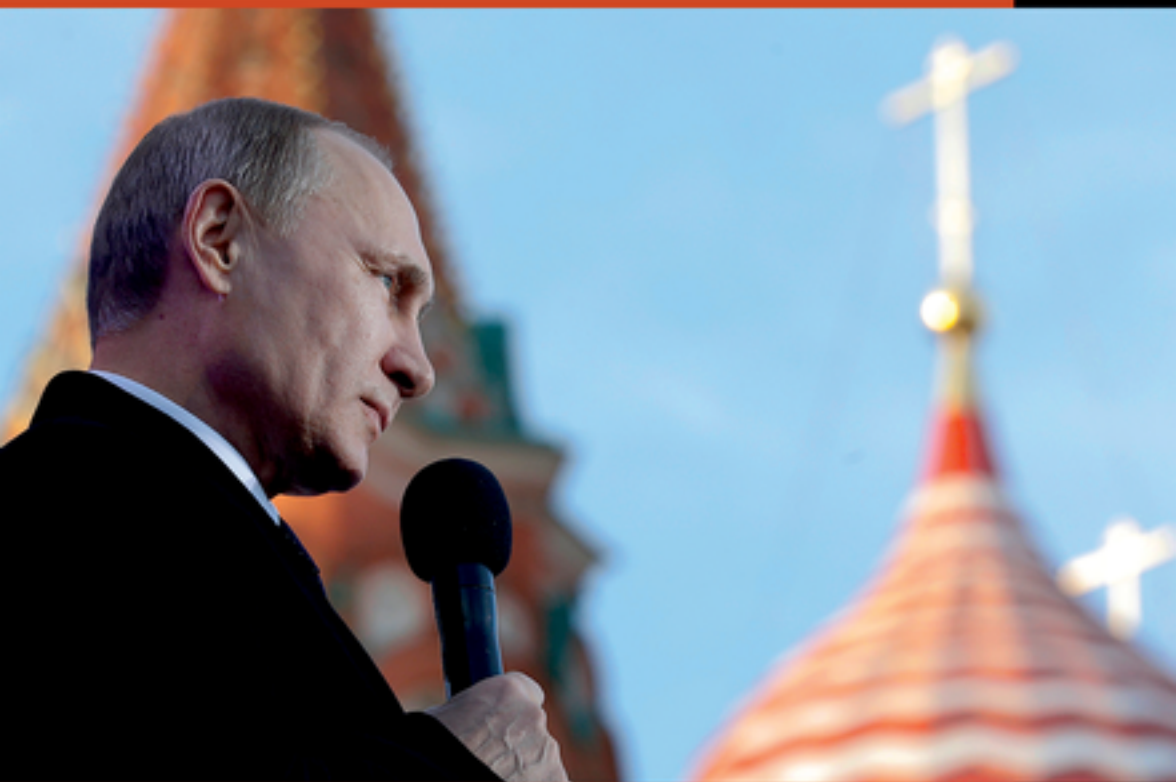


BRIAN D. TAYLOR



THE CODE OF PUTINISM

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To Renée

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In December 2017, Vladimir Putin announced his intention to run for a fourth term as Russian president. By the time this book is published, it is virtually certain that Putin will have been re-elected to a fourth term in a process more like a coronation than an actual contest. With Putin having won another six-year term, Putinism will carry on. The goal of this book is to capture the essence of Putinism. More precisely, this book aims to explain Putinism as a system, and especially Putinism as the collective mentality of Putin and his team—what I call The Code of Putinism.

Many people and organizations helped in making this book possible, none of whom are responsible for the contents, and especially the deficiencies. Principal funding for the research came from the Smith Richardson Foundation; I especially thank Nadia Schadlow for her support for this project. I thank the Department of Political Science and the Maxwell School of Syracuse University for financial and institutional support; I especially thank Jacquelyn Meyer for her assistance. PONARS Eurasia helped in multiple ways. Some of the ideas in this book were first explored at PONARS conferences; I thank PONARS members who participated for their comments. Most centrally, PONARS helped organize a manuscript workshop on the first draft of the book, in November 2015. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the participants in the workshop: Daniel Goldberg, Henry Hale, Steve Hanson, Fiona Hill, Marlene Laruelle, Robert Orttung, Robert Otto, Nikolay Petrov, Peter Rollberg, Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, and Cory Welt. Bob Otto read the penultimate draft and provided valuable comments; he also helpfully provided many relevant articles from the Russian press.

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I owe a special debt of gratitude to everyone in Russia who consented to be interviewed for this book; their insights greatly influenced the arguments in this book. I also thank my friends and colleagues in Russia who made my research trips enjoyable.

A couple of notes on the mechanics. Generally I have placed endnote callouts at the end of the paragraph, to avoid littering the text with too many distracting notes, so many endnotes contain multiple citations. I use the transliteration system of the US Board on Geographic Names, which I believe is easier for non-Russian speakers to read than the Library of Congress system, although I have used the familiar English form for well-known names. Soft signs are omitted from the main text, but preserved in the notes. All translations from Russian are mine unless otherwise noted.

My final thank you is to my family, especially my parents and my sons Anatol and Lucian de Nevers. I dedicate this book to my wife, Renée de Nevers, with love and gratitude.

The Code of Putinism

Introduction

“There is Putin—There is Russia. There is no Putin—There is no Russia.” This dramatic pronouncement was made by a top Kremlin official named Vyacheslav Volodin in 2014. The statement seems absurd, since Russia has existed for hundreds of years, and presumably will continue to do so long after Putin has left power. One might have thought that outspoken Russian patriots would be offended that Russia was considered so fragile that its existence depended entirely on one man. But one of the most outspoken, a former member of parliament named Sergey Markov, wholeheartedly agreed. Markov reasoned that Russia has “very weak institutions and a very strong leader. In that sense Putin is higher than institutions, he is stronger than institutions.” Without Putin, he continued, “weak institutions might not be able to maintain the unity of the country and social stability, and the country could move further toward collapse.”¹

This paradox, in which Putin seems to grow ever stronger, his famous muscles bulging powerfully, while Russian institutions remain weak and ineffective, is at the heart of understanding Putinism. The goal of this book is to capture the essence of Putinism, and to explain why a strong Putin does not mean a strong Russia, and may in fact be a problem rather than a solution. I hope to describe in a relatively straightforward fashion what the Harvard sovietologist Merle Fainsod, in his classic book *How Russia Is Ruled*, called the “anatomy and physiology” of the system of rule in Russia under one specific leader.

Does Vladimir Putin deserve his own “ism?” Definitely. His longevity as ruler (eighteen years and counting), and his impact on Russian political development, justify this tribute. If he stays in office until 2024, which he can do quite legally under the Russian Constitution, he will have served over twenty-four years as the primary leader of Russia, longer than any leader since Stalin and considerably longer than such world-historic figures

as Lenin, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Boris Yeltsin. And the option of making Putin “president for life” could be engineered at some point in the future, a not-uncommon pattern in post-Soviet Eurasia.

Putin also deserves his own “ism” because there is a coherent set of political practices and especially an operating “code” that has remained fairly consistent over time. Thus, Putinism is more like “Thatcherism” or “Reaganism” than like “Marxism”—it is not a fully developed, all-encompassing ideology, but a system of rule and a guiding mentality, a personality and a historical moment.

The central claim of this book is that we can understand Putin and Putinism if we understand the “code” or mentality of Putin and his close associates. To continue the biological analogy, the code of Putinism is the nervous system. It is the coordinating center, the brain, and the depository not just of reason but also of emotions, habits, and ideas. The nervous system controls the rest of the body. The code of Putinism has guided the political decisions that have shaped the political and economic system, domestic and foreign policy.

The code of Putinism is not simply the worldview of leading Russian elites but also a set of habits and emotions that guide policy and decision-making. The dominant beliefs of the current regime are basically conservative and stress the need for a strong state to protect Russia against internal and external enemies. This core idea is reinforced by habits of control, order, and loyalty acquired in the Soviet state, especially its security organs, and emotions related to loss of status, resentment, the desire for respect, and vulnerability. The notion of a “code,” therefore, is meant to highlight that Putin—like all people—is motivated not simply by rational self-interest but also by ideas, habits, and emotions. This combination of emotion, habit, and ideas is what I call a code, or mentality.² It is the code of Putinism, and not the code of Putin, because it reflects the mentality of not just Putin but also many of his closest and most influential associates, people who have worked with Putin for decades. There is a Team Putin, with a distinct and coherent mentality.

There are three major implications of the core argument about the existence and importance of the code of Putinism, and these implications distinguish my argument from some important alternatives to understanding Russian politics. First, Putin matters. Second, what matters about Putin and his team is the “code.” Third, the code of Putinism has made Russia an underperforming country at the domestic level and an overambitious one at the international level.

There are important and influential alternatives to each of these three arguments. Although everyone would agree, one would think, that “Putin matters,” many would argue that what he believes and feels is relatively unimportant, because he is tightly constrained by what we might call “preexisting conditions”—Russian culture, dependence on oil and gas, the legacies of communism, and so on.³ I contend that, although these conditions obviously matter, Putin was able to make consequential decisions that greatly shaped Russia’s trajectory.

Second, he made these important choices under the influence of the code, the ideas and habits and emotions that are shared by Putin and much of his circle. Although Putin and his allies are obviously somewhat constrained by circumstances and have their own interests to pursue, including power and wealth, their behavior cannot be understood solely or even primarily as motivated by narrow calculations of personal gain. Rather, rational interests combine with elements of the code. For example, Putin is often portrayed as a cold-blooded schemer. One of his closest friends, however, once described him as “a very emotional person, but he was completely incapable of expressing emotion. . . . He had strong emotions, but he couldn’t present them properly.” This friend was the cellist Sergey Roldugin, who was later revealed to have secret foreign bank accounts showing that he was a billionaire, riches seemingly acquired through insider deals involving companies controlled either by the Russian state or other friends of Putin. What should we conclude from this? The obvious story is that Putin is enriching his old friends, and perhaps himself—some have speculated that Roldugin’s wealth is actually Putin’s. But if we have a broader view of what motivates people, we also see that Putin has remained steadfastly loyal to an old friend whom he could have left behind in his ascent to power, and that one of his closest friends knows Putin to be a “very emotional person.” Roldugin stated that over time Putin learned to express his emotions well, and I have to agree—Putin’s emotions come out clearly in many speeches and interviews. Throughout the book, we will see how a mix of habits, ideas, emotions, and, yes, interests influence the actions of Putin and his circle. Within a highly centralized and personalistic political system, the mentality of the ruler and his close allies has a large impact. Understanding Putinism requires understanding this broader code—rational self-interest is not enough.⁴

Third, some experts don’t think Russia is underperforming at the domestic level or overambitious at the international level. Rather, Russia looks like what they labeled a “normal country,” having all of the pluses and

minuses of a country at its level of economic development. This argument is an important corrective to the too-easy tendency to compare Russia to countries like France or the United States, wealthy countries with long democratic traditions. But this approach goes too far, because Russia does in fact underperform, with a much less effective state than it should have, given its level of development. Putin's Russia is misruled: the way Putin pursues his ideal of a strong state actually leads to a weak state. The code of Putinism helps explain the paradox of this disappointing performance, with Putin adopting an approach to ruling that sells Russia short. Similarly, in the international realm, the mentality of Putin and his team has led to foreign policy choices that, while understandable, are holding back Russia's standing in the world and hurting its own internal development.⁵

The central task of this book, then, is to explain the code of Putinism and show its importance for Russian politics, economics, and foreign policy. In terms of politics, the code has shaped how the system operates and what we might think of as the outputs of this system. The Putinist political system combines a set of formal rules and institutions that I call "hyperpresidentialism" and an informal system of clan networks. The 1993 Russian Constitution is frequently described as "superpresidential" because of the considerable powers it gave to the head of state. Putin took this existing "superpresidential" system and made it "hyperpresidential." He and his team took a series of steps to weaken the countervailing structures in the formal political system, such as the judiciary, the parliament, and the regions, thereby concentrating more and more power in the presidency.

Thinking more broadly, hyperpresidentialism is a highly centralized version of what political scientists call electoral authoritarianism. Electoral authoritarianism is a political system that on paper is a democracy but in reality is authoritarian, because the elections that do take place, although ostensibly competitive, are not free and fair enough for the ruling party to lose. When the formal democratic system is predominantly for show it can't serve as a mechanism of competition and elite rotation, so these crucial political processes take place in behind-the-scenes battles between informal clan networks composed of small groups of political and economic elites.

Taking these two features of the political system together, hyperpresidentialism and informal clan networks, points to a fundamental tension and potential weakness at the heart of Putinism. The building of an authoritarian political system behind an electoral façade was supposed to enable Putin to control the state while maintaining ostensibly democratic

credentials. But because the formal institutions are to a significant degree fictitious, political and economic elites have to rely more than ever on informal networks to pursue their objectives and get things done. Understanding this tension at the heart of Putinism helps explain many seeming paradoxes, such as Putin's domination of the political system while he fails to achieve many of his specific policy goals. In other words, a political system like Putinism, combining informal clan competition with hyperpresidentialism, cannot help but be an ineffective system of governance. Real policy achievements—and Putin certainly has those—are more despite the system rather than because of it.⁶

The code of Putinism has also shaped the economic system. "Putinomics" is also a hybrid system, combining the formal institutions of market capitalism with a set of informal clan networks. At the top of the Putinist economic system are Putin and his circle, who make the most important decisions and benefit from and sustain the system. State domination of the oil and gas sector is central to Putinomics, as are Putin's personal links to the key players in this industry. Throughout the economy, the arbitrary power of state officials is often central to who wins and who loses, given the weakness of the rule of law and formal property rights.

Finally, the code of Putinism has shaped Russian foreign policy. Putin is determined to claim, or reclaim, Russia's rightful role as a great power. According to the code, only a Russia that is strong at home can be strong abroad, and vice versa. Weakness, brought about by the traumatic collapse of the Soviet Union, represented an existential threat to the country that had to be reversed. Resentment at Russia's lost status, and suspicion that the West in general and the United States in particular were determined to keep Russia weak, created a Putinist foreign policy increasingly frustrated that Russia was not given its due and was even under serious threat, leading ultimately to the annexation of Crimea, war in Ukraine and Syria, interference in the 2016 US presidential election, and major tensions with the United States and Europe.

When did Putinism begin? Logically one might expect it to have started in 2000, when Vladimir Putin became Russian president. But Putinism in its true form really only appeared around 2003–2004. It was only then, when his first term as president ended and his second term began, that Putin cast aside several top officials inherited from Boris Yeltsin, including his chief of staff and prime minister. He replaced them with a prime minister with KGB roots and a chief of staff who had been a loyal aide in St. Petersburg, a certain Dmitriy Medvedev. This time period also was when Russia's richest man,

Mikhail Khodorkovsky, was arrested and thrown in jail and his oil company Yukos was taken over by the state-controlled oil company Rosneft, headed by one of Putin's closest allies. After 2004 the effort to create what was called a "vertical of power" achieved its fully centralized form as governor elections were canceled, with governors now basically appointed by the Kremlin (although governor elections returned after 2012, a series of "filters" were put in place to ensure that only candidates acceptable to the Kremlin could actually win the elections). And this period was when, after the 2003 Iraq War, the 2004 Beslan terrorist attack in southern Russia, and the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, Putin became fully convinced that the United States was out to get Russia in general and him personally, willing to make common cause with terrorists and revolutionaries in pursuit of the goal of keeping Russia weak.

Putinism has changed somewhat over time, but its core tenets have remained quite consistent. Further, it is not monolithic, so there is room for some pluralism and disagreement within the code. For example, despite its fundamental conservatism, economic liberalism—meaning a larger role for the market and a smaller role for the state—at times has balanced this conservative tendency, especially in Putin's first term (2000–2004). But the code pointed in a definite direction, and as Putin grew more comfortable and confident as ruler, he began to trust his gut more and more, taking him in a more conservative direction in his second term (2004–2008). Although the system remained largely Putinist during the presidency of Medvedev (2008–2012), when Putin served as prime minister due to constitutional limits on more than two consecutive terms as president, it was definitely a more moderate version, with more room for advocates of political and economic liberalization. When Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, he tightened up the system and the code of Putinism became more anti-Western and conservative, and the authoritarianism became more severe. This direction reached full expression in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine.

Thus, the most important changes have been in a particular direction, with the code pointing the way. If we compare the Putinism of today with that of the year 2000, over time it has moved in a more closed and restrictive direction. The code increasingly stressed Russia's position as a "besieged fortress" under threat from internal and external enemies working together to weaken the Russian state. The political system became more authoritarian, with Putin almost always choosing, at each fork in the road, to head toward

greater control concentrated in the Kremlin and less room for independent actors outside the state, including in the media and civil society. Finally, over time Putin managed to elevate himself ever further above the informal clan networks, which continued to fight among themselves, but were less and less of a restraint on the boss at the top.

Does Putinism travel? After all, many “isms” are important not just because they are associated with one leader and one country but also because they are emulated by other leaders in other states. Analysts have pointed to the “Putinization” of politics in the former communist world, especially in places like Hungary and Macedonia. “Putinization” in this context usually refers to a combination of electoral authoritarianism, cronyism, opposition to European liberal values of openness and tolerance, and sometimes a cult of personality of the leader. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been called the “Turkish Putin” and seems to employ similar rhetoric about his opponents and institutional maneuvers to prolong his rule.⁷ What makes it difficult for Putinism to travel fully, however, is the Putinist code that draws much of its energy and focus from feelings of resentment and disrespect associated with Russia’s fall from superpower status. For this reason, Putinism is primarily a Russian phenomenon.

Putinism is not simply a return to a traditional form of Russian rule, after a brief liberalization under Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Although there is a long history of authoritarianism in Russia, and an equally long tradition of what we now call corruption, Russia is not doomed by history, geography, or culture to remain as it was in the past. Democratic government and contemporary standards of law-based rule and rational administration are, in the great sweep of human history, relatively new phenomena everywhere, but they have spread considerably around the planet in the last century. Moreover, Russia today is a very different country, with a very different society and a different international situation, than the Russia of Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, or Joseph Stalin. Russian society is now highly educated, predominately urban, relatively wealthy in comparative terms, and more connected to the outside world than ever before. In these circumstances, authoritarianism was a choice, not some cultural curse.

This book argues that these choices were the product of a particular mentality widely shared among much of the Putinist elite, most importantly Putin himself. At the same time, Putinism does have firm roots in Russian society, and many elements of the code resonate strongly among average Russians. Something like Putinism without Putin was certainly possible at the turn of

the millennium, given the collective trauma of the Soviet collapse and the difficult effort to build a new state and a new economy in the 1990s; the social demand for a strong state and a strong Russia was real. Ultimately, however, the specific form of Russia's political and economic system under Putin owes a great deal to the man himself, and the mentality of those around him.

Finally, it is important to emphasize what this book is *not*: it is not a biography of Vladimir Putin, it is not a history of the period from 2000 to the present, and it does not aspire to be a comprehensive account of current Russian politics. It also is not a work of academic political science, trying to test general theories about the comparative nature of political systems. Although the framing of issues is sometimes informed by more general social science concepts, jargon is either avoided or explained in a language that is meant to bear some resemblance to standard English. The emphasis is on elite politics and policymaking, so the dynamic and fascinating Russian society is largely confined to the background. The goal is to provide a clear and accessible discussion of the key features of Putinism.

Putinism Decoded

What makes Putinism an “ism?” For students of Russia in particular, “isms” are generally associated either with major ideological systems of thought or with comprehensive systems of rule, especially when they carry a person’s name—Marxism, Leninism, Stalinism. Marxism and Marxism-Leninism were overarching ideological visions of the world that served as inspiration and guide to action for millions. In contrast, Leninism and Stalinism as labels could be applied either to an ideology or to a system of rule. Thus, political systems in communist countries were often characterized as Leninist or Stalinist, which implied some kind of model or template.

Vladimir Putin seems like an unlikely founder of an ism. He studied law, not philosophy, in college (incidentally, so did Lenin). He served his entire career as a state official—first in the KGB (Committee for State Security), then in the St. Petersburg’s mayoral office, then for the Russian federal government—before becoming president. Party politics and programmatic debates seem to hold little interest for him. Russian parliamentarian Vyacheslav Nikonov, a strong Putin supporter, says, “Putin hates the word ideology.” An American academic characterized Putin as a “problem solver” and “the ultimate pragmatist,” accurately capturing a common view of Putin, both within and outside Russia.¹

It would indeed be an exaggeration to say that Putinism is an ideology in the pure sense of that word, what the Oxford English Dictionary calls “a systematic scheme of ideas.” A former member of the Duma (the national parliament) from St. Petersburg, someone who knew Putin back when he started his political career in the early 1990s as an assistant to Mayor Anatoliy Sobchak, told me that there is “no such thing” as Putinism, because it has no serious ideological basis. Rather, it is a “simulacra of ideology”—meaning that it looks kind of like an ideology, but without real substance.²

If it would be a mistake to see Putinism as a fully developed and coherent ideological scheme, it would be an even bigger mistake to reduce Putin's actions to pure pragmatism and a cold-blooded pursuit of his own self-interest. Indeed, we cannot truly understand Putin's Russia by attributing all of his actions to the rational pursuit of power and advantage. Yet this is the dominant mode of analysis of much contemporary political science writing, including about Russia. As one political scientist puts it, "the ultimate goal of politicians is the maximization of power. . . . they aspire to stay in power by any means for as long as possible and to acquire as much power as possible." The only other goal that might motivate rulers, according to this perspective, is the accumulation of wealth—a different type of self-interest. Thus, for the preeminent American scholar Karen Dawisha, Putin is not just an autocrat but a kleptocrat, ripping off Russia for the benefit of himself and his cronies.³

This form of reasoning, which academics call "rational choice theory," tells us something about Putin and Putinism, but far from everything. As the great German sociologist Max Weber observed long ago, rational self-interest is not the only motive for human action. In addition to what Weber called "instrumental rationality," other important motives for human behavior include values or ideas ("value rationality"), emotion ("affect"), and habit ("tradition").⁴ This is a much more convincing account of human decision-making than one based purely on individual self-interest. All of us can think of times when our actions have been guided by emotions, or habit, or a set of values or principles. Indeed, much of what we do on a daily basis we do because that's what we've done before, and many of our most consequential choices in life are guided by emotions (whom do I love?) or ideas (what do I believe?). As one political scientist recently observed, the "contemporary scholarly stereotype of the autocrat as a super-rational being narrowly focused on political survival" needs to give way to a broader account of motives, including factors such as personal experiences, ideas, memories, and emotions.⁵

I refer to this combination of motives that fall outside the realm of instrumental rationality—habit, emotions, and ideas—as a "code." A code is both more and less than an ideology; more, because it involves not just ideas but also other stimuli for action, and less, because it is not a coherent and encompassing system of thought.⁶ The distinction here between code and ideology is similar to that made by the prominent scholar Juan Linz between ideology and "mentality." For Linz, fully formed ideologies were organized and well-developed "systems of thought" that are characteristic of totalitarian regimes, whereas mentalities "are ways of thinking and feeling, more

emotional than rational” that are characteristic of authoritarian regimes. The central point is that people’s motives for action should not be reduced to one thing; they are the product of different types of influences.⁷

It is worth reiterating that it is not Putin’s code, but the code of Putinism—which means these beliefs, emotions, and habits are shared to a large extent by other members of Putin’s team. Although he is obviously the most important person in the system and the central decision-maker, he has surrounded himself with many people who share similar backgrounds and beliefs. Further, as I discuss toward the end of the chapter, one reason for Putin’s popularity with Russians for the past eighteen years is that many aspects of the code have a wider resonance in society, particularly in the aftermath of the collective trauma of the Soviet collapse and the painful transition to a new economic system.

This code has several key features. Members of the Putinist elite believe in both the importance of a strong state and the necessity of Russia retaining its status as a great power in a dangerous and competitive international system. They value order, unity, and state power over individual freedoms or societal interests. This is particularly true because Russia is, in their view, a besieged fortress, with the West in general and the United States in particular working to undermine it, often in league with disloyal Russian citizens. A basic distrust of spontaneity and uncontrolled behavior fuels a desire to bring others under control; further, since people are generally weak, if you don’t control them, then someone else will. Loyalty to one’s team is essential, especially because institutions are weak and vulnerable to destabilization. The Putinist elite are sensitive to perceived slights to themselves and to Russia, and thus feelings of resentment about lost status and a desire for respect are prominent.

These are sweeping claims; obviously there is a lot more nuance within this code, and contradictions and exceptions. The rest of the chapter will unpack this code and substantiate these claims, especially with the help of speeches by Putin and other key elites and interviews with Russian experts and observers. Further, this code took some time to fully develop and reveal itself, and has evolved over time. Some elements were clearly present from the beginning, such as statism, an impulse toward control, and resentment about Russia’s perceived lower status in the world. Other components were more contested and in flux, such as anti-Westernism.

Another reason that the code only became clear over time is because at the beginning of his rule Putin was both less confident and felt more constrained. But, as is true in other realms of Putinism, a key break occurred

in 2003–2004. This is the moment when Putin freed himself from the remaining constraints of his predecessor Boris Yeltsin, jettisoning the prime minister and Kremlin chief of staff he had inherited and throwing the richest tycoon from the 1990s in jail. Television, the parliament, and the regions were all brought even further under control in this time period. Further, the Iraq war of 2003, the Beslan terrorist attack of September 2004, and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in December 2004 cemented certain ideas about the internal and external dangers facing Russia, threats that might be aimed ultimately at Putin and the Kremlin.⁸

Putinist Ideas

What does Vladimir Putin believe? This is a thorny problem, since only in riddles are there people who either always tell the truth or always lie. The middle-ground position is that we can have greater confidence that he means what he says when he says it a lot, in settings both scripted and unscripted, and his actions are generally consistent with these statements. Further, to the extent views are shared by other leading members of Putin's circle, our confidence that these are truly held views increases somewhat. In this case we have more than fifteen years of statements and actions to draw on, so some central ideas do stand out.

Perhaps the most fundamental component of Putin's thinking is that he is a *statist* (in Russian, a *gosudarstvennik*). In his first major programmatic statement as Russia's ruler, on the eve of the millennium in December 1999, he made this point quite emphatically. Russia, he averred, was different from the United States or England, with their liberal traditions; in Russia, the state "has always played an exceptionally important role . . . [and] is the source and guarantor of order, the initiator and driving force of any change." Building a strong state, Putin stated, was "the key to the rebirth and rise of Russia." At the same time, he reassured his readers that this strong state would be a "democratic, law-based, capable, federal state." The following year he declared, "Russia from the very beginning was created as a super-centralized state. It is fixed in her genetic code, her traditions, the mentality of the people."⁹

This commitment to statism and state-building has been a consistent theme of Putinism. In 2006 Putin listed "strengthening Russian stateness" as his first major achievement, and in 2007 the first two things he mentioned were "restoration of the territorial integrity" of the country and "the