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How the U.S. Struggles to Crack the Putin Code

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Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov described the report claiming Putin suffers from Aspergers as “nonsense.”

"Who is Mr. Putin?" The ongoing Ukraine conflict has breathed new life into a question that has long stumped Western policymakers and analysts.

Efforts to grasp President Vladimir Putin's logic have all but reduced Western leaders to soothsaying and studying tea leaves, with hundreds of thousands of U.S. taxpayer dollars having been allocated to scientific research projects aimed at analyzing the Russian leader's body language.

Russian analysts concur that attempts to explain Putin's behavior with reference to his perceived physical or mental ailments are understandable given the centrality of his role in Russian politics, but that they are scientifically futile, as these researchers in fact have very little understanding of the Russian mentality.

A Series of Claims

The latest finding from a remote examination of Putin's mental health emerged last week on the pages of USA Today.

Brenda Connors, a senior fellow at the strategic research department of the Naval War College and a former U.S. State Department officer, prepared a study on Putin in 2008 for the Office of Net Assessment (ONA), a Pentagon think tank. According to USA Today, since 2009 the Pentagon has paid upward of $365,000 to outside experts to support and assist Connors' program, "Body Leads."

Based on the analysis of video footage, Connors' report advanced the theory that Putin suffers from Asperger's syndrome, "an autistic disorder which affects all of his decisions."

Rumors Reported About Putin's Health

President Vladimir Putin has cultivated his image as a strong and healthy leader, unafraid to show off his muscles in the Siberian wilderness or hit the slopes in the Caucasus Mountains. Yet, Putin has been at the heart of rumors about his health in recent years, all of which have been denied by the Kremlin.

Here are examples of the diagnoses that Putin has been given by the media.

Cancer Rumors

In October, The New York Post reported that Putin was allegedly sick with pancreatic cancer, citing unnamed sources. The article cited a German doctor who had alleged that Putin was receiving steroid shots, possibly explaining the president's "puffy appearance."

The tabloid also reported that Polish and Belarussian media outlets had speculated that Putin had been diagnosed with spinal cord cancer. British magazine The Week also reported the rumor in January of last year, saying that Putin had been trying to "clear his

conscience" by releasing Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the former oil tycoon who had been jailed for 10 years on politically motivated charges.

Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, assured in October that the Russian president was healthy and that journalists should "bite their tongue."

Back Problems

After Japanese officials cited Putin's health as the reason behind the cancellation of an official visit to Moscow in Nov. 2012, the media was abuzz with rumors that Putin had a serious health condition.

It turned out that Putin had simply strained a back muscle during a rigorous judo session, according to Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko, with whom Putin occasionally plays pickup hockey games.

"He [Putin] loves judo," Lukashenko told Reuters at the time. "He lifted a guy, threw him, and twisted his spine."

The Kremlin downplayed the incident, saying that rumors about Putin's back condition had been "strongly exaggerated."

(MT)

The report surfaced years after its completion, at a time when the Ukraine crisis had heightened diplomatic tensions between Russia and the West to levels unparalleled since the Cold War, with Putin positioned at the center of the unfolding drama.

"The behavioral implications of the early trauma Putin suffered are profound, affecting his ability to socially interact, which poses great behavioral challenges to his cognitive and emotional processing as leader," the report said, claiming that Putin suffered "the neurological insult" early in life, and that he did not crawl as an infant.

The study portrayed Putin as a deeply insecure man constantly seeking stability through control: "His primary form of compensation is extreme control." Putin himself has said that since childhood, he has always dreamt of being a strong leader.

In a series of interviews he gave to three prominent Russian journalists, published in 2000, Putin reflected upon the bullying he endured as a young boy. Harassment from other children in his Leningrad neighborhood ultimately inspired him to take up martial arts: first boxing, then judo.

He has carried the lessons learned during those formative career with him to the Kremlin. Throughout the course of his career, Putin has emphasized the imperative of Russian strength, because "the weak are beaten."

The ONA report likewise portrays Putin as a man who fears losing balance.

"Putin's lack of psychophysical stability" requires him to "impose a sense of deep control and willful power over his every conscious move in order to simply remain balanced," it said.

It is by defying this condition that Putin has become so strong, according to the report: "In many ways his handicap has peculiarly served him and Russia in the short-term well."

White House spokesman Josh Earnest refused to comment when asked by USA Today on Thursday whether U.S. President Barack Obama had read the ONA report on Putin.

The same day, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov described the report as "nonsense that does not deserve a comment," news site Gazeta.ru quoted him as saying.

The 2008 study cited Dr. Stephen Porges, now a University of North Carolina psychiatry professor, as concluding that "Putin carries a form of autism, a pervasive disorder called Asperger's Syndrome."

In e-mailed comments to The Moscow Times, Dr. Porges confirmed that he had examined video footage of Putin, but denied having suggested that the Russian leader suffers from Asperger's.

"I would not conclude that he would be diagnosed with any form of autism," Dr. Porges said. "Many people are uncomfortable in complex formal settings. Although individuals with Asperger's have these features, many individuals have these features, including most of my academic colleagues and many people with histories of trauma."

Putin has likely been exposed to more than his fair share of psychological testing in the past. Having cut his teeth in the public sphere as a perpetually on-the-rise KGB officer, Putin was required to undergo harsh psychiatric and physical examinations to obtain his position, and then to continue enduring such analyses just to keep it.

Rumors of Putin's health have not been limited to his mental state. Citing sources close to the Kremlin, The New York Post reported in October that Putin was suffering from pancreatic cancer. [See sidebar].

The report went so far as to suggest the Russian president only had three years left to live,

and that he wanted to expand Russia's borders in the little time he had left so as to leave a lasting legacy "like Peter the Great or Stalin."

This, the U.S. tabloid speculated, was what had motivated Putin's decision to "invade Ukraine."

The Kremlin's Peskov swiftly denied the cancer rumor.

In 2005, The Atlantic magazine reported that Putin "could have had a stroke, perhaps suffered *in utero,*" citing a group of medical professionals including surgeons, a physical therapist and a holistic healer who had examined footage of Putin's gait.

The Enigma

According to Alexander Konovalov, head of Moscow-based think tank the Institute of Strategic Assessments, all of these efforts boil down to the Putin enigma.

"Everybody sees that the whole system of decision-making in Russia is concentrated on one single man, who is not limited or checked by any systemic institutions," Konovalov told The Moscow Times in a phone interview.

"I believe that many of Putin's actions cannot be interpreted within rational models of behavior," he said. "Therefore, to many he is still a closed book."

Yevgeny Minchenko, head of the International Institute for Political Expertise, said he thought the ONA report was "superficial," and that it represented only a small part of ongoing efforts to interpret and predict Putin's actions.

Minchenko recalled that similar studies have been conducted in the United States before, for instance with the psychological portrait of Adolf Hitler. At the same time, with Putin there is a particular problem — Western pundits find it difficult to understand his logic.

"Any attempt to understand Putin without understanding the mentality of ordinary Russians would be futile," he said.

Minchenko himself conducted a psychological portrait of Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko in the past for a client whose name he refused to disclose. According to the author, his predictions have become realities.

The Russian Equivalent

Yekaterina Egorova, president of the Nikkolo-M political consultancy in Moscow, has penned numerous psychological portraits of prominent international political figures for Soviet officials under Yury Andropov and Mikhail Gorbachev, as well as for Russia's first President, Boris Yeltsin.

"I have written a 14-page report for Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze on U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, detailing how to negotiate with him and even how to stand a little bit behind at the photo shootings in order to soothe Baker's yearning for leadership," she told The Moscow Times. Shevardnadze, according to Egorova, followed her instructions.

The Russian government no longer commissions such reports from members of the public, but the practice surely continues in a more clandestine atmosphere, Egorova said.

Putin, for his part, is heavily studied in the West, but without much result.

"They believe Putin is much more complicated than he really is," she said. "And there is definitely an element of demonization in their work."

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