARTMENT: STAGING THE PRESIDENT

Over the last several years, Vladimir Putin's public relations team has pushed his image in a multiplicity of 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 Chávez'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 theatricality is done with the assistance, it would seem, of the Kremlin's inexhaustible wardrobe and special props department.

On the surface, 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 nondescript 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.[16] 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 monitors the public reactions to the Mr. Putin episodes—are aware that these performances lack universal appeal and have sparked amusement at home and abroad because of their elaborate and very obvious staging. This has led people to depict him as a shallow, cartoonish figure, or a man with no face, no substance, no soul. Putin is often seen as a "man from nowhere," who can appear to be anybody to anyone.[17]

But Russian intellectual elites, the Russian political opposition to Mr. Putin, and overseas commentators are not his target audiences. 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 personal connection to a particular group among the Russian population. Press Secretary Peskov admitted this directly 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.[18] 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.

THE SERIOUS SIDE: SHOWING RESPECT

It is important to realize that there is something deeper, more complicated, at work beneath the façade of the "Mr. Putin" performances, something that an outside observer will always find hard to grasp. Each of the guises that Putin adopts, and the actions he undertakes, pays a degree of respect to a certain group and validates that group's place in Russian society. If the Russian president pulls on a leather jacket and rides off on a motorcycle with Russia's equivalent of the "Hell's Angels" or dresses up in a white suit to fly a microlight aircraft directing the migration of endangered birds, Russian bikers and Russian conservationists both get their time in the spotlight. Bikers and conservationists can believe they are equally worthy of presidential attention. They have inspired presidential action. They have their role to play in Russian society, just like everyone else. The performances create a sense of commonality and unity.

Western politicians routinely set out to convince voters that they are one of them, downing beers and snacks they would never normally eat in bars and restaurants they would not otherwise frequent. But Putin is not out to win votes. He is running a country. His actions have more in common with the leaders of traditional societies than Western leaders. Hamid Karzai, when leader of Afghanistan from 2004 to 2014, for example, frequently told his Western interlocutors that contrary to their interpretations of democracy, he understood democracy to be rule by consensus, not by majority. Without consensus, Afghan society would quickly descend into fragmentation, conflict, and violent strife. To bring reform to Afghanistan there had to be a broad consensus. Consensus created unity. Traditional Afghan methods of forging consensus, like the

shura, a formalized consultation with societal leaders and elders, were more effective in reaching consensus, Karzai argued, than Western parliamentary innovations. The most important element of a *shura,* a consultation, Karzai emphasized, was not reaching some kind of decision, but showing respect in a credible way and validating the views of others. Karzai's adoption of traditional dress was one way of establishing credibility. Showing up in person and sitting for hours at a *shura,* or inviting Afghan tribal leaders to meetings in his own home, and simply listening to the discussions were important ways of showing respect. In Afghanistan, societal leaders wanted to feel they had been listened to by the Afghan president, not just informed of executive decisions after the fact.[19]

Similarly, Putin has stressed on several occasions that he considers listening to the Russian people and hearing what they have to say in person as part of his duty as head of the Russian state.[20] He has traveled extensively to Russia's far-flung regions over the course of his presidencies and during his time as prime minister and devised an array of forums for meeting with and hearing from the public. In an impromptu 2012 meeting with Russian-American journalist and author Masha Gessen, Putin also claimed that most of the costumed stunts were his own idea and not his staff's. He wanted personally to draw attention to certain people and places and issues that he thought were being neglected or, in other words, not given sufficient respect by the rest of society.[21] Collectively, these small but elaborately staged and highly publicized acts of respect have been one of the reasons why Vladimir Putin has consistently polled as Russia's most popular politician for a decade and a half.

Putin's stage performances have the double advantage not only of ensuring his domestic popularity but also of keeping outside analysts confused about his true identity. He benefits from leaving people guessing about how accurately his various PR versions reflect his real persona. But if we do not accept these stage performances as even partly reflecting his identity, then the question remains: Who is Mr. Putin? In fact, Putin hints that he is like Russia itself in the famous poem of Fyodor Tyutchev:

> With the mind alone Russia cannot be understood,
> No ordinary yardstick spans her greatness:
> She stands alone, unique –
> In Russia one can only believe.[22]

THE REAL MR. PUTINS

In this book, we pick up the idea of a multiplicity of Mr. Putins from his PR stunts in creating a portrait that attempts to provide some answers to the question "Who is Mr. Putin?" We argue that uncovering the multiple "real Putins" requires looking beyond the staged performances and the deliberately assumed 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 six individual identities we discuss and highlight in this 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. In Part I of this book, which focuses on the period up until 2012, we discuss each of the identities in detail, looking at their central elements and evolution, and their roots in Russian history, culture, and politics. We then explain how Russia's current political system can be seen 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.

We begin Part I with an initial set of three identities: the Statist, the History Man, and the Survivalist. These are the most generic, in the sense that they characterize 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 decade of the 1990s—the Russian Federation's first decade as a stand-alone, independent country after the dissolution of the USSR—is a central element in the Statist, History Man, and Survivalist identities. This was the decade when Russia fell into economic and political crisis, and Moscow lost its direct authority over the rest of the former Soviet republics, including lands that had previously been part of the Russian Empire. This period also 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 by publishing a December 1999 treatise, which we refer to as his "Millennium Message," 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, the Russia of the 1990s.

The first three identities help explain Mr. Putin's goals, while the next three—the Outsider, the Free Marketeer, and the Case Officer—are more personal. They are primarily about the means he has been able to employ to achieve his ends. Putin's childhood experiences in a working class neighborhood of Leningrad, his years in the KGB at home and abroad, and his activities in the local government of post-Soviet St. Petersburg and then in a series of below-the-radar positions in the Kremlin in the late 1990s, all left him with a unique combination of skills and experience that helped propel him into the presidency in 1999–2000. They allowed him to build up and maintain the political and economic system that has been in place in Russia ever since.

That system, and Mr. Putin personally, has faced major challenges, both at home and abroad, in recent years. Part II of the book attempts to explain Putin's responses to those challenges in terms of the framework developed in Part I. At home, beginning with a political crisis in 2011–12, it seemed that some of Mr. Putin's core identities had ceased being strengths and had become sources of weakness for him, as well as a fundamental vulnerability for the personalized system of governance he had created within the Kremlin. As we will show, key elements of his identities prevented Mr. Putin from relating and connecting to thousands of Russian citizens who took to the streets in protest after Russia's 2011 parliamentary and 2012 presidential elections. In the end, however, Putin prevailed over the protesters. We will argue that he did so by going back to his core identities.

Our final chapters in Part II examine Mr. Putin in the context of his views of and interactions with the outside world, culminating with the crisis in Ukraine in 2013–14. Our objective is to understand Putin's

motivations and his behavior by again drawing upon the insights of Part I. We first trace the evolution of his thinking about Russia's relations with the outside world and then show how Mr. Putin, the Operative in the Kremlin, translated that thinking into action as the Operative Abroad.

A CONTEXTUAL PORTRAIT

The ultimate purpose of our analysis is 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. 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.[23]

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's role in it. 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 exactly 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 2014, 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 timeframe, 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.

But before we turn to Mr. Putin's six identities, we begin with the context of his emergence onto the political scene—Russia of the 1990s. 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 whom 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.