

Effective Leadership in Russia: Is Putin an Effective Leader?

Abi Sheehan

Department of Arts and Sciences, University of Nebraska - Lincoln

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Dr. Emira Ibrahimasic

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Abstract

The present study investigated the Russian Federation and the leadership of Vladimir Putin to find out if he has been an effective leader to the Russian people. Through the research shown in the paper, the definition of an effective leader is credibly characterized and related to the subject matter of Vladimir Putin and his reign as president. Using the history of post-Soviet Russia and its three presidents for comparison, scientific evidence in the form of graphs from the World Bank, and the social aspect of information surrounding Russia, the true effectiveness and strength of Vladimir Putin as a leader are evaluated in terms of present-day Russia. Drawing from Articles in the Constitution of the Russian Federation, the powers that an acting president holds are evaluated for their necessity and effectiveness as used under Putin. Given the recent popularity of this subject and the rise of current issues, more research will be needed following the publication of this paper because of the ever-changing circumstances.

Keywords: Putin, effective, economy, strong, leader, Russia, power

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
What is an Effective Leader?	6
Leadership Tendencies in Russia?	8
<i>A Brief History</i>	8
<i>Leadership Styles</i>	11
<i>Sanctions</i>	13
Power that Putin Holds	14
<i>Oligarchs</i>	17
<i>How Russians view Putin</i>	18
Assessing the Record	19
<i>Economic Development</i>	19
<i>Foreign Policy & National Standing</i>	21
Conclusion	23

Introduction

One may ask, “What is a ‘strong/effective leader’?” Though this can be up to interpretation, according to the Center for Creative Leadership, a strong leader will value and demonstrate the importance of integrity, be skilled in communicating in a variety of ways and make hard decisions that will allow them to capitalize on opportunities and earn the respect of their people. Leaders are granted a lot of power while in charge of their domain and must use these powers in ways to benefit and influence one or more of their followers to direct them to achieve a certain objective. They must be aware of their own strength as well as that of their followers and enemies in an attempt to recognize the areas that need development. According to Joel DiGirolamo, there are five major functions of leadership:

- Creating a vision and continually focusing the group energy on the vision
- Building a high-performance team
- Motivating team members
- Ensuring alignment with superiors and the environment and gathering necessary resources
- Maintaining the satisfaction of all members in order to minimize the number of dropouts.

Over and over again, leadership is repeatedly defined, but the common understanding is that the definition is anything *but* common for all leaders in all situations. Some researchers have even sought to attempt to relate particular characteristics to the failures and successes of leaders worldwide, but all with little to show. The true *key* to effective leadership sadly and happily does not exist. This makes it so we can’t simplify our lives up to a magic formula but also, it’s a positive because it is something we can deal with now since it’s the reality.

It is considered to be a good thing to be a “strong leader” in the modern world, particularly ones who chose to present themselves in this way. Some noteworthy examples include Viktor Orban in Hungary, the President of the People’s Republic of China – Xi Jinping, Dilma Rousseff of Brazil, and the United States (U.S.), Donald Trump. The difference though is that not many other democratic and authoritarian states leaders have gone to the extent that Putin must portray himself as a strong leader, especially for the amount of time he has been at it. Due to this fact, Vladimir Putin is the subtopic of my analysis of an effective and strong leader. Currently, in his third presidential term in Russia, Putin continues to capture the hearts of the Russian people and cast himself as competent and decisive through his military actions and policy changes.

This paper, therefore, embarks on a journey to consider whether, and in what exact ways Vladimir Putin can be considered a strong, or effective leader. The analysis begins with considering the definition of an “effective” or “strong” leader and how exactly one can achieve this status. Later, viewing the past Russian leaders’ tendencies in leadership style and accomplishments while in office led Putin to where he is today. This part is based on the fact that Putin is Russia’s dominant political actor, and the views of the Russian public will also be included. The majority of this paper, however, will consider and analyze the powers that Putin holds while being the President and how/if he effectively uses his powers, reflecting on present-day Russia with Putin as a leader and if problems have been continuously solved. Though Putin and his regime show off his leadership in stupendous positive terms, he has not proved to be an effective leader according to the definitions mentioned earlier, yet that does not mean he is not necessarily a non-effective leader. Since Putin has not strained from his fear and intimidation tactics, one must consider if his portrayal as a good leader is his true identity. Vladimir Putin

consistently strives to present himself as a strong leader, and through fear and intimidation, he proves this. According to the research in this paper and the definitions mentioned, Putin has not proved to be an effective leader.

What is an Effective Leader?

Great leaders come in all different shapes, sizes, backgrounds, and personality types. For years, people have written book after book focused on the claim that due to the personality ethic i.e., public image, social interactions, appearance, etc., you can be highly effective just if you act or appear that way. The issue with these claims and this ethic is that they only teach a person how to appear effective, not how to actually be effective in their life. This is quite evident to see why Dr. Stephen Covey, the author of The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, wrote his book in the first place. A true effective person is based on the character ethic i.e., integrity, humility, patience, courage, etc., also called the “inside-out approach.” The personality ethic is rooted in the character ethic, because of this, the personality ethic could come across as being fake if it's not rooted in the character ethic. To accomplish truly being effective and not ‘faking it till you make it, Dr. Covey has laid out seven habits that a person can follow to start their journey to becoming an effective person:

The first habit is to “be proactive” recognize one’s personal responsibility and be able to choose an effective way to respond given stimulus or situation. Someone who is proactive focuses on the things that they can control rather than not, they understand that “their decisions determine their life, not their conditions” (Wisdom For Life, 2018). Then there is “begin with the end in mind” so that we can guide ourselves to the version of us that we want to be we must first create this thought in our mind and then “put first things first” by creating this thought a second time but in the real world. Next is “think win-win” in every situation because to have

truly productive days/months/years/etc., a person must find the willpower needed to even do the things they don't want to do, and in turn, it is more likely for agreements and solutions to be made. Before we can offer advice, we must "seek first to understand, then to be understood," therefore, when we do interact with one another, we must be patient and take the time to understand the other person so that we have the ability to suggest effective solutions to the problem at hand. Habit 6 is "synergy," where different people bring different ideas, opinions, perspectives, and strengths to the table, and instead of just tolerating these experiences, they should be celebrated to come up with the best solution. We must be able to value the different opinions of others, and on top of that we must also be able to step back at times to "sharpen the saw." Habit 7 is about sharpening one's physical, spiritual, cognitive, and social health in order to continually renew ourselves and unleash our future potential (Wisdom For Life, 2018).

I find this last habit talked about by Dr. Covey to be the most important. One of the most effective ways to measure a leader and his or her proficiency is defined by the degree to which the party obtains its goals. In regards to Vladimir Putin, he has spent a lot of time with this habit so that he could present himself to the world in the way he wants to: that he is strong physically, mentally, and socially and is more than adequate to run his country. Putin can take just about anything and make it into self-promotion of himself as a leader, and therefore he focuses mainly on the social aspect and how he's viewed by fellow countries. He values his outward appearance and uses it to his advantage in getting people to follow him, either blindly or in fear of what he could do. As stated by Warren Benis, a pioneer in the field of Leadership studies, "[a] lack of a clear vision is a major reason for the declining effectiveness of a leader" (Vojta, 2010). Every action must start with an idea and once the idea is developed then one must work through the details to be able to present it with integrity and faith. Leaders must be able to communicate their

ideas effectively and clearly and be committed to seeing them through. On top of this, one must be able to change his vision in order to gain the trust of those necessary to fulfill the objective.

Leadership Tendencies in Russia?

A Brief History

The first leader elected to be in charge of Russia after the Cold War was Boris Yeltsin (July 10, 1991 – December 31, 1999), who began as an extremely popular president, with 81% citizen approval ratings of his performance as of September 1991. Yeltsin was a Russian and Soviet politician who was once a member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union before his election into office. He eventually stood as an independent political member with the public viewing him as a part of both liberalism and Russian nationalism. Through the years he rose through the ranks of the Communist Party, from being the First Secretary, chair-elect of the Russian Supreme Soviet, and initially was elected president of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) which, because of Yeltsin allying with various non-Russian leaders he began the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union. Therefore, the RSFSR became the Russian Federation as we know it today, an independent state. Sadly though, due to his second term beginning in 1996, things went downhill for Yeltsin. Through my research, it is evident that Yeltsin was better at destruction than construction, and though he destroyed communism and the Soviet Union, his popularity went down to the single digits by 1999.

Yeltsin decided to resign on December 31, 1999, but before his official resignation, Boris Berezovsky, a Russian entrepreneur who was part of the oligarchs and “the only one to remain firmly by the president’s side” suggested Vladimir Putin to Yeltsin as his next possible successor. Though Putin was already the Prime Minister of Russia and under the Constitution of the Russian Federation, if “the president of the Russian Federation is unable to fulfill his (her)

duties, they shall be temporarily delegated to the Chairman of the Government of the Russian Federation” (“Constitution of the Russian Federation,” art. 92, sec. 3), Yeltsin still wanted to choose a good successor. After much convincing, Putin became the next anointed successor on May 7, 2000. For the time between Yeltsin’s resignation and the start of Putin’s first two terms in office, Putin was still the Acting President, but his official date of succession did not begin until May. During his first term, he had to clean up the past 10 years of damage that Yeltsin had caused. He took it upon himself to reconstruct the impoverished state that the country was left in, while also winning a power struggle that was going on with the Russian oligarchs. This was the first official run-in with the oligarchs that Put had had, and he immediately put them in their place by reaching a bargain with them to allow them to still maintain a lot of their powers in exchange for unwavering support for Putin’s government. Following this was the 2003 referendum held in Chechnya to declare the Republic of Chechnya a part of Russia.

Putin was a very unlikely presidential candidate in the first place, “the people who lifted him to the throne knew little more about him than you do” (Gessen, 2012). Even Berezovsky who brought the initial attention to Putin being the next possible president did not consider him a friend or even an interesting person. He never even found him ‘useful’ enough to keep him close to him for possible future gain or help, he truly did not perceive any spark of curiosity in Putin. So, choosing him as a candidate was almost common sense to Berezovsky, all the bland characteristics that made him keep his distance from Putin would make him the ideal candidate, Berezovsky thought. Apparently, he believed Putin was “devoid of personality and personal interest” (Gessen, 2012), therefore making him pliable and meticulous.

On 14 March 2004, Vladimir Putin was elected to his second term as president where his focus was on improving Russia's health care system and the wellness of the population,

education, housing, and agriculture. For this was the era of Putin capitalizing on crises to consolidate his power (Michael, 2012), and he started after the Beslan terrorist attack on a school when he announced that governors and the mayor of Moscow would no longer be elected and that he would now appoint them instead. This all meant that the president would now be the only federal-level public official to be elected directly by the citizens of Russia (Michael, 2012). Putin also made it so the Kremlin was the only one able to approve political parties to get on the ballot, subsequently limiting the variety of political choices for Russia. Putin truly had taken control of the country and even what was allowed to be said. Two years later in 2006, Anna Politkovskaya, a female Russian investigative journalist and Human Rights activist who had exposed the corruption within the Russian army after the October 2002 siege of Moscow and its handling in Chechnya, was shot dead in her building lobby on 7 October 2006, Putin's birthday. This led to criticism and accusations that Putin was not protecting Russia's newly independent media but also to many theorizing that Putin may have had something to do with her death. Yet this must have been quickly forgotten and forgiven since at the beginning of 2008, Russia had stepped into the limelight with nine other countries as having one of the top ten largest economies in the world.

A brief disruption in Vladimir Putin's presidency happened when First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev (May 7, 2008 – May 7, 2012) was endorsed by Putin to be elected as his successor after being prohibited by the Constitution from running for president for a third term. During this time, Putin was appointed prime minister by Medvedev and remained Russia's most popular politician. During his role Medvedev was focused on his subsequent presidential campaign message, "Freedom is better than no freedom," and his top agenda, which was a wide range of modernization programs for Russia's economy and society to lessen the country's

reliance on oil and gas. Medvedev also had a plan to run Russia's foreign policy under 5 principles he had laid out at the beginning of his ascendancy: The superiority of the fundamental principles of international law, the world must be multipolar, Russia does not seek confrontation with any other country, Russia will protect the lives of their citizens, "wherever they are," and that Moscow would seek to develop ties in regions with whom it has traditionally had friendly relations. In tandem, he worked with Putin throughout his term practically as joint government head. Putin knew that endorsing Medvedev for president would affect his previous role, yet he did not think it would be in such a minuscule way. Because of different external threats to Russia – the financial crisis and the South Ossetia war – Putin decided to step back into his stronger leadership position in Russian politics to make sure everything still ran smoothly. But the question truly came down to whether it was President Medvedev or Prime Minister Vladimir Putin who possessed the most power.

Leadership Styles

Each president of Russia has brought it upon himself to rule in a new and different way from his predecessor, particularly after the Cold War. Yeltsin's popularity of his time came because of his attraction to the Soviet voters who agreed with him on being an advocate for democracy and economic reform. He took steps to give the Russian Republic more autonomy and add a market-oriented economy with a multiparty political system as well. Yeltsin was determined to make a change. He was the key to the Communist Party and the Soviet Union being destroyed, which is one of his biggest achievements. The stock exchange, private banks, and commodities exchanges all commenced under his watch.

During Medvedev's presidency, the long-lingering conflict between separatist regions of South Ossetia together with Abkhazia and Georgia had escalated in the summer of 2008. After

authorizing the use of force against Georgia, the Russian military forces launched a counter-offensive attack against their troops. Lasting only five days, a peace deal was finally in the making and was signed by both parties. After this was the 2008-2009 economic crisis where the country's GDP fell by over 8 percent only resuming its substantial growth in 2010. This also led to Medvedev's approval ratings declining from 83 percent in 2008 to 68 percent and eventually improving to 72 percent by October 2009. He sought to modernize Russia, reform its police system, and anti-corruption campaign. Medvedev's biggest achievement in office was the accession of Russia to the World Trade Organization in December 2011.

Putin's style of leadership is more authoritarian than any other president's post-Soviet era. According to Igor Yakovenko, "If Stalin was 80 percent violence and 20 percent propaganda, then Putin is 80 percent propaganda and 20 percent violence" (Pomerantsev, 2015). Since the beginning of his third reign as the president of Russia, Putin has embraced the idea of being the one to run the show and be in control. His style of leadership is driven by the old Russian empire nostalgia of Tsar Nicholas II. He wants the Cold War era back; he wants to recreate and reunite the 'greater' Soviet Union. Putin's idea of taking back all of the republics and re-shaping the country seems unconventional since the Soviet Union was so dangerously close to total collapse, but nonetheless, he persists down this path. He has been spreading falsehoods and using propaganda for years, similar to the way Adolf Hitler did before World War II, in order to get all his citizens on his side to believe that the West is truly their enemy. Putin's tactics are unconventional and not one of an effective leader, regardless of all the great things he has seemingly done for the country.

Sanctions

As a way to disrupt trade, financial, and investments to/with other countries, sanctions can be put in place by one country to force costs on the targeted country. These are generally put in place for another country to achieve a type of political agenda they could be working for, but it can also be a way to reverse the target country's unacceptable actions and restore normalcy. Sanctions are among some of the toughest actions that nations can take prior to going to war. By virtue of the war going on in Ukraine since January 2022, the United States and European Union (E.U.) have been working together to write up the best actions to take against Russia while also helping Ukraine. As of April 2022, some of the sanctions put in place have blocked Russia's largest and private banks, Sberbank and Alfa Bank, any state-owned enterprises, all Russian elites, and their family members, along with being prohibited to make any debt payments with funds that are subject to U.S. jurisdiction (The White House, 2022). Sanctions on Russia will continue to escalate along with economic measures until the war against Ukraine ends and an agreement is made. Both the E.U. and U.S, are committed to "exempting essential humanitarian and related activities that benefit the Russian people and people around the world...[this includes] enabling the telecommunications services to support the flow of information and access to the Internet" (The White House, 2022) to ensure the Russian people are able to see the outside perspectives of the world. Along with these sanctions, the current acting President of the United States, Joe Biden, has signed one of many Executive Orders (E.O.) making it prohibited for there to be any new investments in the Russian Federation, which will lead to weaker global competitiveness for Russia.

In total, there have been more than 170 sanctions put against Russia since January 2022 by over 25 different governments all around the world. Individuals, banks, businesses and

enterprises, exports, and more have all been affected by these “blitzkrieg” of sanctions, yet Vladimir Putin claims that these efforts have been a failure overall and claims that his goals for Ukraine will be achieved regardless (Inskeep, 2022). Putin is determined for Russia to become self-reliant and to build new partnerships because of this war. He believes that their economy will just adapt and without the help of the West, he can now get what he needs from China and India instead. Though Putin is optimistic about the outcomes of the sanctions and war, it is not likely that it will end well according to experts, particularly in the opinion of Natalya Zubarevich, a specialist on regional developments in Russia (NPR, 2022). According to her and many others, the effects of these sanctions will most likely be devastating, even though it is too early to see, she claims that “we’ll only feel the real impact starting in May or June when production lines will break down” (NPR, 2022) because of the lack of imported parts from the West. With the people of Russia only being allowed to access the state media, it is no wonder they are agreeing with Putin that the sanctions are failing, their media presents it this way in accordance with what Putin says is correct. They believe that the West is trying to keep Russia down and the sanctions are just another way to do this. These sanctions are not likely to disappear any time soon, now is believed to be the last of the sanctions put upon Russia, but until they cease their fight against Ukraine, no Western countries will trust them.

Power that Putin Holds

The President of Russia decides the basic direction of Russia’s policies, both domestic and foreign by also representing the state in foreign affairs. The Constitution of the Russian Federation, Article 80 through Article 93 describes the powers and roles he or she will have as the head of state. When being sworn in, the president takes an oath and says, "I swear that in exercising the powers of the President of the Russian Federation I shall respect and protect

human and civil rights and freedoms, observe and protect the Constitution of the Russian Federation, protect the sovereignty and independence, security and integrity of the State, and faithfully serve the people" ("Constitution of the Russian Federation," art. 82, sec. 1). Once in office, the Russian President takes on many roles: appointing or dismissing multiple different government officials, being the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, regulating and governing the people, and having immunity while elected. Although, with some discrepancies in The Constitution of the Russian Federation, it is practically an effortless thought to bend the rules so that they have slightly different meanings.

Putin himself has acquired a taste for a different type of formal power though, and his effort is widely regarded as formidable; one could even say that by bending the rules, Putin has made himself, "a dominant actor almost by default" (Wilson, 2020). Though promoting himself as viewing Russia through the lens of an authoritarian, Putin's powers have only continuously increased since shortly after Putin took office. For instance, the arrangement of operations under Dmitri Medvedev from 2008 to 2012 was all led through the watchful eye of Putin himself. He determined who specifically would replace him as president (a loyal subordinate) and that he would then be elected as prime minister (keeping Medvedev and Russia under a close eye), along with his new title he was able to continue as a dominant figure in Russia even though the Constitution of the Russian Federation stated otherwise. Article 81.3 states that "One and the same person cannot hold the office of the President of the Russian Federation for more than two terms running" ("Constitution of the Russian Federation," art. 81, sec. 3). But an additional amendment was added, however, that states a provision of section 3 of article 81, stating the following:

Limiting the number of terms for which the same person cannot hold the office of the President of the Russian Federation, is applied to the person having held or holding the post of the President of the Russian Federation without taking into account the number of terms that he (she) had held or is holding this post by the time of coming into force of the amendment to the Constitution of the Russian Federation introducing the relevant limitation, and does not exclude for him (her) the possibility to hold the post of the President of the Russian Federation: during the terms allowed by this provision.

(“Constitution of the Russian Federation,” art. 81, sec. 3.1)

In doing this, Putin has made it possible for him to run for reelection twice more with the possibility of extending his presidency till 2036. This is not the only time Putin has ‘fixed’ or changed the laws to be in his favor. In 2004, Putin signed a law “allowing the president to appoint regional governors” (Luhn, 2015), which is a privilege he still retains, for the most part anyway despite there being protests for this law to be amended in 2011-2012.

Truly understanding the type of leader that Putin is can be difficult. Is he a risk-taker with how he annexed Crimea? Or is he a cautious leader with his decision to build huge oil reserve funds for the state? Maybe he is a long-term planner with the intention to undermine international anyone who is biased against the interests of Russia? He could even be an opportunist who takes his chances and responds to circumstances as they arise. Or could he be all these things at once? There is no actual answer to this question but what it does show is how adaptable he is as a leader. He is willing to change up his strategies whenever a new circumstance appears no matter his prior ideological commitments.

Oligarchs

Oligarchs, wealthy businessmen, and women that benefit from their financial assets affecting politics in their favor, leading to a multitude of countries regarding them as the “real” Russian decision-makers. They are known for influencing specific politics and building their industrial holdings through profits and trading activities. With the industrial holdings in their grasp, they were able to take over some state enterprises, and in the process of privatization they exploited their own customer’s debts from bankruptcy proceedings, but this was all a deliberate plan to get them under their control. This process was manipulated, however, through help from the state officials that oversaw running them. The results of the bankruptcy proceedings often steer in the favor of the trading companies and not in the customer's interests.

These people can also be known as “the ruling group” or “Putin’s friends” because of their close ties to the government, yet through Putin, in 2000 they had been ‘put in their place.’ Putin decided to institutionalize the ones who opposed him, and to a certain extent has also tamed them into more proper behavior. To show his power, he had Vladimir Gusinsky, a fellow oligarch arrested on tax charges so that he would be out of Putin’s way, and evidently out of the country, as he immediately left Russia after posting bail. In an attempt to steer clear of politics, the oligarchs have stepped back from any sort of public disapproval of Putin after watching their former friend, now turned exiled businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky who spent 10 years behind bars for suspected fraud. Putin pardoned him in 2013, but he began several applications with the Court of Human Rights alleging that his rights had been violated by Russia because they were politically motivated.

How Russians view Putin

It does not take a highly informed person to know that Vladimir Putin has high approval ratings among his people, ratings that have never even dipped below 60 percent. There have been countless polls and studies done on the true feeling that Russians have and feel about Vladimir Putin as their President. In one opinion piece by Michele Berdy, she analyzes a tweet from Russia Today, written by Margarita Simonyan:

Раньше он был просто наш президент и его можно было поменять. А теперь он наш вождь. И поменять его мы не дадим.” [Before he was just our president (президент) and could be replaced. But now he is our leader (вождь). And we won’t let him be replaced.] (Berdy, 2018)

Making a distinction between the words президент [pre ze deint] and вождь [vozhd’] within the text is much more significant than meets the eye. The word вождь has three different meanings: chief of a tribe, military leader, the sense of Leader with a capital “L.” Yet in the case of Putin, they see him as an ideological and political leader, to Russia, Putin is the father of their nation, the source of inspiration and light to the path of a brighter future; someone who is strong, powerful, and – in Russia’s case – autocratic and rules over вождество (chiefdom) (Berdy, 2018). Almost every Russian, specifically in a survey of 1,632 respondents from March 24th through 30th of 2022, about 83 percent of Russian citizens support Vladimir Putin and his actions even following his invasion of Ukraine, this is the highest it has been since 2017 (Bloomberg News, 2022). They truly believe that he is ‘doing the right thing’ in Ukraine because they accept the argument, he brought forth about Russia being threatened by NATO. Though he has had a long line of unpopular pension reforms throughout his years, this war has seemingly brought the community back together to (almost) all agree on the same thing.

Assessing the Record

In terms of the powers bestowed upon Vladimir Putin as the elected Russian President, he has plenty to lean on to call himself “strong” and even “effective” in accomplishing his chosen objectives. But, has Putin used his powers to do good for Russia? Especially for the future of the country and its people? How should his success or failure be judged? In order to answer these, it’s necessary to first decide what areas of his presidential performance to consider. For this paper, I have chosen economic development, order and stability, and national standing because of the claims from the Kremlin on how Putin has transformed Russia. In reflection of these areas and the effect that they had on his image and approval ratings; it seems logical to focus on this sphere of terms. To truly understand if Putin’s performance has been successful, it is necessary to focus on Russia as a whole with the other states of the Former Soviet Union (FSU) because of their similar heritage and structural forces. If Putin truly is a strong leader who transformed Russia, the performance of Russia is expected to be better than the other FSU countries since Putin was sworn into power in 2000. To prove these points, data will be drawn from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and Transparency International.

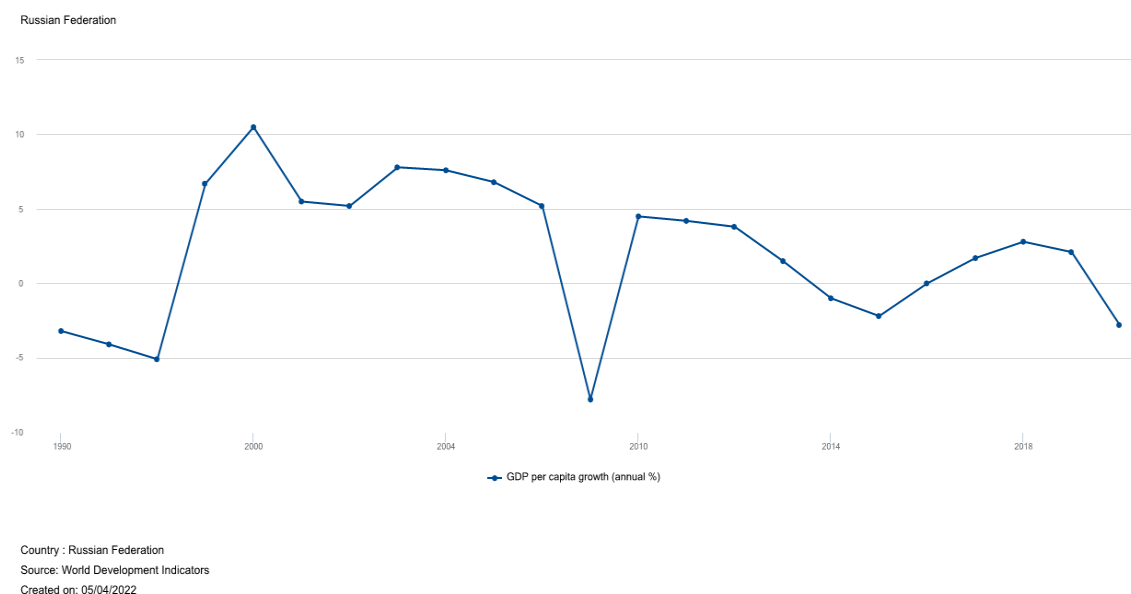
Economic Development

After the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, economies everywhere suffered tremendously, and though some were able to rebound, others were not able to. Russia was one of the lucky countries to rebound in the first half of 2021 because of consumer demand surges and rapid credit growth once COVID-19 restrictions were eased up. Once the second wave of COVID-19 hit the country, it was obvious that the high-paced economic activity would cool down though but that they would still be ahead of the game. The impact of the pandemic did have an effect on their economic growth during the past few years, but it did not stop them from moving forward,

this can be seen by looking through the timeline of his presidency at all of the data points. A lot of the GDP per capita (PPP) data points are much less impressive than one would assume but seeing how unemployment has fallen drastically, as well as the decrease in many of Russian's living situations being below the poverty line, Russia has shown to be better off with Putin in charge. According to the World Bank, an article in December 2021 stated that the “growth in Russia [was] forecast at 2.4 percent in 2022” (World Bank Group, 2021), but this was prior to the 2022 war in Ukraine.

However, there are some important aspects behind this impressive economic development that needs to be answered on whether, or to what extent, all of this truth can be attributed to Putin and the policies of his administration? First of all, the recovery of Russia's economy began prior to Putin taking office, as you can see in the figure below (Data from the World Bank Open Data), proves these findings and that this was due to the devastation following

Table 1. GDP per capita growth (annual %), 1990-2020.



the crisis in 1998 along with the increase in oil prices. The structural factors of the country have been the true drivers of growth in Russia, in fact, one can also see that there is not much that is

exceptional about their economic growth at all. In Table 2, out of the 11 post-Soviet states listed, Russia has the second lowest GDP growth with a 3.60% average between 2000-2020, the lowest being Ukraine with a 2.23% average GDP growth between 2000-2020 (World Bank Open Data, 2020). This evidence shows that the growth of the economy was truly not exceptional, and in fact, was relatively poor to their neighboring countries. The same is true for their unemployment, poverty, and GDP per capita (PPP), all of them showing that Russia, Putin specifically is anything but their 'light to the path of a brighter future.' Reaching macroeconomic stability has been one of Putin's greatest achievements, by him paying off their debts,

Foreign Policy & National Standing

Putin is the sole decision-maker when it comes to foreign policy, and according to the regime and his citizens he has done a great job, particularly when it comes to reclaiming Russia's great power status and national standing. Their satisfaction with Putin's perceived accomplishments has gained him continued public support, especially since 2014. However, is it the case that Putin has made Russia more powerful in international affairs? In consideration of his national defense and foreign policy policies, the military renewal is evident in the increased budget and spending. Their spending rose from \$9.23 billion in 2000 to a peak of \$88.35 billion in 2013 and has plateaued at around \$61.71 billion in 2020. Though this does show that Russia's armed forces are significantly stronger, particularly compared to the other post-Soviet countries, their power compared with the West remains limited with no true shift in the balance of power. In all probability, as you can see below, Russia's foreign policy since 2014 has evoked more countermeasures from the West than anticipated, leading to a likely weakened Russian international position.

Table 2. Military expenditure.

Country	Current US\$ (millions)		
	2000	2012	2020
Armenia	68.1	380.6	634.0
Azerbaijan	119.6	3,250	2,240
Belarus	140.3	807.4	844.5
Estonia	78.3	436.9	701.0
Georgia	18.8	492.0	292.2
Latvia	70.0	255.7	756.9
Lithuania	140.4	328.6	1,170
Moldova	5.1	23.9	44.5
Russia	9,230	81,470	61,710
Tajikistan	10.4	76.3	80.4
Ukraine	1,137	2,840	5,920
United States	320,090	725,210	778,230

Source: World Bank Open Data

It is impossible to consider all aspects of Russia's foreign policy as of 2000, but in general, they have become more assertive in their demands, and their aim is not directed at restoring Russia's status as a great power. Although, in terms of Putin being president he has not made much of an impact on this aim. Through many attempts, even going as far as hosting the XXII Olympic Winter Games in Sochi in 2014 and the FIFA World Cup in 2018, Putin continues to show Russia's greatness at home and abroad. The fallout of this specific event was the Sochi Olympics allegations of corruption before the games even began, leading one to the conclusion of Putin's foreign policy possibly being more counter-productive than not.

In the realm of foreign policy, Putin has been able to successfully make the world believe that he has been restoring Russia's great power status since day one. For him, this has benefited him immensely, boosting his approval rating for the past many years of his being in office. However, there is little to no evidence of his foreign policy work having any achievements in the interest of the Russian state or its citizens. Though the rest of the world does not seem to have the best thoughts in their mind when thinking of Russia, particularly because of Putin's rash

decisions, he does not truly seem to care in the grand scheme of things. His focus has always been specifically on Russia and the followership of his people.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Vladimir Putin has possessed an immense number of powers as a leader of the Russian Federation. However, the idea that he used these powers to do great things for Russia is essentially a myth as the evidence above shows. Yes, improvements have happened but none of them have been specific to Russia. The majority of the developments have been driven by structural factors and not solely by the actions of leaders. The other mentioned socio-economic advances are ones that are expected to happen in unison with economic growth. In comparison with the other FSU states, Russia is no better than the average, and sometimes it is even worse. The success of Russia under Putin is largely attributed to the structure, not the agency, and all in all, very unremarkable.

Putin may have begun his leadership with some restraint, but once he established his place in the office, he depicted himself as “self-aggrandizing, manipulative, avaricious, and deceitful” (Gessen, 2012), and frankly, he is proud of it. His complete authoritarian control over his people and what they are allowed to see on television has captured all of them under the assumption that Putin is trying to do what is best for them and that the West is the enemy. Under his belief of “Russia not being Russia without Vladimir Putin,” he has used his presidential powers from the Constitution of the Russian Federation to bend the rules in his favor over and over again. With the continuous blind support of the Russian people, Putin has been able to rule with almost no complaints, and if there is one, he easily sweeps it under the rug.

Vladimir Putin has been incredibly successful at presenting himself to his people as a strong leader. Although in some respects this can be true in terms of the powers that he does hold

as president of the Russian Federation, it is an illusion in terms of performance. There's not much in Putin's record to truly proclaim him as a great leader. Favorable structural conditions have guided him through his presidency while his leadership has been more detrimental to Russia than anything. Because of the added weight, he has put on his country argues for the necessity of a strong leader. Putin as a leader has been underwhelming in practice. His invasion of Ukraine has put a damper on his reputation, and the world's view of Russia is more negative than ever before. Creating this new era after the 30-year peace that followed the Cold War it is hard to consider his tactics effective through his questionable decisions in 2022. There is a possibility for him to turn around his fate and the fate of his country, but it is unlikely. Putin is a heartless dictator in search of power and with his current tactics, things are bound to get worse before they get better.

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