

Vladimir Putin

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in full Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin (born October 7, 1952, Leningrad, Russia, U.S.S.R. [now St. Petersburg, Russia]), Russian intelligence officer and politician who served as president (1999–2008, 2012–) of Russia and also was the country's prime minister (1999, 2008–12).

Early career

Putin studied law at Leningrad State University, where his tutor was Anatoly Sobchak, later one of the leading reform politicians of the perestroika period. Putin served 15 years as a foreign intelligence officer for the KGB (Committee for State Security), including six years in Dresden, East Germany. In 1990 he retired from active KGB service with the rank of lieutenant colonel and returned to Russia to become prorector of Leningrad State University with responsibility for the institution's external relations. Soon afterward Putin became an adviser to Sobchak, the first democratically elected mayor of St. Petersburg. He quickly won Sobchak's confidence and became known for his ability to get things done; by 1994 he had risen to the post of first deputy mayor.

In 1996 Putin moved to Moscow, where he joined the presidential staff as deputy to Pavel Borodin, the Kremlin's chief administrator. Putin grew close to fellow Leningrader Anatoly Chubais and moved up in administrative positions. In July 1998 Pres. Boris Yeltsin made Putin director of the Federal Security Service (FSB; the KGB's domestic successor), and shortly thereafter he became secretary of the influential Security Council. Yeltsin, who was searching for an heir to assume his mantle, appointed Putin prime minister in 1999.

Although he was virtually unknown, Putin's public-approval ratings soared when he launched a well-organized military operation against secessionist rebels in Chechnya. Wearied by years of Yeltsin's erratic behaviour, the Russian public appreciated Putin's coolness and decisiveness under pressure. Putin's support for a new electoral bloc, Unity, ensured its success in the December parliamentary elections.

First and second terms as president of Russia

On December 31, 1999, Yeltsin unexpectedly announced his resignation and named Putin acting president. Promising to rebuild a weakened Russia, the austere and reserved Putin easily won the March 2000 elections with about 53 percent of the vote. As president, he sought to end corruption and create a strongly regulated market economy.

Putin quickly reasserted control over Russia's 89 regions and republics, dividing them into seven new federal districts, each headed by a representative appointed by the president. He also removed the right of regional governors to sit in the Federation Council, the upper house of the Russian parliament. Putin moved to reduce the power of Russia's unpopular financiers and media tycoons—the so-called “oligarchs”—by closing several media outlets and launching criminal proceedings against numerous leading figures. He faced a difficult situation in Chechnya, particularly from rebels who staged terrorist attacks in Moscow and guerilla attacks on Russian troops from the region's mountains; in 2002 Putin declared the military campaign over, but casualties remained high.

Putin strongly objected to U.S. Pres. George W. Bush's decision in 2001 to abandon the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. In response to the September 11 attacks on the United States in 2001, he pledged Russia's assistance and cooperation in the U.S.-led campaign against terrorists and their allies, offering the use of Russia's airspace for humanitarian deliveries and help in search-and-rescue operations. Nevertheless, Putin joined German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and French Pres. Jacques Chirac in 2002–03 to oppose U.S. and British plans to use force to oust Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq.

Overseeing an economy that enjoyed growth after a prolonged recession in the 1990s, Putin was easily reelected in March 2004. In parliamentary elections in December 2007, Putin's party, United Russia, won an overwhelming majority of seats. Though the fairness of the elections was questioned by international observers and by the

Communist Party of the Russian Federation, the results nonetheless affirmed Putin's power. With a constitutional provision forcing Putin to step down in 2008, he chose Dmitry Medvedev as his successor.

Putin as prime minister

Soon after Medvedev won the March 2008 presidential election by a landslide, Putin announced that he had accepted the position of chairman of the United Russia party. Confirming widespread expectations, Medvedev nominated Putin as the country's prime minister within hours of taking office on May 7, 2008. Russia's parliament confirmed the appointment the following day. Although Medvedev grew more assertive as his term progressed, Putin was still regarded as the main power within the Kremlin.

While some speculated that Medvedev might run for a second term, he announced in September 2011 that he and Putin would—pending a United Russia victory at the polls—trade positions. Widespread irregularities in parliamentary elections in December 2011 triggered a wave of popular protest, and Putin faced a surprisingly strong opposition movement in the presidential race. On March 4, 2012, however, Putin was elected to a third term as Russia's president. In advance of his inauguration, Putin resigned as United Russia chairman, handing control of the party to Medvedev. He was inaugurated as president on May 7, 2012, and one of his first acts upon assuming office was to nominate Medvedev to serve as prime minister.

Third presidential term

Putin's first year back in office as president was characterized by a largely successful effort to stifle the protest movement. Opposition leaders were jailed, and nongovernmental organizations that received funding from abroad were labeled as "foreign agents." Tensions with the United States flared in June 2013, when U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden sought refuge in Russia after revealing the existence of a number of secret NSA programs. Snowden was allowed to remain in Russia on the condition that, in the words of Putin, he stop "bringing harm to our American partners." After chemical weapons attacks outside Damascus in August 2013, the U.S. made the case for military intervention in the Syrian Civil War. In an editorial published in *The New York Times*, Putin urged restraint, and U.S. and Russian officials brokered a deal whereby Syria's chemical weapons supply would be destroyed.

Putin commemorated the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the post-Soviet constitution in December 2013 by ordering the release of some 25,000 individuals from Russian prisons. In a separate move, he granted a pardon to Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the former head of the Yukos oil conglomerate who had been imprisoned for more than a decade on charges that many outside Russia claimed were politically motivated.

In February 2014, when the government of Ukrainian Pres. Viktor Yanukovich was overthrown after months of sustained protests, Yanukovich fled to Russia. Refusing to recognize the interim government in Kiev as legitimate, Putin requested parliamentary approval to dispatch troops to Ukraine to safeguard Russian interests. By early March 2014 Russian troops and pro-Russian paramilitary groups had effectively taken control of Crimea, a Ukrainian autonomous republic whose population was predominantly ethnic Russian. In a popular referendum held on March 16, residents of the Crimea voted to join Russia, and Western governments introduced a series of travel bans and asset freezes against members of Putin's inner circle. On March 18 Putin, stating that the Crimea had always been part of Russia, signed a treaty incorporating the peninsula into the Russian Federation. Over subsequent days still more of Putin's political allies were targeted with economic sanctions by the U.S. and the EU. After ratification of the treaty by both houses of the Russian parliament, on March 21 Putin signed legislation that formalized the Russian annexation of Crimea.

In April 2014, groups of unidentified gunmen outfitted with Russian equipment seized government buildings throughout southeastern Ukraine, sparking an armed conflict with the government in Kiev. Putin referred to the region as Novorossiia ("New Russia"), evoking claims from the imperial era, and, although all signs pointed to direct Russian involvement in the insurgency, Putin steadfastly denied having a hand in the fighting. On July 17, 2014, Malaysia Airlines flight MH17, carrying 298 people, crashed in eastern Ukraine, and overwhelming evidence indicated that it had been shot down by a Russian-made surface-to-air missile fired from rebel-controlled territory. Western countries responded by tightening the sanctions regime, and those measures, combined with plummeting oil prices,

sent the Russian economy into a tailspin. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) estimated that more than 1,000 Russian troops were actively fighting inside Ukraine when Russian and Ukrainian leaders met for cease-fire talks in Minsk, Belarus, on September 5. The cease-fire slowed, but did not stop, the violence, and pro-Russian rebels spent the next several months pushing back Ukrainian government forces.

On February 12, 2015, Putin met with other world leaders in Minsk to approve a 12-point peace plan aimed at ending the fighting in Ukraine. Although fighting slowed for a period, the conflict picked up again in the spring, and by September 2015 the United Nations (UN) estimated that some 8,000 people had been killed and 1.5 million had been displaced as a result of the fighting. On September 28, 2015, in an address before the UN General Assembly, Putin presented his vision of Russia as a world power, capable of projecting its influence abroad, while painting the United States and NATO as threats to global security. Two days later Russia became an active participant in the Syrian Civil War, when Russian aircraft struck targets near the cities of Homs and Hama. Although Russian defense officials stated that the air strikes were intended to target troops and matériel belonging to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, the actual focus of the attacks seemed to have been on opponents of Syrian president and Russian ally Bashar al-Assad.

Cite

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