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Champagne, Tea Sets and Social Movements: The Ovechkin-Putin Relationship

By Ned Garvey

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Russian ice hockey player Alexander Ovechkin and Russia's President Vladimir Putin. **Mikhail Metzel / TASS**

Alexander Ovechkin scored his 895th NHL career goal on Sunday, surpassing previous record-holder Wayne Gretzky. With 12:34 remaining in the second period, the 39-year-old Russian drove home a long-range shot, sealing his place in NHL history.

After the game, Ovechkin paid tribute to his teammates, fans and trainers. "So fellas, thank you very much, I love you so much...And the last thing — to all of you fans around the world, in Russia, we did it boys," he said.

While Ovechkin is known to many as the darling of the Washington Capitals and the NHL, he is also known for his support of and longtime rapport with Russian President Vladimir Putin

— a relationship that has drawn controversy over the years.

On Monday, the Russian president congratulated Ovechkin, saying, "You've surprised legendary masters. Without a doubt, this achievement is not only your personal success but a true celebration for fans in Russia and abroad."

First meeting

Ovechkin rose to fame at hockey club Dynamo Moscow, where he made his professional debut in 2001 at the age of 16. By the time he entered the NHL draft in 2004, he had already long been predicted to be the No. 1 overall pick. He settled easily in Washington, earning himself the "Rookie of the Year" title in 2006 and notching 198 goals and assists in his first two seasons.

Ovechkin met Putin for the first time in May 2007 after the Russian national team took bronze at the World Championship in Russia. Despite having a poor tournament, Ovechkin accompanied head coach Vyacheslav Bykov and Russian Ice Hockey Federation head Vladislav Tretiak to the Kremlin.

At the time, Bruce Boudreau, who coached the Capitals from 2007 to 2011, said of Ovechkin: "He's a very passionate man. As we're passionate about our country, he is about his."

Pouring Putin champagne and asking him for cars

The Russian state's usage of him, as well as his relationship with Putin, blossomed steadily from there.

Before the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, where hopes were high that the Russian hockey team could win gold on home soil, Ovechkin carried the Olympic Torch on the first leg of its journey from Greece to Moscow.

Russia failed to medal, losing to the United States in a shootout, and then Finland in the quarterfinals.

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However, that same year, a strong Russian team won the World Championship in Belarus. The win surprised no one, as most countries sent weakened squads to the tournament.

After their victory, the Russian team was pictured partying with Putin in the locker room, and Ovechkin was seen pouring champagne for Putin from the trophy.

Ovechkin then appeared in the Kremlin once more. At that meeting, he asked Putin to give each of his teammates a new Mercedes GL, the same gift given to Olympic medalists — a request the Russian president honored.

Explaining the request, Ovechkin told Yahoo Sports: "Such a desire arose from the team. I, as captain, passed it on. Didn't we try to win them in Sochi? Perhaps our request didn't seem right to some people. But it's what we did, that's all. If you have the opportunity, why not ask?

It wouldn't have upset anyone. I gave the car to my father, and we sold the Lexus. We sold the Mercedes to Quebec right away. The color didn't suit me either. Three cars are enough — an SUV, a sedan and a sports car."

A year later, Putin even played hockey with Ovechkin and other Russian stars at an educational center in Sochi.

When Ovechkin married his wife, Anastasia Shubskaya, in 2016, Putin gifted the pair a tea set.

Putin Team and the war in Ukraine

On Aug. 28, 2014, the same year Russia annexed Crimea and began its war in Ukraine, Ovechkin expressed his support for the invasion, posting a picture of himself holding a sign reading "#SaveChildrenFromFascism" on Instagram, a hashtag used by Russian media to justify its aggression against Ukraine.

Referring to the post, Ovechkin told ESPN: "I don't try to make a statement. Right now, as a Russian, I have lots of friends from Ukraine. I just don't want a war. Nobody wants a war."

In November 2017, Ovechkin announced the creation of Putin Team, a social movement in support of the Russian president.

"I'm sure there are many of us who support Vladimir Putin! So let's unite and show everyone a strong and united Russia!" he said in a statement at the time.

An archived version of the Putin Team's website says that the movement is a "team of people for whom actions are more important than words. Every victory, big or small, makes our country stronger."

Many famous Russians, including hockey players Evgeni Malkin, Ilya Kovalchuk and Pavel Bure; former Donetsk People's Republic head Artyom Zhoga; singer Polina Gagarina; and pro-war bloggers Alexander Kots and Zakhar Prilepin all joined the movement at various times.

The Putin Team was ostensibly involved in "strengthening Russia" and showing support for Putin, but it's unclear if it ever participated in any major projects.

On Feb. 25, 2022, one day after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Ovechkin told reporters, "Obviously, it's a hard situation. I have lots of friends in Russia and Ukraine and it's hard to see the war. I hope soon it's going to be over and there's going to be peace in the whole world."

Asked if he still supported Putin, he responded: "Well, he is my president, but I am not in politics. I am an athlete, and you know, how I said, I hope everything is going to be done soon. It's [a] hard situation right now for both sides ... I'm not in control of this situation."

Since April 2022, the Putin Team's website has been inaccessible.

Even now, Ovechkin's Instagram avatar is a photo of himself and Putin.

When asked in January if a Russian chasing Gretzky's record created any "awkwardness,"

league commissioner Gary Bettman told the press: “He plays for the Washington Capitals, as far as we're concerned. He's not playing for Russia... It's a testament to him and the Capitals and that's what it's all about.”

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