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Is “This Guy” a Dictator? On the Morality of Evaluating Russian Democracy under Vladimir Putin

Amir Azarvan

Abstract

Is it morally defensible to single Russian president, Vladimir Putin, out as a dictator? The popular impression that he is a dictator has been used to legitimize a dangerously adversarial policy towards what a U.S. Army general described as “the only country on earth...that could “destroy the United States.” I argue that this perception is in some ways misleading, and has contributed to escalating tensions with Russia, which is both unnecessary and harmful both to Russia and the U.S.

Introduction

Vladimir Putin is a dictator. He's not a leader. Anybody who thinks otherwise doesn't know Russian history and they don't know Vladimir Putin. Hillary Clinton knows exactly who this guy is. John McCain said, I look in his eyes and I see KGB.

Senator Tim Kaine (D-VA)

On five separate occasions during the 2016 vice presidential debate, Senator Kaine referred to Russian President Vladimir Putin as a dictator (White, 2016). Such remarks, expressed by those who form what I call the “American anti-Putin community” (or AAPC), are becoming increasingly commonplace in American politics. The popular impression that Russian President Vladimir Putin is a dictator has been used to legitimize a dangerously adversarial policy towards what a U.S. Army general described as “the only country on earth” ... that could “destroy the United States” (*KyivPost*, 2015). I argue that this perception is morally indefensible, misleading, and has contributed to escalating tensions with Russia, which is unnecessary and harmful both to the United States and Russia.

In the next two sections, I will introduce my working definition of “dictatorship” and will explain the moral framework employed in this study. I then situate (in the following sections, Democracy and Human Rights in Post-Soviet Russia and What Public Opinion Can Tell Us) the Putin regime in its relevant context by examining trends in the areas of human rights repression, democratic change, corruption, and public opinion. Next, I address (in Sincerity or National Security: Must We Choose?) the question of whether Russia poses a threat to U.S.

national security, in which case some may argue that our moral requirements in foreign policy ought to be relaxed. I conclude (in *A Call for International Empathy*) with a brief summary, as well as the suggestion that a foreign policy that is more ethical *and* beneficial to our national security may depend on our willingness to acquire greater international empathy.

Defining Dictatorship

There are political contexts in which certain words connote far more than - or, in some cases, express something quite different from - what their denotative meanings indicate. This is certainly true of the term dictatorship. While it formally denotes “a form of government in which one person or a small group possesses absolute power without effective constitutional limitations” (“Dictatorship”, 2017), modern society takes it to mean a lot more. In its contemporary usage, dictatorship can be defined as a political regime characterized by “extraconstitutional authority seized for selfish purposes and exercised over unwilling subjects” (Harris, 1938). In this paper, my use of the term corresponds to the latter, more clearly pejorative meaning.

The Moral Starting Point of My Analysis

Before continuing, I wish to state a key working assumption informing this investigation: *In foreign affairs, we should act in accordance with our stated moral values as consistently as possible.* I write “as consistently as possible” because there may be occasions on which our values are in tension with one another, and we are forced to prioritize among these conflicting values. For instance, one might argue that although leaders should not generally mask their true intentions while conducting foreign policy, it may be necessary to make insincere appeals to democracy in order to generate public support for a policy of hostility towards a country that poses - or is perceived as posing - a national security threat. In other words, when leaders are compelled to choose between sincerity and security, the latter ought to be preferred (be that as it may, I will briefly explain why I do not believe that Russia actually does pose such a threat to the United States).

Also, given the moral requirement to apply our values consistently, we must, if we wish to determine whether this requirement is being met, be able to systematically compare cases, in this case, between Putin and his contemporaries and/or his predecessor. Acting on the belief that Putin is a dictator is, therefore, morally indefensible unless we are willing to behave similarly towards other leaders who are equally or more dictatorial.¹ I suggest that each time we condemn President

¹ Suppose I unfriended someone on Facebook on the grounds that he supported Donald Trump—whom I depicted as a vile racist—while remaining friends with those who are just as or more openly supportive of him. Aside from the question of whether my characterization of the president is accurate, most people would rightfully view my inconsistency as morally problematic.

Putin as a dictator we open ourselves up to the moral criticism that we are not applying our professed moral principles in a consistent manner.

As for the particular bases of comparison that I will be examining, I have chosen to focus on trends in the following areas: human rights repression, democratic consolidation, corruption, and public opinion. I will explain how these areas relate to the connotative meaning of dictatorship discussed earlier.

Democracy and Human Rights in Post-Soviet Russia

Human Rights Under Putin

In its most recent yearly report, Amnesty International (AI) painted a grim picture of human rights conditions in Russia, marked by increased restrictions on civil liberties, torture, and other ill-treatment in prisons, failures to respect the rights of refugees and asylum seekers, and abuses in Chechnya, Ukraine, and Syria (Amnesty International, 2017). Since 2004, the country has been classified as “not free” by Freedom House in its annual Freedom in the World report.² Human Rights Watch (HRW) puts the matter quite boldly: “Today, Russia is more repressive than it has ever been in the post-Soviet era” (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

This last statement is particularly germane to this discussion, as it points to a comparison. As I argued, it is necessary to be able to compare cases systematically in order to determine whether we are applying our values consistently across them. Qualitative reports issued by organizations like AI or HRW do not lend well to such comparisons. Fortunately, however, the Political Terror Scale (PTS) numerically codes annual human rights reports published by AI and the U.S. State Department (SD) according to systematic criteria.³ Countries are scored from 1-5, where 5 means that “terror has expanded to the whole population,” and that “the leaders of these societies place no limits on the means or thoroughness with which they pursue personal or ideological goals” (Political Terror Scale, 2016).

Have human rights’ conditions improved under Putin, or worsened? The answer depends on which series of coded reports one turns to. As Table 1 reveals, AI’s average score was higher in the first eight years of Putin’s presidency than over the corresponding length of time under Yeltsin - pointing to an increase in repression - while the SD’s score was lower.

Of course, the PTS is but one indicator of human rights repression, one that focuses on “personal integrity rights,” examples of which include political imprisonment, extrajudicial executions, torture, and disappearances. Among other categories of human rights (and time does not permit to exhaust all of them), it does not measure the repression of civil liberties. Under the latter category, press freedom merits special – but by no means – exclusive attention. Between 2002 (the

² To access Freedom in the World data, visit <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2017>

³ To access Political Terror Scale data, visit <http://www.politicalterror scale.org/Data/Download.html>

first year that Freedom House began collecting data on this variable) and 2016, Russia's press freedom score steadily worsened from 60-83 (100 being the worst possible score).⁴

Table 1: *Average Political Terror Scale Scores Under Presidents Yeltsin and Putin*

<i>Source of Coded Reports</i>	<i>Under Yeltsin (1992-1999)</i>	<i>Under Putin (2000-2007)⁵</i>
Amnesty International	3.4	4.1 <i>More repression</i>
U.S. State Department	4.1	3.9 <i>Less repression</i>

Source: Political Terror Scale.

One factor that is often emphasized concerning this trend is the murder of journalists. According to data provided by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), an American-based NGO, 24 journalists have been murdered under presidents Putin and Medvedev (as of May 28, 2017).⁶ While it ought to go without saying that one death is one too many, it is helpful to put this figure in a comparative context. A direct comparison would involve contrasting the number of murders during the length of Yeltsin's tenure analyzed by the CPJ with the number slain over the same length of time under Putin.⁷ The Yeltsin and Putin periods did indeed differ, but only by one life: 13 journalists were murdered under Yeltsin, and 14 under Putin. However, if the length of Yeltsin's tenure analyzed by the CPJ were contrasted with the Putin and Medvedev presidencies combined, we would discover that the yearly average number of journalists slain diminished, albeit slightly, from 1.6 to 1.4.

The American anti-Putin community (AAPC) will naturally be inclined to question the relevance of the latter comparison by noting that Yeltsin ruled during a very different, tumultuous period, in which all manner of socioeconomic and political evils were supposedly inevitable. But this seems to presuppose that Yeltsin does not bear much of the responsibility for the tumult itself, as well as its varied consequences. The difficulties of the 1990s were not, at least in their entirety, the necessary growth pains of transitioning from the Soviet political and economic model, but were to some extent the result of policies actively pursued by Yeltsin.

⁴ To access Press Freedom data, visit <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2016>

⁵ In 2015, the latest year in the PTS dataset, the AI variant of the PTS dropped to 3. Otherwise, neither the AI and SD score has changed from 4 since 2008.

⁶ Although the CPJ's database compiles all documented killings, I restrict my attention to murders. To access the CPJ's database, visit <https://cpj.org/killed/>

⁷ Thus, the periods investigated were 1/1/1992-December 30, 1999 (under Yeltsin), and December 31 2000-May 6, 2008 (under Putin). I included Putin's time as acting president in the latter period.

Indeed, as Stuckler and Basu (2013) point out, the dramatic increase in poverty and reduction in life expectancy witnessed in Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union “did not occur everywhere in the former Soviet sphere. Russia, Kazakhstan, and the Baltic states ... which adopted economic shock therapy programs ... experienced the worst rises in suicides, heart attacks and alcohol-related deaths” (para. 12).

By no means do I wish to suggest that journalist killings have ceased to be a problem, and it is to be admitted that a more thorough comparison would involve a careful examination of the circumstances of each documented murder. Having said that, the AAPC’s representation of the problem brings to mind the following hypothetical scenario. Imagine two pairs of friends. In each pair there is a drug addict. In the first pair, the addict’s friend is responsible for nurturing his addiction, or at least does little to free him from it. In the second, the friend is helping the addict slowly wean himself from his addiction. The AAPC tends to liken Putin to the addict’s friend in the first pair. Perhaps, however, it is time to consider the possibility that he is in certain regards comparable to the addict’s friend in the second.

Democratization Under Putin

To what extent is Russia governed democratically? To arrive at an answer, I relied upon a modified version of the Polity score, which is based on the openness and competitiveness of elections and institutional constraints on the chief executive’s power (Marshall, Gurr, & Jaggers, 2016). This measure takes on values ranging from -10 (strongly autocratic) to 10 (strongly democratic). As Figure 1 shows, Russia’s Polity score has never exceeded 6, and persisted at its most recently-recorded level of 4 since 2007 (see Figure 1).

Two points are worth noting with respect to this data. First, although Russia has, by Western standards, a very low Polity score, it is not ruled by an absolutely autocratic government (as are U.S. allies Bahrain, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia). Thus, if one remains faithful to the actual meaning of dictatorship, which, again, involves *absolute* political power, then it would be absurd to describe Russia’s government as dictatorial. Nor will it do to opt for “partial dictatorship,” as this term would be an oxymoron (perhaps “democratically challenged” is more fitting).

Second, while singling Putin out as a dictator seems to imply that his regime is more authoritarian than that of his U.S.-allied predecessor, the fact is that Russia’s Polity score has been higher under the former than under the latter. As Sakwa (2008) notes, “although the aim of Yeltsin’s reform was the creation of a capitalist democracy, his methods were divisive and on occasions flouted basic democratic norms and appeared to be an inverted form of the authoritarian order that he sought to overcome” (p. 49). And yet, as we will soon see, this fact does not appear to have invited stronger condemnations of the more “dictatorial” Yeltsin.

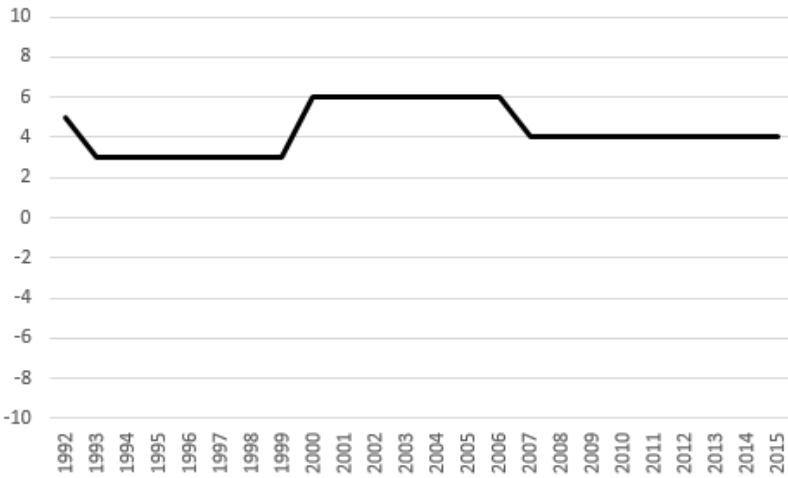


Figure 1. Regime Trends in Russia (1992-2015). Source: Polity IV Project.

Furthermore, one of the first things one notices upon reading Polity IV Country's Report (Center for Systemic Peace, 2010) is that its negative assessment of Russian democracy rests largely on appearances: "it *appears* as if the Unified Russia bloc is using its current situational advantages to effectively restrict competition and establish itself as a dominant party" (p. 5); "Although Putin's manipulation of the 2008 presidential elections did not directly violate the constitution, he did *appear* intent on circumventing the mechanisms that ensure competitive executive recruitment" (p. 2); and "[His] *apparent* indifference to democracy continues" (p. 2). Such appearances all too easily translate into objective facts in the minds of those who are predisposed to criticizing the Putin government.

But what is to be made of conclusions drawn by those assigned to monitor Russian elections? Do they not speak to the absence of genuine democracy in the country, despite the façade of electoral institutions? Although observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) concluded that the 2016 parliamentary vote "was more transparently administered than previous elections," it was marred by "an array of shortcomings" (Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 2016, para. 1). As for the most recent presidential election, the OSCE (2012) alleged that, in spite of the government's effort to improve electoral transparency, Putin's victory was predetermined.

Following Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland's (2010, p. 69) classificatory scheme, by which a regime is categorized as either democratic or dictatorial, one might conclude that Russia's recent electoral experiences demonstrate that the country's regime falls under the latter group. "For a regime to be democratic," they argue, "both the chief executive office and the legislative body must be filled by elections. Contestation occurs when there exists an opposition that has some chance of winning office as a consequence of elections" (Cheibub, Gandhi, & Vreeland, 2010, p. 69; see also Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub, & Limongi, 2000, p. 16). Such

“contestation” did not seem to have transpired in the latest presidential election. According to an OSCE observer, “there was no real competition and abuse of government resources ensured that the ultimate winner of the election was never in doubt” (Organization for Security & Cooperation in Europe, 2012, para. 6).

But even if one accepts Cheibub et al.’s dichotomous classification, it remains to be determined whether Russia is *less* democratic under Putin than under Yeltsin. As I have explained above, this, too, is a morally relevant issue. Although the OSCE did not monitor the 1996 presidential election, evidence suggests that it was no less problematically run. It was widely reported that Yelstin’s campaign “was secretly managed by three American political consultants who on more than one occasion allegedly received direct assistance from Bill Clinton’s White House” (Wilson, 2016, para. 4). Further, Russia’s notorious oligarchs stated on record that their objective was to get “Yeltsin a second term by any means necessary” (Shuster, 2012, para. 7). His victory is all the more suggestive given that his approval rating was initially at 6% at the start of his campaign; lower even than Joseph Stalin’s (Randolph, 1996).

A Question of Sincerity

Although the U.S. government, assisted by the media’s “generally uncritical coverage of U.S. foreign policy” (Hook, 2010; see also Aday, 2014), seems to have more or less successfully promoted the notion that Russia is being governed by a dictator, the United States has maintained friendly relations with a number of countries that are also deemed unfree (e.g., see Ritter, 2014). Several of these have even lower Freedom House scores than Russia. These countries, together with their parenthetically noted Freedom House scores, include the following: Azerbaijan (14), Bahrain (12), Ethiopia (12), Tajikistan (11), Saudi Arabia (10), Equatorial Guinea (8), and Uzbekistan (3).

This invites the charge that Russia’s real or perceived authoritarianism is merely a smokescreen, a ruse to legitimate a policy of hostility towards a country that is increasingly challenging U.S. hegemony. At a minimum, it does not appear that democracy promotion tops the list of the U.S. government’s foreign policy priorities, nor does it seem to be a top priority for the general American public (Drake, 2013). We have seen how Yeltsin can scarcely be described as a less “dictatorial” president than his successor. Nevertheless, the former’s U.S. counterpart “was strongly inclined not only to like Yeltsin but also to support his policies, in particular, his [supposed] commitment to Russian democracy” (United States Department of State, n.d.). Even after the bloody standoff with the Russian Duma in 1993, when “tanks set fire to a Parliament filled with civilians” (Cockburn, 1993, para. 6), President Clinton “vowed that the United States would not waver in its backing for the Russian President as he sought to restore order,” pinning the blame for the violence on Yeltsin’s political opponents (Jehl, 1993, para. 1).

Corruption in Russia

That I would dare to use corruption data in order to partially *redeem* Putin might leave the reader gasping for air in a fit of hysteric laughter. However, while Russia is consistently rated among the world's more corrupt countries in Transparency International's annually-updated Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), our indictment of Putin, in particular, appears to presuppose that corruption overall has *worsened* under him.⁸ However, this does not appear to be the case. On a 1-10 scale, whereby the higher the country's score, the less corrupt it is, Russia's average CPI score was no lower during the first four years of Putin's presidency than under the last four years of his predecessor's, but was in fact slightly higher (see Figure 2).⁹

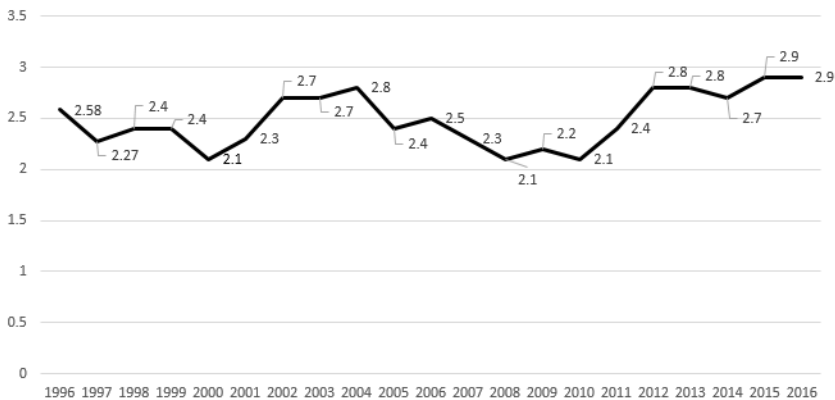


Figure 2. Russia's Corruption Perception Index Score (1996-2016). Source: Transparency International.

The AAPC may prefer to stress the fact that Russia was near the bottom 25% of countries in the 2016 CPI, but it is at least equally helpful to point out that its most recent score – while still comparatively low - was its highest on record. “The Yeltsin period,” Sakwa (2008) argues, “was one of rampant corruption, despite several desultory attempts to halt the frenzy” (p. 165). Yet, as far as CPI scores are concerned, the most that Putin could be faulted for, perhaps, is not presiding over a more rapid and steady improvement.

⁸ To access Corruption Perceptions Index data, visit

http://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2016

⁹ The scores were 2.45 and 2.41, respectively. The reason for this particular temporal comparison is that Transparency International's data covers only the last four years of Yeltsin's presidency.

What Public Opinion Can Tell Us

To reiterate its connotative meaning, the term dictatorship signifies absolute power over unwilling subjects. To call Putin a dictator is, therefore, to imply that he governs against the will of the Russian people. The best way to test this claim – the best available means of ascertaining the willingness of a people to be ruled by a particular regime – is to consult public opinion data.

According to the World Values Survey, no more than 45% of Russians believed that having a democracy was a good thing,¹⁰ lending credence to the notion that Russians are not culturally prepared for a democracy.¹¹ However, this figure jumped to 66% in 2006, and increased by another percentage point in 2011. In other words, it appears that a democratic culture is developing, even if Russians still trail behind Americans in their support for democracy. Interestingly, while Russia's Polity score dropped from 6 to 4 in 2007, Russians' perception of their level of democracy *increased* somewhat between 2006 and 2011. It could, therefore, be argued that Russians' conception of democracy differs from that on which traditional measures are based.

Table 2 displays less encouraging data. Americans express much greater confidence in their justice and law enforcement systems. The difference between Russians and Americans is especially stark with respect to the police. Twice as many Americans as Russians have had confidence in their police. With respect to the judiciary, Russia's already low level of confidence declined from 2006-2011.

Table 2: *Institutions in which Confidence is Comparatively Lower in Russia*

<i>Confidence in the Police</i>					<i>Confidence in the Justice System</i>				
	2006		2011			2006		2011	
	Russia	US	Russia	US		Russia	US	Russia	US
A great deal or quite a lot	32	68	32	68	A great deal or quite a lot	36	55	32	68
Not very much or not at all	64	29	64	30	Not very much or not at all	58	41	64	29

Source: World Values Survey.

¹⁰ To put this in perspective, the comparable figure in the United States was 85%.

¹¹ For a critique of this view, see *Out of Order: Russian Political Values in an Imperfect World*, by Ellen Carnaghan, 2007, University Park, PA: Penn State University Press.

However, Russians have had greater (and growing) confidence in their national government and legislature than Americans (see Table 3). Of course, in both Russia and the United States, confidence in each of these institutions falls below a majority. Nevertheless, while there is no cause for celebration in either country, the implicit assumption that Russians are more politically dissatisfied than their American counterparts is by no means entirely correct.

Table 3: *Institutions in which Confidence is Comparatively Higher in Russia*

Confidence in the National Government					Confidence in the Parliament				
	2006		2011			2006		2011	
	Russia	US	Russia	US		Russia	US	Russia	US
A great deal or quite a lot	43	37	47	33	A great deal or quite a lot	27	20	31	20
Not very much or not at all	52	57	47	65	Not very much or not at all	63	75	59	77

Source: World Values Survey.

If the data presented in Table 3 on perceptions of confidence speaks to the willingness to be governed, and if such willingness is understood to be a defining trait of a dictatorship, then, in particular regards to these two political institutions, the inescapable conclusion is that the United States bears this dictatorial trait in greater measure than Russia.

The Popularity of President Putin

Special attention must be devoted to the notorious popularity of President Putin himself. For having cited Putin’s remarkably high level of support among Russians, President Trump was mocked by his predecessor:

“When the interviewer asks him [Trump], ‘why do you support this guy [Putin]?’ He says, ‘He is a strong guy. Look, he’s got an 82 percent poll rating.’ Well, yes, Saddam Hussein had a 90 percent poll rating. If you control the media and you’ve taken away everybody’s civil liberties, and

you jail dissidents, that's what happens," Obama claimed, addressing the crowd at a Hillary Clinton campaign event in Philadelphia (RT, 2016, para. 3).

While suspecting that the Kremlin's "tight control over the media" may influence Russian public opinion, Politifact (which cannot reasonably be accused of serving as a mouthpiece for either Trump or Putin) acknowledges that Trump correctly estimated Putin's popularity (Carrol, 2015). Even after adjusting for the "possibility that respondents have been lying to pollsters out of fear or social expectations," Western pollsters confirm that Putin's high public approval is not a myth (Carrol, 2015, para. 23). The truth is that Russians are happy under their president, at least much more so than Americans are under theirs. This adds another wrinkle to the claim that Putin governs an unwilling populace and is, on that account, a dictator.

Sincerity or National Security: Must We Choose?

Not only is "dictator talk" misleading, but it arguably renders our country less secure. Earlier, I noted that there may be occasions on which we are compelled to choose among conflicting values. While it is generally true that we should not employ double standards in the area of foreign policy, might it be necessary to do so in order to generate public support for hostile actions against a supposedly aggressive Russia? While Keene (2017) believes that Putin is "a modern-day Russian czar," he is skeptical of the claim that he heads "a regime wedded to an ideology bent upon dominating and transforming the world into its own image" (para. 8). Indeed, Putin's military actions have been restricted to areas in which there is a large population of ethnic Russians or Russian citizens. While these actions may undermine America's hegemony in the region, they do not appear to pose a threat to its *national security*, at least no more so than the West's vilification of Putin has done. According to Cohen (2017), "demonizing Putin is gravely endangering America" (para. 2). For one thing, "by treating the Russian president as a 'rogue' or 'outlaw' leader, it is ruling out Putin as an essential U.S. national security partner, which any Kremlin leader should be" (Cohen, 2017, para. 2).

Conclusion: A Call for International Empathy

While both sides of this debate may agree that Russia is not a posterchild for democracy, I have argued that ascribing the term "dictator" to Vladimir Putin is misleading and unnecessarily and dangerously polemical. The American public should therefore resist the demonizing narrative put out by the AAPC. We should abandon our self-righteous views on Russia, as well as other countries whom (we are told) are our adversaries. Rather than viewing Russia's actions through a Manichean prism of world politics, we should opt for a more sophisticated and less manipulative lens, one that places these actions in their appropriate and continuously evolving contexts. Ignoring the historic, socioeconomic, and political

contexts in which Russian behavior is situated may entail the effect of reducing public empathy for our (supposed) adversary; facilitating the adoption of a simplistic view by which Russia's actions are attributed mainly to the evil that is believed to be inherent - or at least more pronounced - in it. Empathy requires the development of a deeper more nuanced understanding of others that certainly goes beyond the overt demonization that has often characterized U.S.-Russia relations. Research has demonstrated the positive role of empathy in resolving interpersonal conflict (e.g., see Navidian, Bahari, Kermansaravi, 2014). Future studies should explore its potential in mitigating conflicts at the international level.

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