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America's Poor Grasp of Putinology

By Richard Lourie

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Every self-respecting intelligence agency should have a full-time Putinologist. One reason is that President Vladimir Putin alone rules Russia. What he says goes. Of course, there are all sorts of competing influence groups — the military, tycoons and the new and newly vocal middle class — whose views and interests Putin must take into account, but in the end he's the "decider" and need not fear pesky legislative or judicial impediments to his will.

Another reason is how inscrutable the Russian president can be. Jonathan Winer, a former high-level U.S. State Department official, ranked Putin second only to then-FBI director Louis Freeh when it came to being impossible to read. But Putin, unlike Freeh, went on to become president and prime minister of his country, positions that require some secrecy but also demand many opposite talents: the ability to communicate with other leaders and the public, to empathize and connect rather than keeping oneself hermetically sealed when it comes to masking thoughts and feelings.

So there is a contradiction at the core of Putin's political personality, between his 16 years of training and practice in the KGB and the requirements of a political leader in an age where

communication skills are essential.

Another contradiction that lies at Putin's psychological core is one that he shares with tens of millions of his fellow Russians: He is a Soviet man living in a post-Soviet world. Like them, he is a creature adapting to an abruptly changed environment. In purely Darwinian terms, he has adapted quite successfully. After all, he is on top of the heap. But there are other ways in which he has failed to fully shed Soviet ways, like his insistence on a strong centralized state that does not allow its citizens sufficient participation for them to consider themselves stakeholders.

Capital flight leads to brain drain, the loss of the very talent that could transform Russia from a gas and oil giant to a multifaceted economy. This is the only way to avoid the collapse of the Russian state that will occur when gas and oil prices collapse because of new technologies or discoveries of vast deposits of shale oil.

It is politically convenient and intellectually lazy to portray Putin solely as the enemy of liberty and orphans, a ruler surrounded by a conspicuous number of murders, most of which got rid of his worst enemies and critics. But there's more to him than that. His philo-Semitic side has led to a greatly improved position for Russian Jews, some of whom casually walk through Moscow in sidelocks and yarmulkes as if they were not in the land that put the "pogrom" in the dictionary.

Mixing cynicism and sincerity, he also has done much to repair rifts in the Russian Orthodox Church caused by the Soviet regime. A unified church is a stronger support for the state.

Politically, he's also complex, allowing the U.S. and NATO to use Russian airspace and an air base to resupply their troops in Afghanistan. He canceled a contract to sell Iran the S-300 air defense system, which could have been a nightmare for Israel. Finally, the U.S. can hitch rides on Russian rockets to the International Space Station — for a fee, of course.

The U.S. must have both a clear sense of what it wants from Russia and who Putin actually is. At the moment, it has neither.

Richard Lourie is the author of "Sakharov: A Biography" and "The Autobiography of Joseph Stalin."

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