

**VLADIMIR PUTIN: AN ASPIRANT METTERNICH?****By Mitchell A. Orenstein**

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As Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered his military into Ukraine in 2014, people were quick to compare him to Adolph Hitler, whose annexation of Austria and invasions of Czechoslovakia and Poland set off World War II. Hillary Clinton commented in March 2014 that if Putin's justification for taking Crimea to protect ethnic Russians sounded familiar, it was because, "it's what Hitler did back in the '30s. . . . Germans by ancestry were in places like Czechoslovakia and Romania and other places, [and] Hitler kept saying they're not being treated right. I must go and protect my people." Since that time Ukrainian Euromaidan supporters have published dramatic images of Putin as "Putler," mashups that have trended wildly on social media and become a staple of public protests.

Yet, Putin's approach to world affairs is more similar to that of another Austrian, Prince Klemens von Metternich. Like Metternich, the dominant force in post-Napoleonic era diplomacy, Putin is a conservative imperialist who seeks to create a balance or "concert" between the great powers in Europe, while suppressing liberal democratic politics and the aspirations of small nations. By comparing Putin's worldview with that of Metternich, one can gain more insight into Putin's approach to world affairs than can be understood from much contemporary debate. Putin has indeed returned to 19th century diplomacy in 21st century Europe, so it makes sense to brush up on the major figures of that time and how their strategies played out. No one was more influential in shaping European diplomacy in the 19th century than the great man of Austria, Prince Klemens von Metternich.

Putin's career, like Metternich's, was defined by the trauma of democratic revolution. Metternich, the scion of a noble diplomatic family, had just begun university in Strasbourg, France when the French revolution broke out in 1789. In 1790, he was unable to return to university and forced to transfer. Metternich sympathized greatly with the sufferings of the nobility in France. Like the great British conservative Edmund Burke, Metternich saw the revolution as a calamity. He sought throughout his career to restore the grandeur of monarchical Europe over the challenges posed to it by radical democracy, liberal nationalism, and constitutional government.

Similarly, Putin's worldview was shaped by his early career as KGB officer in Dresden, East Germany, where he experienced the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disruption caused by democratic revolutions in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. While Putin rose to power in the Yeltsin years, he came to believe in the restoration of the former empire and to oppose the disruption caused by democracy. Putin has called the collapse of the Soviet Union the greatest geopolitical catastrophe in history and he regards democracy in Russia as an existential threat. He supports conservative authoritarian governments of the smaller states, including Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus, and refuses to abide by the rule of law. He seeks to restore the grandeur of Russia.

In Metternich's time, the democratic turmoil of the French revolution, with its attacks on the church and nobility, were followed by the Napoleonic invasions, which sought to expand French domination of Europe under the guise of spreading democracy. As Austrian ambassador to France, Metternich tried to persuade Napoleon to leave off invading Austria, and when unsuccessful, helped to organize the triple and then quadruple alliance that ultimately stopped Napoleon and forced him

into exile. One of Metternich's key allies was Tsar Alexander I of Russia, along with Prussia and the United Kingdom.

Putin tends to see the expansion of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as Napoleonic in their ambitions. Democracy is not peaceful, in this view, but wildly messianic and territorially expansionist. This time, it is not the multi-national armies of Napoleon threatening to cross the Berezin River, but the multi-national European Union and NATO – backed by the US – that promise to convert Russia and its allies to democracy at the barrel of a gun. This explains why Russia's defense strategy emphasizes threats emanating from the West.

Metternich's greatest achievement, after helping to defeat Napoleon, was to create and manage a balance of power system in Europe for more than 30 years. In 1806, he was appointed Austrian Foreign Minister (he formally assumed the office only in 1809) and in 1821 Chancellor. He dominated Austrian statecraft for a generation. He organized the Congress of Vienna that established a post-Napoleonic order in Europe that lasted from 1815 to 1848. The Congress of Europe, as it became known, rested on a series of accords between the monarchical rulers of Europe's great empires and states, mainly Russia, Prussia, Austria, the United Kingdom, and France.

Managing Europe's complex affairs through frequent meetings, the Congress managed to ensure relative peace by restraining the empires' territorial ambitions and combining to tamp down democratic and national aspirations, such as the rise of Greek nationalism, agitation for an independent Poland, or Italian self-rule. Some have lauded the Congress of Europe for protecting the peace in Europe for more than 30 years. Others have criticized it for stifling growing demands for democracy and national autonomy that erupted across Europe throughout this period, culminating in the liberal revolutions of 1848, when Metternich, the architect of the Congress system, was forced to resign.

Vladimir Putin is only an aspirant Metternich, in this sense. While he shares Metternich's view of the need for a balance of power system in Europe, and in November unveiled a monument to Alexander I, the Russian Tsar who worked with Metternich to form the Congress of Europe, Putin has been unable to impose a similar system himself. Although, it must be said that this has not stopped him from trying. It was notable that throughout the Ukraine crisis, Putin disparaged the national aspirations of the Ukrainian people and opposed direct negotiations between Russia and Ukraine. He sought instead to resolve the conflict through great power talks with Germany, France, the UK, and the US. This, he believes, is how peace can and should be achieved. The rest of Europe, which respects national self-determination, finds Putin's thinking archaic. Yet, since 2008, Russia has explicitly advocated for a "new security architecture" in Europe based on a version of Metternich's balance of power system.

Russian proposals for a balance of power security architecture in Europe arose suddenly in 2008. In June 2008, then President Dmitry Medvedev made a set of proposals for a new European security architecture that surprised and confused the West. Medvedev advocated doing away with NATO (and all other security alliances) and replacing them with a principled legal agreement to resolve all conflicts peacefully while respecting each country's security interests. These proposals were met with confusion in the West, which failed to understand how such an arrangement would actually work, viewed the lack of an institutional structure as bewildering, and opposed the "spheres of influence" thinking that seemed to lay behind it. Medvedev's proposals were rejected out of hand. They never got a serious hearing. However, they have resurfaced periodically as a concept in Russian track two diplomacy, most recently in Foreign Affairs where two independent Russian security experts mooted many of the same ideas in an article on what it would take to resolve the Ukraine crisis peacefully. The authors proposed a "grand bargain" in which NATO would be dissolved, replaced by a grand alliance with Russia and other Northern hemisphere powers.

Putin wants a new balance of power system in Europe for two reasons: first because he feels Russia is fundamentally excluded from the current security architecture of Europe, built on NATO and the EU, and second, because he believes Russia could play a major role in a new system, just as Metternich used the Congress of Europe to enhance Austria's power.

Putin rightly feels that Russia is excluded from the current European security system based on NATO and the EU. His hatred of NATO is well-known. He believes that NATO is an anti-Russian organization that has outlived its purpose. His hostility to the European Union is less well understood. For most in the West, the European Union is seen as the other lynchpin of peace and security in Europe. The EU has become the dominant political organization in Europe by forcing its members to resolve conflicts peacefully among themselves, to govern themselves democratically, and to respect the opinions of all member states, large or small.

Yet, while most European leaders have come to see the EU as indispensable, from Putin's point of view, the European Union is deeply flawed because it excludes Russia. Russia, under Putin, can never become as democratic as necessary to become a full member of the European Union – or of NATO. It will always, therefore, have second-class status. Russia's perspective

will never be fully respected on a continent governed by the EU. Therefore, the EU must go.

This explains why Putin seeks to undermine European unity at every turn and seeks to use Russia's relations with middle and weaker powers such as Italy, Hungary, Serbia, Bulgaria and Turkey against European Union policy. It explains why Putin supports anti-democratic and anti-EU politicians such as Hungary's Victor Orban in Hungary or France's Marine LePen, as well as funding a wide variety of anti-EU far-right parties. He wishes to weaken the EU, make it unable to fulfill its mission of peace and democracy, and ultimately replace it with a balance of power system.

Putin aspires to reshape Europe, as Metternich did after the Napoleonic wars, into a balance of power system in which Russia is not only included, but a central player that helps to construct the rules of the game. When Putin proposes a "new security architecture," he is actually recommending himself as the Metternich of a new Europe. His ideal is a Congress Europe in which great powers meet to resolve security issues on the continent while respecting and containing one another's spheres of influence. Putin is happiest when dealing directly with those whom he regards as the real leaders of Europe, the heads of the other great powers on the continent, Europe's big three. If we look at Putin as an aspirant Metternich, a lot of his seemingly hard to understand foreign policy behavior comes into clear view.

Putin's audacity has proven difficult for Western leaders to understand, but here it also makes sense to point to a few similarities between Putin's character and that of Metternich. Putin, like Metternich, considers himself a genius of international affairs and tends to regard most other leaders with contempt. They simply do not meet his standards of greatness. Putin's arrogance has been expressed, most recently, by his showing up late to important international meetings, such as his recent meeting in Milan with Angela Merkel or his early departure from the G20 summit in Brisbane. Famously conceited, Metternich once stated, "I cannot help telling myself twenty times a day, 'O Lord! How right I am and how wrong they are.'" One can imagine President Putin having similar sentiments. His body language in conversations with US President Barack Obama indicate a person who cannot bear that he is less powerful than a man he regards as possessing much lower abilities.

While the idea of a new balance of power Europe seems bizarre to many world leaders, who cannot understand why Putin supports 19th statecraft for a 21st century Europe, he does have some European politicians on his side. Marine LePen's Front Nationale, for instance, has long proposed replacing the Euro-Atlantic security system in Europe with a continental alliance between France, Germany, and Russia. This may be why she has been singled out as the European leader Putin most seeks to cultivate. He has treated Marine LePen's visits to Moscow with the pomp and circumstance of a state visit. And a Russian bank has agreed to finance LePen's Presidential election campaign to a tune of 40 million Euros. While many apologists have suggested that the bank was acting independently, no Russian bank gets involved in high politics without the support of the Kremlin. Indeed, the intermediary who helped set up the loan is a parliamentarian from Putin's party. Opinion polls show LePen is likely to enter the second round of voting in a run-off with one other candidate for President of France.

Marine LePen's idea of a grand alliance between Russia, France, and Germany is akin to the idea propounded by other European far-right groups of a "Europe of nations" to replace the detested European Union. The far right hates the liberal Brussels bureaucracy, which it portrays as elitist and distant from the average national voter. They recommend replacing Brussels with a much looser alliance of nation states guided by their own national priorities. The basic idea is similar to Metternich's Congress of Europe. The previous German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder also showed signs of agreeing to a balance of power Europe in which Germany would play a large role through a coalition with Russia. His dealings with Russia's Gazprom gave the impression that Germany could be bought off and drawn into a special relationship with Russia, ignoring its smaller neighbors. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has also fed Putin's belief that a balance of power Europe led by great leaders was within his reach.

There are a number of problems, however, with this vision of a "Europe of nations." In contrast with the European Union, it is far less institutionalized and therefore far more prone to failure. No mechanisms are prescribed for formal working out of policy issues, beyond discussions between great leaders. What if leaders are less than great? What if they differ from one another? Conflict can result, as it did during Metternich's time. Second, and perhaps more fundamental, every country's nationalism in Europe is another country's potential repression. This basic principle can be seen most vividly in Ukraine, where it is fine to talk of a "Europe of nations," but when it comes down to it, one must decide between Ukraine's national aspirations and Russia's. European countries are forced to take sides and the outcome looks a lot like the start of World War I. The idea of a "Europe of nations" is fundamentally unstable. At worst, it marks a direct path to war. At best, it enables the larger, more militarized nations to dominate the small. That is hardly the Europe that most Western leaders want.

Certainly not German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the now acknowledged leader of the European Union, who has cast her and Germany's lot with the EU. Germany under Merkel has not fallen for Putin's attempts to detach it from Europe and

encourage it to behave as a great power, dividing and conquering the smaller countries in between. Merkel, like most other European leaders, feel deeply that Europe has already found the right model for dealing with common crises on the continent of Europe. It is called the European Union. And, despite the EU's slow response to the global financial crisis, there are plenty of reasons to think that the EU managed to resolve this crisis, like others, with a high degree of success. Europe has reached its nadir and is on the upswing, while Russia with its dependence on the historically high oil prices of the past post-Iraq decade, is on the way down.

Putin faces fundamental problems in his attempt to create a 19th century balance of power in a 21st century Europe. A study of Metternich's fall from grace shows why.

Ultimately, Metternich's lifelong crusade against democratic liberalism and national self-determination in Europe came to naught. He was deposed during the 1848 revolutions in Europe that celebrated the national and constitutional aspirations of numerous states in Europe, such as Hungary, Poland, and a unified Germany – aspirations that had been suppressed under the Europe of empires. Some historians have questioned whether Metternich might have done more to accommodate these national and liberal aspirations within the Austrian empire and thereby prevent the debacle of the First World War. Yet, Metternich remained throughout his life a vigorous proponent of a conservative, imperial Europe dominated by a few great states: Austria, Prussia, Russia, the United Kingdom, and France. He saw the times changing, but was unable to change with the times.

President Putin may prove to be equally anachronistic. The political and economic system he has built in Russia cannot provide an adequate basis for the future of Europe. Russia's extraordinary oil wealth during the 2000s, a product of the Iraq war and other unusual circumstances, have masked the effects of his corrupt and kleptocratic system of rule. It is hard to see Putin's rise as a sign of anything but an unintended consequence of the failed pursuit of the war on terror and a global financial crisis that temporarily weakened the West.

The forces of democratic liberalism, national self-determination, and international cooperation remain strong. Neither Putin nor any other world leader has been able to propose an international system that would work better than the liberal internationalism of the West. Metternich's glorious Congress of Europe is nothing but an anachronism. It was a second-best solution at the time, a way of preventing war in a chaotic Europe at the expense of liberty. It has been surpassed by a European Union that provides peace, liberty, and common prosperity and that few leaders or most people will willingly abandon. Russia cannot be a core member, but its best hope is to undertake the difficult work of economic modernization and the steps towards political liberty that will enable Russia to integrate with the most successful European state system the continent has ever known. Just as France had to give up its Napoleonic territorial ambitions to join the Congress of Europe, Russia will have to give up its grander ambitions to join the European club.

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