

Putin the Polite, Chilling Hero of Russian Souvenirs

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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One of the most popular images adorning t-shirts and smartphone covers is a simple photo portrait of Putin looking remote and inscrutable behind dark glasses.

He may be in charge of an economy in crisis, but if mobile phone covers and souvenir mugs are a barometer of popularity, Russian President Vladimir Putin need not fear for his political future.

In fact, Moscow's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine last year has given the memorabilia makers even more material to glorify a president whose image as a champion of Russian national interests in a hostile world is barely challenged in his own country.

And while plenty of the souvenirs are standard tourist kitsch playing to the action-man image Putin has cultivated since coming to power, others seem to revel, without irony, in the darker side of a former spy who has suppressed political dissent and admitted to plotting in secret to seize Crimea.

Tourists who visited the city of Kazan for this month's world swimming championships would have found Putin-face wall clocks and monster fridge magnets with the president in various heroic poses — as bare-chested action man, naval commander (“We will not abandon our own!”) or historic “Volodya (Vladimir) the Brave.” One recurring motif even has him cuddling a puppy.

But there is also a glossily finished decorative china plate bearing the inscription “Crimea is Ours!” over a map of the peninsula, a Russian flag, and a picture of Putin clenching his fist.

From there, it's a small step to the t-shirts sold outside the Kremlin showing Putin delivering a karate kick to the throat of U.S. President Barack Obama, accused by many ordinary Russians of trying to foment anti-Russian feeling in Ukraine.

And there is more than a hint of admiration on display for some of the darker arts employed by a president whose personal popularity rating regularly tops 80 percent.

The “Anyavanya” brand carried by upmarket online shop Aizel.Ru, which says it has “made the patriotism of the fashionable Russian public into a trend,” displays smartphone covers of Putin, in a camouflage jacket, labeled “The most polite of people.”

“Polite people” was the knowing term quickly coined in Russia for the troops in unmarked uniforms who took control of Crimea without firing a shot — and who Putin later openly admitted, after months of denials, were Russian forces acting on a plan he had hatched with his commanders.

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“I can read your mind” reads one of the captions on a phone cover in Kazan. Another seems to want to throw the West's criticism of Putin's methods back in its face. It simply reads, in English: “Russian Mafia.”

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