

The Putin Enigma

Who is Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin? A ruthless KGB agent turned dictator of a nation, or a passionate patriot standing up for his nation's rights? The Russian president is a fervent nationalist leader—but also, curiously, a claimed supporter of the Jewish people. He maintains close ties with the likes of Iran and Syria, but has also called Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu "a friend." And when Russia scrambled to enact counter-sanctions against the US and EU for their censure over the Ukraine crisis, Putin's government explained that, instead, they would import more goods from Israel!

Putin's flair for the dramatic has given him super-hero-like status within Russia, and he carefully cultivates his macho image, even as he is vilified as a tyrant and an autocrat by Western nations. Learn about his wacky public relations stunts, his surprising relationship with the Jews and with Israel, and some of the possible motivations behind why he does what he does.



It is a cold, foggy morning in the remote Russian Far East. Marine biologists board inflatable, black rubber dinghies, boots splashing in the frigid, briny water as they scramble inside—four men to a boat. Each dinghy’s motor roars to life. The researchers speed away from the coastline and into the choppy, treacherous gray waters of the Bering Sea.

On the lead boat, a gallant figure sits up straight, calmly surveying the surrounding water. In his hands, he holds an Excalibur crossbow. A closer look reveals a man who is instantly recognizable across Russia and around the world: Prime Minister Vladimir



Russian “whalers” on the hunt for an elusive gray whale off the coast of the Kamchatka Peninsula in Russia’s Far East. Wait... who is that man with the crossbow?



No beast is safe from an armed Vladimir Putin. He shot a gray whale with a crossbow from a motorboat to help researchers track the animal.

Putin. Today, Putin is a man on a mission. As he grips his crossbow, he scans the sea in search of his prize: a gray whale.

However, Putin has not come to Kronotsky Nature Preserve to harpoon a 50-foot gray whale, native to these waters, and haul it in as a trophy commemorating the frigid safari. Instead, Russia’s fearless leader and avowed nature lover intends to shoot one with a special dart that will collect a skin sample for the researchers, allowing them to identify what area the whale originated from.

The weather is not ideal, and the team proceeds through choppy waters, bobbing up and down through the crests and troughs of the waves. From the water, to the thick air, to the nearby mountains, to the whales themselves, everything here is gray—in stark contrast to the researchers’ bright-orange-topped waterproof suits. Putin’s expression exudes exhilaration.

Though they seek a whale, they must exercise due caution. If one of the rubber boats ventures too close to the leviathan, the craft may capsize and toss them into the unforgiving water. The researchers banter back and forth, shouting between the boats, and one man tosses at Putin some long crossbow arrows tipped with bio-sample darts. Then—there... in the distance... a whale!

Remaining calm and steady, the Russian leader fits an arrow to his bow and expertly takes aim as state media cameras roll, trained on him from a nearby boat. Then the scene cuts away.

In later interviews with breathless news reporters astounded at his bravery for attempting the challenge in such rough conditions, Putin says modestly, “There was a real feeling of exhilaration. I missed three times, but hit on the fourth attempt.”

“What about the risks?” asked one journalist.

“Living is dangerous,” said the former KGB officer and president, and current prime minister.

The year is 2010. Vladimir Putin, who served for two terms as Russian president from 2000 to 2008, has stepped aside due to



Putin downs an opponent in a judo competition. His signature move is the “Harai Goshi sweeping hip throw.”



Putin instructing a young Russian judo student on how to improve his technique.

constitutional limits on consecutive terms and yielded the presidency to his acolyte Dmitry Medvedev. Western pundits often express the opinion that Putin is pulling all the strings from behind the scenes.

Having successfully pushed through a change to the constitution extending the presidential term limit to two consecutive terms of six years, the prime minister has now set his eyes on a new 12-year presidency starting in 2012. In order to maintain his popularity, he regularly engages in publicity stunts such as the “whale-hunting” expedition.

The Colorful President Putin

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin is unusual among world leaders. Characterized by the West as an autocrat maintaining power through strong-arm tactics, he enjoys a whopping 89% approval rating in his native Russia, as measured in October 2015 by a respected independent polling agency. At the same time, the man who became Russia’s top power broker in 2000 started life in a poor, communal apartment building with two hard-working parents who barely had time to take care of him, and he spent most of his life in obscurity. Though today he is highly visible on the world stage and prone to flamboyant public relations stunts—from playing ice hockey to riding with a tough biker gang—Putin’s private life is a closely held secret and virtually nothing

is known about his two daughters, or even his ancestry.

Perhaps more mysterious is his relationship with Jews, and with Israel. Putin is a committed Russian nationalist, a label that is historically associated with anti-Semitism. (Jews in Russia are categorized as a separate ethnic minority and are *not* typically considered Russian!) He was an officer of the KGB, an organization notorious for its anti-Semitism. He pursues a fiercely independent program of foreign relations and maintains close ties with Israel-hating nations like Iran, even courting one of the world’s most reviled tyrants, Bashar al-Assad of Syria. Given all that, it surprises people that he promotes excellent relations with Israel, considers Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu a friend and encourages the building of Jewish religious institutions in Russia!

There are many rich and powerful individuals in Russia with significant influence on the government. Putin must keep them happy and maintain a certain political balancing act. Despite these limitations, when it comes to executive power, Putin is indisputably in charge of the country. He has the power and authority to run Russian affairs, domestic and foreign, his own way. He is notably willing to flout the pleas and demands of the NATO bloc, including Western Europe and the United States, and push whatever political and military program he feels will further Russian interests. His most