

# Russia's Putin: Meet the New Boss... He's Not the Same as the Old Boss. Scott Ritter

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*Vladimir Putin was sworn in for his fifth term as Russia's President. Mainstream Western Russian "experts" paint Putin as a corrupt autocrat governing over a failed system and nation. Their "reality" couldn't be further from the truth.*

In her July 27, 2020, review of Catherine Belton's book, *Putin's People*, in *The Atlantic*, Anne Applebaum concluded that following his re-election as Russia's President in the Spring of 2018, Vladimir Putin and his cronies had "once again created a calcified, authoritarian political system in Russia," including "a corrupt economy that discourages innovation and entrepreneurship."

Years of Putin presidential leadership, Applebaum noted, had left Russia destitute. "Instead of experiencing the prosperity and political dynamism that still seemed possible in the '90s," the Pulitzer Prize-winning author declared, "Russia is once again impoverished and apathetic. But," she concluded, "Putin and his people are thriving—and that was the most important goal all along."

Applebaum is a much sought after speaker on post-Cold War Russia, where she specializes in picking apart Russia's Soviet past while lamenting the rise to power of Vladimir Putin, whom she characterizes as an autocrat, at the end of the decade of the 1990's. In Applebaum's defense, she is not alone in this regard. Indeed, she finds herself in the company of former ambassadors (Michael McFaul), national security experts (Fiona Hill and Angela Stent), and intelligence officers (Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Steve Hall, and John Sipher), all of whom have used their Russian-laden résumés to insinuate themselves into what passes for a national dialogue in the mainstream media over the true nature of Russia and its leadership, and what that means for the United States and its European allies.

Without exception, the cast of characters assembled above have echoed Applebaum's summation of Putin's legacy and future as Russia's leader.

There is one important difference, however—while Applebaum has been an observer of Russian events, the others were all players in the game, active participants in the formulation and implementation of American policy regarding Russia in the period immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union. They helped propagate policies designed to exploit Russian political, economic, and security weaknesses to the sole benefit of the United States and, when Putin's unexpected assimilation to the Russian presidency threatened to undo all that they had accomplished during the decade of ruinous governance under Boris Yeltsin, these same actors actively worked to undermine Russia in hopes of bringing Putin down.

Any analyst who speaks of the catastrophic decade of the 1990's in terms of "prosperity and political dynamism" cannot be described as a Russian "expert," but rather an anti-Russian propagandist.

The same must be said of anyone who compares the social and economic condition of Russia circa 1999 with Russia in 2020, and opts to describe the present condition in terms of apathetic impoverishment.

The fact that Applebaum and company articulate Russia's current economic situation as corrupt and lacking in innovation and entrepreneurship might explain why they have all gotten it 100% wrong when advocating the imposition of harsh economic sanctions against Russia in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, believing that the Russian economy would collapse, only to witness its survival, revival, and explosive expansion. There are two words that describe the Russian economic environment today—innovation and entrepreneurship. The fact that these words are not in the lexicon of these erstwhile "experts" when describing the Russian economic reality today speaks volumes about the ignorance of this collective.

Applebaum and her ilk understand the roots of Russian political corruption and calcification all too well—they purpose-built this system under the leadership of former President Boris Yeltsin and married it to an economic scheme that saw pensioners robbed while robber barons thrived. The Russian oligarch class was midwived by the present-day Russian "experts" who explain Russia to an American audience infected with the disease of Russophobia these experts help vector into the mainstream. The marriage of Russian oligarchs to Russian political power was part and parcel of an overarching US-driven scheme designed to destroy, not revive, the Russian nation. It was the living embodiment of societal calcification. And when Vladimir Putin's rise to power threatened to unravel their grand plan, these experts turned on him, projecting their sins onto the new president in classic Orwellian fashion, flipping the script so that up was down, left was right, and right was wrong.

The Applebaum class of erstwhile Russian "experts" cannot ever tell the truth about Russia, because to do so would require them to honestly reflect on their own wrongdoing when it came to destroying Russia to begin with, and seeking to keep it destroyed in the decades to follow. They have built careers and fashioned sinecures based on these lies, and their very existence depends on their ability to sustain the telling of these lies to the American public.

Image: Boris Yeltsin



The Russia that Vladimir Putin inherited from Boris Yeltsin was a fundamentally broken nation. The oligarch class insinuated itself into the very fabric of Russian economic and political society, and the Russian people had lost faith with their own history and culture, instead seeking western-style fortune that required them to debase themselves on the altar of assumed western cultural superiority.

A nation that far removed from its true nature is nearly impossible to govern—no politician could survive the shock therapy required to reverse course. Putin had to prioritize those parts of Russia that needed fixing first, forcing him to hold his nose at the rot that had to be left for the time being, since it provided the framework that kept what passed for Russia together.

Over the years, Putin was able to chip away at the corruption of the oligarch class, repairing the damage done by the decades of neglect, and slowly encouraging the healing process necessary to revive the Russian nation and the Russian people. But the residual taint of the Yeltsin years still attached itself to the Russian body, the infection running too deep to be purged without undoing much of the accomplishments that had been achieved regarding societal rejuvenation. The West's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, however, gave Putin an unexpected boost in this regard. First, hundreds of thousands of political opponents, the followers of Alexi Navalny, fled the country. Second, the West sanctioned the oligarch class, crippling them financially and weakening them in terms of the influence they could exert back in Russia. And finally, the West pushed for the near-total divorce with Russia economically, and in doing so pulled the plug on a politically powerful class of Russian businessmen who had become inextricably intertwined with the western business elite.

In short, the western response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, influenced by Anne Applebaum and her ilk, backfired dramatically. Not only did western sanctions destroy the political viability of the Russian oligarch class and business elites, but it boomeranged back on the West in a classic blowback that has crippled the European economy. Vladimir Putin was able to use the need to boost the Russian defense economy to pursue the kind of innovation and entrepreneurship Applebaum et. al. claimed was nonexistent in Russia

today.

The war with Ukraine and the collective West accomplished something else as well—it awoken a dormant sense of patriotism among the Russian people. This patriotic revival has led to Russians falling in love with Russia, rediscovering their culture, their history, their religion, and their values. Vladimir Putin has been the driving force for the Russian renewal, building upon this new sense of national pride to redefine Russia's role on the international stage as a great nation with a unique culture that is capable of self-sustainment, and as such never again dependent upon the West for anything. This new Russia can stand on its own two feet and protect itself from any enemy that might present itself.

The fly in the ointment of this current reality, however, is the degree to which Russia has become dependent upon the leadership of Vladimir Putin. Putin won reelection by securing 88% of the vote with a 77% turnout among eligible voters. This is a mandate for the kind of change that Putin previously could not consider for fear of tearing apart the fabric of Russian civil and economic society. With the oligarch class and the pro-western economic elites effectively neutered by sanctions, Putin can enact sweeping economic reforms designed to reinvigorate the Russian economy based upon the massive reinvestment of resources which had earlier been taken out of Russia.

The war with Ukraine has freed up Putin in another, perhaps even more important, way. The residual rot of the Yeltsin years, in the form of regional politicians who were more concerned about their individual wealth than they were about the Russian collective, still existed and, in their numbers, were still a formidable power.

By turning the war with Ukraine away from being a war between two brotherly Slavic peoples, which many Russians opposed, into an existential struggle for survival with the collective West, Putin has tapped into a pool of patriotism the likes of which has not been seen since the Second World War. Russian patriotism is now directly linked to support of, and service in, the Special Military Operation. Vladimir Putin has drawn upon this new patriotism and the mandate provided by his electoral victory to redefine the modern Russian political class, and by doing so, putting in motion the kind of structural changes necessary for Russia to continue to grow and thrive in a post-Putin era.

"It is often said here," President Putin stated in his inaugural address, "that the head of state in Russia answers and will always answer for everything. This is still the case. But today," Putin noted, "although I have a deep awareness of my own personal responsibility, I nevertheless want to emphasize that *Russia's success and prosperity cannot and should not depend on one single person or one political party*, or political force alone. We need a broad base for developing democracy in our country and for continuing the transformations we have begun. It is my conviction," he continued, "that a mature civil society is the best guarantee that this development will continue. Only free people in a free country can be genuinely successful. This is the foundation for both economic growth and political stability in Russia. We will do all we can to ensure that everyone here can realize their talents and abilities, to ensure that a genuinely multiparty system develops and that personal freedoms are strengthened."

The "calcified, authoritarian political system" that Anne Applebaum decried is but a figment of her imagination, and that of those who, like her, have come to hate anything and everything affiliated with the Russia that Vladimir Putin has rebuilt from the ruins of the Yeltsin decade.

She and her fellow Russian “experts” have gotten it wrong on Russia and its leadership, and will continue to do so going forward. Hopefully, those in positions of responsibility will understand the price that has been paid for giving credence to such warped analysis, and start listening to the assessments of those who seek to understand the reality of Russia as it is, and not the fiction perpetrated by those who are locked in the failed policies of the past. Only in this way can the disease of Russophobia that has gripped the psyche of the American public be overcome. And when that time comes—and it will come—we can all recognize the reality of what Vladimir Putin has already accomplished and appreciate that which is currently embarked on accomplishing.

Meet the new boss. He’s not the same as the old boss.

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