

The Last Man Standing Vladimir Putin, Russia and its White Revolution

On Christmas Eve of 2011, tens of thousands of people rallied in protest against presumed vote fraud by Premier Vladimir Putin's political party *United Russia* in controversial elections two weeks earlier. Their bloodless protest came nearly 20 years after the Soviet Union's collapse on December 25, 1991. This upheaval came on the heels of the "Arab Spring" revolutions in North Africa and the Occupy Wall Street protest movement in the U.S.

Last Man Standing

A new revolutionary spirit was in the Moscow air, raising the specters of both 1991 and that of the watershed Russian Revolution in 1917. While the Russians are stoic people, tempered by their winter's cold and their violent history, remnants of John Reed's *10 days that shook the world* still reverberated in Moscow. The 2011 protests made the Kremlin nervous that the populist unrest that energized both the Arab world and the *Occupy Wall Street* protesters will eventually undermine Russia's ruling elite.

With its many Muslim factions throughout the republics of the former Soviet Union, the Kremlin fears a repeat of the *color revolutions* that caused regime change in several of those republics during the opening years of the 21st century. When peaceful protests ushered in regime change in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004, the events were dubbed the *rose revolution* and *orange revolution* respectively.

The new revolutionary fervor in Russia has been christened the *White Revolution*, not because of Moscow's blizzard-filled winters, but because of the white ribbons its supporters wear on their clothing. To date Russia's *pale revolution* has not had the widespread revolutionary energy of the other color revolutions. But 2011 just might have served as a harbinger of things to come. Putin knows the power of social revolution and political unrest. His undivided support for beleaguered President Bashar Assad in Syria has demonstrated his abject fear of being the *last man standing* in a world of diminishing autocrats and petty dictators.

A Russia Without Putin

Diverse throngs of upwards of 40,000 protesters in Moscow and other cities were common in the months following the December 2011 demonstrations. The protesters believe they are the soul of the Russian future – liberals, nationalists and communists, a collection of constituencies best described as the urban middle class, as well as a group of the digitally connected, broadcasting the rallies live on their iPads, proclaiming a *Russia without Putin*.

Unfortunately for them, the salacious sideshow, the punk rock band *Pussy Riot*, has dominated the public stage, undermining the authenticity and credibility of the *White Revolution*. *Pussy Riot's* impromptu *religious performance* last February and subsequent trial quickly put Russia's government in the world's spotlight.

Pussy Riot's notorious crime was its unscheduled performance at the Russian Orthodox Church's Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. Dressed in short, colorful dresses, leggings and their balaclavas, three members entered the *soleus*, or inner sanctum, in the church and performed their satirical *Punk Prayer*.

The band, founded in 2011 just days after Putin announced his plans to return to the presidency, is the latest symbol of discontent among Russia's young. Its eleven members are sworn to anonymity so they can emphasize their representation of all the people. Most are hardcore feminists who have studied the humanities in the universities. Their lyrical themes include radical feminism, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights, and especially opposition to Putin and the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The charges against the band members ranged from singing blasphemous songs in church to the public desecration of both the Orthodox faith and Premier Putin himself. Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolonnikova were *convicted of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred*. A third band member, Yekaterina Samutsevich, was released on appeal in October.

A Russian Rock Star

After an unprecedented third presidential election in March 2012, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin uncharacteristically found himself staring into the eye of another revolutionary storm. In 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, he was heralded as *the savior of Russia*. After succeeding Boris Yeltsin as president on December 31, 1999, Putin proceeded to win two additional presidential terms. With an iron fist, the former KGB man from Leningrad pulverized an insurgency in Chechnya, while stabilizing the economy, thanks largely to an energy boom in oil and gas prices.

In his 2000 biography, *First Person*, Putin described himself as a *childhood boogman*. After the university, he joined the KGB, fulfilling in the process a childhood dream born of Soviet-era films that glamorized the world of the socialist secret agent. Despite his uncanny resemblance to British actor Daniel Craig, Putin was no Slavic *James Bond*. To the contrary, he performed nothing more than *ordinary intelligence* works in Dresden, East Germany – his only foreign posting.

As president, Putin stands head and shoulders above his predecessors. With his variegated interests and steely stride, he is the closest thing to a *bona fide* rock star the Russian people ever had. Now 60 years old, Putin also paints, plays the piano, and engages in all kinds of sports that range from scuba diving to the martial arts. With his ruddy good looks and eye-catching ability, especially in the publicity shots of his walking sans shirt, Putin is arguably Russia's first male sex symbol. He has two daughters with his wife Lyudmila – Mariya, now 27, and Yekaterina, 26.

Putin's father was a *model communist, who lived the communist ideology*. While Putin did join the Party at the university, his nationalist United Russia party is more reflective of his political philosophy. His religious views are opaque, seemingly lifted from a Churchillian adage. His public moral integrity has been damaged by his illicit relationship with Alina Kabaeva, a native of Tashkent Uzbek, reportedly the mother of his son Dimitry. The rumor mill has Putin divorcing his wife to marry the beautiful 26-year-old former Russian rhythmic gymnastics champion, now a member of the Duma.

Eurasian Hegemony

Since 1991 Russia has become a hybrid state, having gone through a long process of regression that witnessed its transformation from a maze of confusion and corruption to an authoritarian regime. Others contend that Russia is now a *virtual mafia state* due to the systemic corruption in Putin's regime. Until his last election, Putin had enjoyed high approval ratings. He believes that once the Russian people understand the overall gestalt of his vision for Russia, they will stop their Western-oriented protests and follow his direction.

Putinism is the name given to his *grand design*. Power, not ideology, is at the heart of Putin's vision. *Putinism* rests on a nationalism based on geographical

determinism. The Russian president wants to recreate buffer states in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia like in the old Soviet Union. He hopes to enlarge this vision so that Russia can become the *hegemon in all of Eurasia*.

From a geopolitical viewpoint, Putin needs to join forces with Russia's former Soviet republics in order to be better positioned to compete economically with the United States, the European Union and China. His hold on Ukraine is increasing, especially after Ukraine's ill-advised refusal to rent out its Soviet-era gas transportation system to Russia and the European Union.

Russia invaded Georgia in 2006 and still occupies the enclaves of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, recognized as independent states. That same year, Putin orchestrated a meeting between the four emerging economies, Brazil, Russia, India, and China. It is part of Putin's vision to make this oil-conscious BRIC alliance a dominant force. While this vision may be tenuous at best, it has enough clout to make the Western world sit up and take notice.

A New Russian Civilization

Because of several years of constant economic and social turmoil, many Russian citizens pine for the security of the old communist regime. While the Communist Party did gain some ground in the Duma in the last elections, this should be their high-water mark. Putin's relationship with businesses at home and abroad appears more like *democratic fascism*, or an extreme version of what is called *crony capitalism* in America, where favored businesses will *assist* government to lead this *great mission of the Russian people*.

To Putin, Russia is more than a country adjacent to Europe, or even a part of Europe. Putin's mission is to seize a historic moment of *Russian exceptionalism*. As a result he believes Russia has an antinomian *dispensation of grace* that has exempted her from obeying any Western laws or rules of conduct. In effect Putin is poised to proclaim the rise of a new Russian civilization with imperial overtones, worthy of the old czars.

The idea of an economic union has a particular appeal for Putinists because it contains the potential to *right the wrongs* of the Soviet collapse in 1991 while placing the Russians back on track to fulfill their *historical destiny*. Given its economic potential and military might, Putin believes Russia is the only *natural leader* for such a union.

Re-integrating the former *Soviet Eurasia* under Moscow's leadership is far more complex than Putin may imagine. Several powerful constraints hinder his ability to maneuver. The smaller potential members, like Ukraine, would understandably be wary of an economic union that came at the expense of their political sovereignty.

Having failed to attract Western investments under his grandiose *Lisbon to Vladivostok* vision, Putin might have to opt for a more realistic scenario with former Soviet Belarus and Kazakhstan. These countries have already formed a Customs Union. Since autocrats run both

Belarus and Kazakhstan, and both countries' economic and political cultures are arguably the closest to Russia among the former Soviet republics, Putin may have to settle for a smaller version of his world design.

A Lesson in *Realpolitik*

The critical issue for Putin 2013 is the direction of Russian foreign policy. There is a widespread impression that Russia has been attempting to reassert its power by being the standard bearer for all other surviving authoritarian states. This has strained Russia's relationships with NATO and the United States. Putin was cautious during his first term. He wisely supported the *War on Terror* after 9/11 but was embarrassed when the United States attempted to expand NATO to Poland, Georgia and even Ukraine. He viewed this policy as a direct threat to Russian security.

Consequently, Putin distanced himself from the Bush administration by withholding support from the Iraq War after 2003. Then there was the Russian invasion of Georgia. When Barack Obama assumed power, he announced that he would *hit the reset button* with Russia and return to a less contentious position. However, tensions with NATO have been rising as Russia intensifies its complaints about the American missile defense system being deployed in Europe. In 2010 Ukraine abandoned its NATO plans after Putin purportedly threatened to annex the Ukrainian East.

The Kremlin would like to fashion its relations with Obama along the lines of its current relations with Germany and France. Paris and Berlin have a tolerant attitude toward Russia's pervasive corruption and other crimes committed by senior officials. In return, French and German companies receive trade preferences on the Russian market and have become privileged partners in Russia's state corporations. Putin hopes that Obama will learn the national values of his *Realpolitik*.

International Hardball

During the final days of President Obama's first term, human rights issues in Russia erupted like an infected boil. Despite his off-the-record posturing for more *flexibility* after his re-election, Obama issued a direct challenge to the Russian government. At Obama's insistence, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the National Endowment for Democracy, a key player in Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution, have been stirring the revolutionary pot in Russia. The new American Ambassador Michael McFaul has done everything in his power to prod the Russian government on human rights.

The passage of the Magnitsky Act, authored by U.S. Senator Benjamin Cardin, was designed to punish Russia for its human rights violations. Magnitsky will penalize the Russians by refusing visas for Russians accused of human rights violations while freezing their assets in the U.S. The act was passed as a response to the death of a whistle-blowing Russian lawyer, Sergei Magnitsky, who was alleged to have been tortured to death in pre-trial detention in 2009 after accusing a cadre of Russian officials of massive tax fraud.

Putin insisted that Magnitsky had not been tortured, but died of a heart attack and that any questions should address the adequacy of his medical treatment. Putin retaliated against the Magnitsky Act by placing a moratorium on all adoptions of Russian children by American couples. This highly controversial legislation, dubbed the Dima Yakovlev bill, named after an adopted boy who died of parental neglect in America, will end a policy by year's end that has witnessed over 64,000 such adoptions since 1999. The bill also includes a clause that bans any Russian NGO involved in political activity that receives funding from the United States. Putin's reaction was designed to show Obama that Russia still knows how to play hardball. However, it has had the unexpected consequence of opening another vein of revolution among the protesters, who now sing their *March Against Scoundrels*.

A Moribund Legacy

Putin's political success has been mixed at best. Russia's remarkable economic growth under his reign was based on the raw-materials boom of the 2000s – of which Russia was the world's outstanding beneficiary. But with the global economic crisis, the boom came to an end. Despite a low flat tax rate of just 13%, plus a Value Added Tax (VAT) of 17%, the Russian economy has stagnated, thanks largely to the decline in oil prices. Putin's *patriotic purge* of foreign cars, films and schools, as well as his crackdown on dissenters have dissipated the *Russian savior mystique* that surrounded him for over a decade.

Cries of corruption have become even more resounding as notions of popular democracy dance in the dreams of many protesters. To thwart the naked reality that Russia is demographically a *dying nation*, in his March inaugural address Putin exhorted families (offering cash bonuses as an incentive) that *three children must become the norm in Russia or the country will face a serious demographic challenge going forward*.

The average Russian woman has seven abortions in her lifetime, making abortion one of the main causes of Russia's population decline. As a result many pro-life and pro-family organizations from all over the Russian Federation have established a National Parents Association. The Duma introduced a bill that eliminates abortion as a medical service in the national health plan. It also allows doctors to refuse to perform abortions, in stark contrast to *ObamaCare* in the U.S.

While Putin's Russia is under the gun on several fronts, its weathered president is a seasoned veteran in maintaining his political power. In an ever-changing world that is on the brink of a financial apocalypse, one can only guess if Putin will be the *last man standing*. Or will his final legacy become as moribund as Russia's demographic future?

~

2013 Chicago Conference



ANNIVERSARY

The Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation urges you, your family and friends to attend this conference on **FAITH, FAMILY, FREEDOM**

Chicago, IL – Saturday, March 9, 2013

Drury Lane – Oakbrook Terrace, IL

8:00 a.m. – 3:15 p.m.

Speakers:

William A. Donohue

President and CEO of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. Bill is the author of many books of which his latest is *Why Catholicism Matters*.

Patrick J. Reilly

President and CEO of The Cardinal Newman Society. He has written numerous articles on Catholic higher education and other Catholic issues.

James Hitchcock

Professor of History at Saint Louis University, author, lecturer.

His latest book is *The History of the Catholic Church: From the Apostolic Age to the Twenty-first Century*.

William J. Federer

President of Amerisearch, Inc., Bill is a nationally known speaker and best-selling author. His book *America's God and Country Encyclopedia of Quotations* sold over a half-million copies.

Mark your calendar now! Hope to see you in the Windy City!

The Mindszenty Report is published monthly by the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation

7800 Bonhomme Ave.

P. O. Box 11321

St. Louis, MO 63105

Phone 314-727-6279 Fax 314-727-5897

Subscription rate: \$20.00/year, \$36.00/two years.

Outside the U.S.A. \$28.00

The Mindszenty Report is not copyrighted, and subscribers are invited to have it printed in their local newspapers.

Contributions to the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation are tax deductible as allowed by law.

Eleanor Schlafly, *Publisher*

William A. Borst, Ph.D., *Feature Editor*

e-mail: info@mindszenty.org

web site: www.mindszenty.org

orders.inquires@mindszenty.org

Chicago Conference Leaders:

Dorie Gruss

Chairman Emeritus 630-932-7796

Kevin Haney

Chairman 630-730-7112

Mary Ambuul

Co-Chairman 219- 838-4217

Victoria Nelson

Registrar 847-312-2116

This will be a great program of information, motivation, spiritual support, and an opportunity to visit with old friends and meet new ones!

Speakers



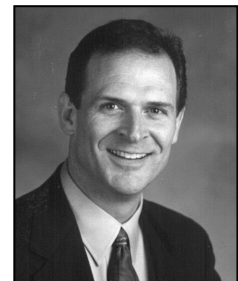
William A. Donohue



Patrick J. Reilly



James Hitchcock



William J. Federer

Mindszenty Report Reprints

STALIN'S KILLING FIELDS: THE SOVIET UNION AND THE KATYN FOREST MASSACRE A review of one of the biggest World War II cover-ups, the Katyn Forest Massacre, where over 4,000 Polish soldiers, officers and civilians were brutally murdered by the Soviets. This shameful act was covered up by Churchill and Roosevelt with a strategy of silence. Ask for 1/13

A JOURNEY TO SAINTHOOD: THE LIVING LEGACY OF ARCHBISHOP FULTON J. SHEEN recalls the inspirational and sometimes surprising life of Bishop Sheen, who exemplified fervent evangelization of God's truth through his clear and concise scholarship. But it was from the secular pulpit of radio and TV that he did most for the salvation of souls. Can sainthood be far behind? Ask for 12/12

BOOKS FOR THE MIND, HEART AND SOUL. Our annual list of recommended reading offers great suggestions for personal edification and gift-giving in categories of faith, history, government and culture. Ask for 11/12

1 copy	\$.75	100 copies	\$23.00
20 copies	\$7.00	500 copies	\$110.00
50 copies	\$12.00	1000 copies	\$210.00