The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

25 Similarities Between Chavez and Putin

By Michael Bohm

March 21, 2013



Although all autocrats pretty much fit the same basic profile, the similarities between Presidents Vladimir Putin and Hugo Chavez are particularly striking. Here are the top 25 similarities between the two:

1. Both came from modest, low-income families. As a teenager, Chavez sold sweets on the street to supplement his family's income. Putin described in his autobiography "The First Person" how he grew up in a communal apartment without hot water and regularly chased rats from the entrance way of his apartment building — and one time, a giant rat even chased him.

2. Having come to power at the same time in 1999, both leaders lucked out on the global rise in oil prices in the 2000s. Venezuela's total oil revenue under Chavez was about $1 trillion. Under Putin, Russia's oil revenue is about $2 trillion to date. Both used their huge oil windfalls to subsidize handouts and buy political support among the large segments of the population that are dependent on the state.

3. Chavez nationalized ExxonMobil, Chevron and other foreign oil companies. Putin effectively nationalized Yukos. As state control of the oil sector increased in both countries, capital investment, productivity and production dropped, and capital flight increased. In both countries, state control of the economy as a whole has exceeded 50 percent.

4. During the leaders' rule, both nations were stricken by the "oil curse" in which rent-seeking dominated the economy, non-oil sectors suffered a decline in competitiveness, and most of the wealth was redistributed, wasted or stolen, not created.

5. For most of the 2000s, Chavez gave Cuba about $3 billion a year in oil subsidies. Putin also gave Belarus about $3 billion in oil subsidies during the same period. The subsidies were crucial in keeping Cuba's and Belarus' economies afloat.

6. As closed, oil-rich nations with limited checks and balances, corruption increased exponentially under both leaders' rule. Venezuela was No. 165 on the 2012 Transparency International corruption ranking, and Russia was No. 133.

7. The number of bureaucrats in each country more than doubled. Venezuela was ranked No. 180 in the 2012 World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index. Russia: 112.

8. Both leaders shared a strong affinity for conspiracy theories. Chavez said the U.S. tried to assassinate him several times, including his pre-death accusation that U.S. intelligence agents might have planted a carcinogenic substance in his body. Chavez also said the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy plotted the 2002 failed coup against him and that the country's regular electricity blackouts were caused by the CIA. Meanwhile, Putin, Kremlin-friendly analysts and the state-controlled media have suggested that the U.S. has tried to orchestrate a color revolution in Russia by funding nongovernmental organizations, opposition leaders and protesters.

9. Both prided themselves on standing up to the U.S. with incendiary, populist rhetoric. While speaking at the United Nations in 2006, Chavez likened U.S. President George W. Bush to the devil and said the podium still smelled like sulfur after Bush had spoken from there the previous day. Chavez also called the U.S. "the biggest menace to our planet." Meanwhile, Putin likened U.S. foreign policy to the Third Reich during a Victory Day speech in 2007, called the U.S. the "single master" on the global arena during his 2007 Munich speech and said in 2011 that the U.S. was a "parasite" that feeds off the global economy.

10. Both were lieutenant colonels.

11. As strongmen, Chavez is the model Latin American caudillo. Putin is the model Russian *vozhd*.

12. Chavez founded *chavismo*, a political philosophy based on social welfare, a strong state role in the economy, anti-Americanism and anti-liberalism. Putin created Putinism, which is founded on state capitalism, a large and powerful government based on a vertical power structure and a one-party state, anti-Americanism and the rise of the siloviki.

13. Both used the downtrodden and dispirited for their political base. Chavez courted the poor, unemployed and uneducated by attacking U.S. imperialism and U.S. global hegemony. Putin

appeals to Russians who are bitter about the country's loss of superpower status and Cold War defeat and who are nostalgic about the Soviet Union. Putin tries to lift their spirits by speaking of Russia's spiritual greatness and by stoking anti-Americanism.

14. Both leaders' anti-Americanism is hypocritical. Chavez sold 1 million barrels of oil every year to the U.S., or 10 percent of U.S. oil imports. Putin's elite have a fondness for buying luxury real estate in New York, Florida and California and sending their children to U.S. universities.

15. Chavez said Venezuelans were impoverished by the country's neo-liberal economic policies of the 1990s. Putin blames the country's high poverty rate and decay on the liberal economic reforms and privatization of the "wild 1990s."

16. Both enjoyed playing the role of Robin Hood. Chavez "democratized oil income" by nationalizing foreign assets and using the money to buy housing for the poor. During his December 2009 annual call-in show, Putin said part of the money that Yukos "stole from the people" was used by the state to help poor Russians buy new homes and repair old ones.

17. Both clung to a besieged-fortress mentality. Chavez said, "Venezuela is used to defending itself ... and fighting imperialism. We must be ready for [U.S.] aggression." During last year's Defenders of the Fatherland Day speech at Luzhniki Stadium, Putin said, "Russia's battle continues," referring to U.S. meddling in Russian internal affairs. Putin concluded his speech by exclaiming, "We will die defending Moscow like our brothers died!" quoting Mikhail Lermontov and implicitly equating Russia's battle against the U.S. with Russia's brave defense against the French in the 1812 war.

18. Both oversaw the state gaining control of major media outlets. Russia was No. 142 on the 2011-12 Press Freedom Index, while Venezuela was 120.

19. Chavez expelled Human Rights Watch from the country. Putin expelled USAID.

20. Chavez had "Hello, Mr. President," a weekly television show that lasted six hours per episode. Putin has held yearly expanded news conferences and call-in shows that last four hours each.

21. Both leaders' popularity was based on paternalism that bordered on being a personality cult. A popular slogan for Chavez supporters was "With Chavez, everything; without Chavez nothing." During the 2012 presidential campaign, Putin supporters marched under the slogan, "If not Putin, then who?"

22. Many Chavez supporters say he was sent by God to help the poor. Patriarch Kirill in 2012 called the Putin era "a miracle of God."

23. Chavez was a benevolent autocrat, Putin a kind tsar, and both were considered fathers of their nations.

24. Chavez sang folksy ranchera songs, rode tanks and flew helicopters. Putin sang "Blueberry Hill," rode a Harley-Davidson with the "Night Wolves" biker gang and flew a MiG-29.

25. Chavez created "Bolivarian democracy." Putin created "sovereign democracy."

Amid all of these similarities, however, there is one striking difference between the two: Chavez left the political scene — albeit not on his own will — at the height of his popularity. But Putin is still hanging on to power far past his popularity peak of 70 percent in 2007. According to a Feb. 13 Levada Center poll, Putin's approval rating has dropped to an all-time low with only 32 percent of Russians saying they would vote for him if the election were held today.

If this trend continues and if Putin still insists on staying on as president for the next five, or perhaps 11, years, an even more important difference between Chavez and Putin will certainly emerge: Chavez will be remembered by many lower-income Venezuelans as a national hero who fought a brave battle against U.S. imperialism and who lifted millions out of poverty, while Putin will be remembered as another Leonid Brezhnev who hung on to power long past his due and oversaw a protracted period of economic stagnation and global isolation.

Michael Bohm is opinion page editor of The Moscow Times.

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