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## Transcript

# Who is Vladimir Putin?

## Fiona Hill

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### **Edward Lucas:**

Good evening and welcome to Chatham House.

I could give a long introduction to Fiona Hill. But as we've only got an hour, I'm going to skip that. I reckon if you don't know who Fiona is, you wouldn't be here.

As some of you will know, Fiona was the national intelligence officer for Russia for the United States. Obviously all reference to that is scrubbed from her book, where there is an endorsement on the back from Sir John Scarlett. But when you get deep into the footnotes, you sometimes get a little whiff of some of the things that perhaps she can only allude to.

For those of you who haven't read the book, it's about the six faces or the six facets of Mr Putin's character. You call him the 'operative in the Kremlin', but he's more than just an operative. Fiona, can you just give us, briefly in a few minutes, what those six are and why you decided to choose those rather than some of the others?

### **Fiona Hill:**

The reason for coming up with multi-faceted personalities for Putin, was – I wrote this book with a co-author, so when I say 'we' I'm not doing the royal we, I'm actually doing me and another author, just to make that clear – that we felt there were so many single-dimensional portraits of Putin that had been written already. Many of them, some of you will have read. There are quite a lot of books out there and one might say, 'why another Putin book?' or 'why another book about Russia at this period?' Because we felt that there were a lot of threads missing to the story of how someone who had been a KGB officer and perhaps a not particularly successful one, and had been a deputy mayor of St Petersburg – so always someone who was a number two or someone who was in the shadows – could suddenly end up being at the top of the Russian political system, to stay there for so long and to actually be quite popular in a Russian context. We felt that needed some degree of explanation.

So the book is really a contextual biography of Putin. We decided not to go down every rabbit hole of every story and rumour about Putin or try to pick up every biographical thread, because there's so much that is really unverifiable about this gentleman. Even in my old position that Ed talked about, it wasn't always possible to verify some of this information.

So we decided instead to write about the things we do know about: the context in which Mr Putin operated. Hence, in many respects, 'the operative in the Kremlin'. And things that we know about Russia and the Soviet Union and the time in which he grew up, he had the formative experiences of his career and his life. So it's really a book about the Soviet Union and Russia with Mr Putin at the centre of this.

We started looking at many of the things that Putin says and the things that he has done, and as I said, the actual context of events around him. After that, we came up with what we decided to call six real identities of Mr Putin. This is also playing on the fact – as you'll see from the cover of the book, which for any of you who grew up in the United Kingdom in the 1970s, you might remember Mr Benn, the cartoon character. It might be lost on a few people. But it was my favourite cartoon when I was a kid.

Mr Benn, who assumes many costumes and has costume-appropriate adventures, and always solves a problem for the people that he encounters. Strangely enough, Mr Benn – you can go back now and look online, there's a whole Mr Benn fan site that's still out there – had a lot of adventures that are very strangely similar to Mr Putin's. He was a deep sea diver. He was a fire fighter. He was a race car driver. He was a conservationist, a big game hunter; I could go on.

In any case, we picked up on these ideas of these guises, these costumes that Mr Putin puts on to connect with various parts of the population, and then took it from there that there were actually some real identities. Just very quickly, we picked six, and people can quibble with these, and they're laid out in the book.

Three of them are identities that one could ascribe to a whole range of Russian politicians of the same generation as Mr Putin: people who are just entering their 60s now who were born in the 1950s and then grew up in the latter part of the Soviet Union and really came into their political positions in the 1990s.

The first of these three identities, the statist, could really describe a large number of Russians who believed, at the end of the 1990s, that the state was in a ruinous situation and needed to be restored. So that first identity is Mr Putin as the restorationist. He was a restorationist politician, someone who basically came in to say he was going to strengthen the Russian state again after a period of decay, and that he was going to basically strengthen the institution of the presidency. Again, this was a larger consensus across the Russian political elite at the very end of the 1990s.

The second identity is related to this, which we've called history man, which is how Putin, in restoring the state, has delved back into Russian history, going right back into the tsarist era. There's still Soviet elements to the Russian history that he touches upon today, but it's really a tsarist revival that Putin has presided over and one in which he tries to identify and to draw direct links between himself and reformers and major political figures of the tsarist era, including most notably Pyotr Stolypin, the last prime minister under the Romanovs who was assassinated in 1911.

And it was on the hundredth anniversary of Stolypin's assassination when Putin made the big announcement that he was going to come back into the presidency to basically finish the period of reforms that he had started off, making a link back to Stolypin, who was one of the last great reformers.

The third identity is the survivalist, which picks up on the notion that many Russians have of Russia being the great state that survives every calamity – war, invasion, great deprivation, great political upheavals. Putin himself is the child of survivors of the Leningrad siege, the great blockade by the Nazis in World War II in which almost a million people of Leningrad died. He's the only surviving child of the family.

And he's really taken this survival instinct, which is one of not just self-preservation but always preparing for the worst, to great heights as president. Not only did Putin pay off all of the debts that the Russian Federation had accumulated in the Soviet period and in the 1990s, seeing this as important to the survival of the state over the longer term – wish the United States would pay attention to this right now, we're all very worried about the debt situation. Mr Putin, that's what he tackled as soon as he came into the presidency.

But he also built up a whole host of material reserves. In fact, he restored a reserves system that Stalin had set up in the period of autarky in the 1930s to protect the Soviet Union against any calamity, natural or man-made. Anything from oil and gas reserves, fuel reserves, tents, baby food, medicines, you name it, so that everyone would have a chance at survival. And now, having built up large currency reserves, after paying off the debts, he's also stashing away gold bullion. So he obviously knows something that we don't know about currency volatility at the moment.

The third set of identities, which are a little bit more unique to Putin; the first of these is the outsider. Putin was an outsider to the Soviet system, in fact. He wasn't just from the second city of Leningrad; his parents were not part of the intelligentsia, they were not part of the nomenklatura, the Soviet hierarchy. His parents came from very humble origins. He was even an outsider when he

was recruited to the KGB in the 1970s. He joined as part of a cohort in the KGB called the Andropov levy.

This is when Yuri Andropov was trying to stir things up in the KGB to deal with the dissident movement that had emerged in the 1970s, drawing on his own experiences of having seen upheavals and revolutions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and deciding that they needed to bring people who were outside the normal recruitment channels who might have some fresh thinking and might be able to help them deal with some of the problems.

Putin was then not exactly on a fast track through the KGB hierarchy. He kept getting outsider postings. He was in Dresden in the 1980s, which put him not just outside of the Soviet Union, but outside of the mainstream in Germany. But also, outside of some of the big developments at home. He was posted to Dresden between 1985 and 1990 and he actually missed perestroika and glasnost, which may be a significant factor in his biography that we can discuss.

Then from being the outsider, the fifth identity is free marketeer. This really describes the process of when Putin came back from Dresden to a Leningrad that was morphing into independent St Petersburg under Mayor [Anatoly] Sobchak and became the deputy mayor. St Petersburg was the epitome of the wild east at the time. It was the city where all of the imports and exports out of the Russian Federation were taking place, where new businesses were being set up. There was a lot of wheeling and dealing.

Putin was in charge of overseeing the establishment of new businesses, in which sometimes the city government would take a stake, and also, all of the new joint ventures that were set up with the Finns and the Germans and all of the investors that were flocking into St Petersburg in that period. St Petersburg gave Putin an appreciation for a very specific kind of market capitalism, one in which vulnerabilities and connections were the main glue of the relationships. There wasn't really entrepreneurship or free market enterprise in the way that we would have thought about this.

Putin, during that time, his job was also to target businessmen, to make sure that they came through with their parts of the deals to the city, to make sure they paid their taxes, to make sure that they delivered goods. Part of that was done by collecting compromising financial and other information on the companies, keeping tabs of who had paid their taxes and who had done what with whom and when they'd done it.

When he came to Moscow in 1996, he was brought there initially to do a similar kind of thing, to keep tabs on the oligarchs, the biggest businessmen

of all, to try to figure out how to stop them from fighting with each other and preying on the Russian state. This was in 1996 when many of you will remember, [Boris] Yeltsin had engaged in the notorious loan for shares deal to get himself re-elected in the presidential election of June of that year. By late 1996, there was a real feeling that the state was being pulled apart by everyone who had acquired assets as part of that deal.

Then the final identity is the identity of the case officer, the role that Putin had, the biggest role that he had in his career. We don't know exactly what he did in the KGB for the 15 years that he was there, but we can have some idea, again by looking at the nature of the KGB in this period. He probably did a little bit of investigations, maybe some collection, a lot of collection of information. But he may – even if he didn't do it directly, he certainly would have been aware of how to recruit and run agents in various jobs that he most likely had in this period.

But there are two things that Putin himself singles out that he learned as a case officer. He talks about working with people – in Russian, *rabota s lyudmi* – which has multiple meanings. Obviously manipulating people as well as working one-on-one and making connections and relationships and recruiting people. And then working with and processing information. He's very proud of those two skills that he acquired while he was there.

Those are really the hallmarks of most of his activity, as we talk about 'the operative in the Kremlin', of how he has operated once he got into the Kremlin. He spends an awful lot of time trying to figure out how to manipulate people to get them to do what he wants to do in highly orchestrated settings. I've taken part in some of them myself, the Valdai Discussion Club, in which groups of experts and journalists – some of whom I see, fellow Valdai travellers in the audience – who have been invited for special encounters with Putin, in which we get to ask a question and he transmits information back with us – a large amount of information that he has processed.

And then there's his call-in sessions, which I'm sure many of you have seen, where he has for weeks on end questions phoned in from all the way around the country and legions of people who process these questions, and then come up with the questions that exemplify most the kind of things that are on people's minds. And then for hours on end, on a live television show, he responds to people's questions on all issues, trivial to the large issues of state, from all the way across the country.

This is how he shows that he's in charge of all the information, that he's on top of everything that is happening in the country, and how he can relate the

work of the case officer, which was always more one-on-one, to the mass level.

So those are the identities. And we lay those out in the book. And then we try in the last couple of chapters in the book to show how those are fed into the system that Putin operates within and tries to operate. And then how this may have fed into his responses, or lack of responses in some cases, to what happened in 2011 and 2012 when he decided that he was coming back into the presidency and discovered it wasn't going to be quite as easy as he had clearly anticipated.

### **Edward Lucas:**

It struck me that there's a couple of other identities that one might have also picked up. One is Putin the celebrity, the sort of manufactured product of a sophisticated PR machine. You alluded in the beginning to all the different public stunts he's done, and he's really acknowledged in his conversation with the journalist Masha Gessen that he thinks up some of these himself. That's one interesting aspect, although maybe one that is beginning to grate a bit on Russian public opinion. People don't seem to like it as much.

The other one is – we're on the record here, so we obviously have to be a little bit careful about what we say, particularly those of us who have had dealings with our wonderful English libel courts – I suppose one could, if one was being negative, say that there's a certain amount of corruption in Russia and a certain amount of organized crime. If one was being very negative, one might even say would it be worth considering the idea of Putin as the mafia boss?

### **Fiona Hill:**

Well we do actually in the book make an allusion to 'mafia don or CEO?' We talk about how Putin himself likes to style his role as being the CEO of Russia. When he was my colleague, Clifford Gaddy, who co-authored the book, became notorious back in 2006 for some work that he did on Putin's dissertation – some of you might remember this – in which Cliff and another colleague discovered when they actually managed to get hold of a copy of Mr Putin's dissertation, which is not a great thrilling read, I have to say, like anyone's dissertation... I can't even begin the full title; it's so long and ponderous.

Although we discovered actually that there's a translation of it into English by a Swedish translator that was done not so long afterwards in a rather – if anybody wants to go out and look for it – in a rather obscure law journal. But anyway, if anybody *really* wants to read it...

It relies very heavily, shall we say, on a book written by two US university professors on strategic planning. And the essence of this book on strategic planning lays out how a CEO, and in fact all the different members of a key management team of a corporation, should really think about the long-term trajectory of that corporation.

It's very clear that Putin has tried to apply some of this information, or some of these theories, to his management of the state. It's about planning in times of uncertainty, which of course is what Putin is all about. You can't control the outside world, so you have to make provisions. So some of the ideas of building up the reserves, preparing for the worst case scenarios, come clear out of this.

The big difference in this text book is that every member of the key management team should have some degree of management responsibility and strategic planning. But Putin has clearly accrued most of that to himself, leaving everybody else more in an implementer role. So he didn't pay full attention to this textbook. But this textbook was clearly translated by the KGB for the academy sometime in the 1980s. So it's pretty obvious that Putin would have seen it at some point in that kind of context.

So Putin has this image of himself as a CEO of Russia Inc, the large multi-vector economic conglomerate that Russia is with all the key strategic assets, but obviously pretty oil- and gas-heavy. But there are also some distinct elements of the other phenomenon of the mafia don. There's a lot of information that's out there by many other authors – Vadim Volkov, Alena Ledeneva, who many of you will know – writing about what St Petersburg was like in the 1990s, when there was a great deal of co-opting under the rubric of cleaning up of organized crime in the city.

It's also very clear that the KGB and the FSB, in the periods that Putin was still active and in the periods where he may have been more in the reserve, was very set on cleaning up the role of the so-called 'thieves in law' in the various penal colonies and trying to break their dominance of the economic system. In many cases, they seem to have co-opted, press-ganged, some of those people into the services of the state in terms of applying leverage.

We didn't get into that in the book – but there are a lot of things that have been written about that – but we do certainly allude to the tendency of



behaving in that manner, particularly in the way of coercing and blackmailing many of the top business people to make sure that they toe the line and certainly follow the rather heavy-handed directives, sometimes, of Mr Putin as the CEO.

Now, you asked about also the celebrity aspects of this. As you mentioned, Masha Gessen, a great article recounting her strange encounter with Mr Putin in the Kremlin when she biked to a meeting having had an unexpected phone call on her cell phone from Mr Putin. She is a journalist who wrote another biography of Putin, *The Man Without a Face*, that came out last March. And she became a part of the story in her own right in a major way. The book is rather a personal account of Putin, because Masha has become a figure also in the Russian opposition and most recently has taken over the helm of Radio Liberty. So she's someone who's very much in the spotlight.

And in that kind of role as being a journalist – she was actually the journalist of a nature magazine and she'd been sacked for not covering Putin's microlight hang-gliding with the cranes. I think everybody will probably remember that, which is one of his last infamous stunts.

She'd refused to send someone to cover this, she'd been sacked, and Putin, as the head of the nature conservancy of Russia, had got wind that she'd been sacked. But I don't think had really fully processed that she was also the Masha Gessen who'd written the biography, or didn't perhaps care, and decided that he would have her come to the Kremlin, ostensibly to make sure she got her job back.

During this strange encounter that she had also with the editor of this journal there, he confessed that he staged a lot of the stunts himself. Because what he wanted to do was mobilize people – that these were all carefully crafted when he realized that something was being neglected. So people's support for conservation, people's support for nature; it's rather, again, conservative in many different aspects of the term. As part of his extolling of the greatness of Mother Russia, part of it is obviously being heavily invested in Russia's great natural wealth, not just its natural resources.

He wanted to make sure that people were shepherding those resources in the correct way, and this is why he was seen tranquillizing tigers and trying to tag whales and fly with cranes and all the other things. And going off to beautiful parts of the Altai Mountains and wading in rivers shirtless with Prince Albert, all kinds of things that he'd been doing. Part of this was to lend some of his celebrity to causes that he has decided are very important to him.