Pulling the Curtain Back on the Kremlin

The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia
By Angus Roxburgh

THREE YEARS AFTER the United States and Russia decided to “reset” their troubled relationship, the friendship is on decidedly shaky ground. The US has accused Russia of aiding Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad’s crackdown, while Russia claims that America is arming Syrian rebels. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs slammed US Ambassador Michael McFaul, who was already enduring a rather chilly welcome, for being “unprofessional.” Russian President Vladimir Putin’s decision to skip last month’s summit of the Group of Eight (G-8) nations was widely perceived as a snub to US President Barack Obama, who hosted the event. Meanwhile, Putin’s presidential inauguration has been shadowed by opposition street protests, some the largest since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Angus Roxburgh’s The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia explores how we got to this point. He details the deterioration of the tentative romance between the Kremlin and the West, finding plenty of blame to go around. Roxburgh reminds us that when Putin first came to power in 2000, Western leaders greeted him with cautious optimism. Putin cozied up to British Prime Minister Tony Blair and charmed German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder. US President George W. Bush famously looked into Putin’s soul and liked what he saw. The very real differences between Russia and the US were exacerbated by serious communication failures. This is a problem that Roxburgh knows well. From 2006 to 2009 the long-time Russia hand and former BBC journalist served as a media consultant to the Kremlin. He provides fascinating, first-hand accounts of his attempts to convince Russian officials to engage the Western media or risk vilification and misunderstanding. The Kremlin largely ignored his counsel. At the same time, Roxburgh argues, the US sometimes saw what it wanted to see.

Roxburgh contends that America misunderstands Russia long before Putin took power. US President Bill Clinton, who enjoyed a good relationship with Putin’s predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, wanted to think that Russia was on the right path. It finally had freedom and democracy. There was an explosion of new business activity and ordinary citizens could travel and speak freely. It was a period of optimism and hope, right? Not exactly. Many Russians would rather describe it as “a decade of shame and humiliation,” marred by violent crime, economic inequality and deep insecurity. If the despair of the 1990s seems obvious now, it apparently wasn’t at the time. Most Western leaders, Roxburgh argued, failed to appreciate the “psychological turmoil” that Russians were going through. Putin, on the other hand, understood it all too well. Roxburgh writes, “It is the darker side of life in the 1990s — so easily overlooked in the West — that provided the fertile soil into which Putin would plant his ideas.”

Putin rose to power on the instinctual understanding that Russians craved strength, stability and respect. In particular, fighting terrorism became his “obsession.” This all helps explain Putin’s rather extraordinary ascent from relative anonymity to the country’s highest leadership position. He made his way from the KGB to first deputy mayor of St. Petersburg. Then, through what Roxburgh calls “a combination of luck and acquaintances,” he continued on to Moscow where he climbed the rungs of the Kremlin bureaucracy. In 1999 Yeltsin appointed Putin, then security chief, to prime minister on the day after a major Chechen invasion into the neighboring republic of Dagestan. Roxburgh writes that in the months that followed “Putin became the new face of Russia — tough, energetic and ruthless in responding to ever more audacious Chechen terrorist attacks.” Shortly after Yeltsin’s sudden resignation that same year, Putin became acting president of Russia. In 2000 he won the election in the first round.

Putin came to power in a relatively friendly mood. He announced that he wanted to resume relations with NATO and that he desired for Russia to be “part of Europe.” Prime Minister Blair suggested the creation of a new “NATO-Russia Council” that would bring Russia closer to the alliance without being an actual member. At the signing, Putin made a moving statement in which he expressed his exhaustion with “confrontation” with the world, and his longing for nothing more than Russia’s “voice to be heard, and for her national interests to be taken into account.”

Despite a few early stumbling blocks, Putin got off to a reasonably good start with the Bush administration. In 2001, after his first meeting with Putin in Slovenia, Bush uttered his famous phrase, “I looked the man in the eye. I found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy. We had a very good dialogue. I was able to get a sense of his soul.” After Sept. 11, Putin was the first world leader to call Bush to offer condolences and help. He later offered assistance to the US war in Afghanistan. “Russia, it seemed, was now totally aligned with the US in war on terror.”

According to Roxburgh, Putin’s muscle flexing belied a creeping sense of panic. Putin saw enemies all around him. He was “haunted by almost paranoid illusions of weakness and external danger.” In 2004, there was the horrific hostage crisis in Beslan. Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili was threatening to overstep his bounds. The last straw may have been Ukraine’s Orange Revolution, which ultimately instated the Western-backed Viktor Yushchenko, the Kremlin-backed sitting prime minister. Roxburgh describes the Orange Revolution as a “door slamming on Russia’s and the West’s efforts to understand one another.” The two countries’ interpretations couldn’t have been more different. The West saw the Revolution as a triumph of democracy. Putin viewed it as anti-constitutional coup in what was “almost a province of Russia.” He also believed the revolution was backed by Western forces.

While the US and Russia each have their side of the story, internationally Russia was losing the war of public opinion. This was a combined effect of Russia’s actions and the Kremlin’s failure to communicate. Roxburgh witnessed the latter during his time advising the Kremlin on its media strategy. He soon learned that Russian officials didn’t really understand how Western media worked. They wanted Roxburgh and the other advisors just to plant stories in the media. They also believed that a glowing op-ed in The Wall Street Journal, for example, could be bought for a certain price. Generally speaking, most officials avoided giving interviews to the Western media. When reporters were critical, the Kremlin wouldn’t try to bring them around. Rather, they preferred to “punish” these journalists by shutting them out of press events.

Roxburgh and his colleagues tried to explain that it would be far more constructive to engage...
journalists. Take them to lunch, offer a juicy bite off the record, get them to trust you. If you’re not out there in front of the cameras, they argued, your opponents will be. Russian officials actually tried this new approach for a while, Roxburgh says. They held (perhaps exceedingly formal) dinners for Moscow correspondents in fancy restaurants, and journalists were “delighted.” But the Kremlin was fine with this approach only as long as things were going well. At sensitive moments, when journalists were likely to broach prickly issues of human rights, it seemed safer not to meet with them at all.

Russia’s approach proved catastrophic when war with Georgia broke out. Perhaps the world would never have forgiven Russia for invading a neighboring, independent country, regardless of Russia’s argument that Georgia had provoked it. But the Russians certainly weren’t helping to make their case. “Though it was Georgia, in the end, that lit the touch-paper, it was Russia that found itself in the dock for the conflagration,” Roxburgh writes. “Partly, this was because views were colored by the initial international television coverage of the war, which showed little, if any, of the Georgian bombing and destruction of Tskhinvali and a great deal of the subsequent Russian bombing of Gori.”

Furthermore, Roxburgh says, Georgian President Saakashvili gave a stream of interviews in fluent English and French, and Georgia encouraged the press to go to Gori. Moscow, on the other hand, resisted the urgings of its public relations advisers to let the media visit Tskhinvali, in South Ossetia. Russia only belatedly began to offer English-speaking interviewees to stations such as CNN and the BBC.

In 2008, Dmitry Medvedev became president of Russia. Roxburgh says that internationally, he ended up acting “in much the same way as one would have expected Vladimir Putin to have acted.” But the optics were different. Medvedev was going to be more “modern” than his KGB-trained predecessor. He visited Silicon Valley and opened a Twitter account. He went with President Obama to a burger joint. And in 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton approached her Russian counterpart with a button with the word “reset” on it. (It turned out the word was mistranslated into Russian as “overload” or “overcharged,” which in retrospect seems like some kind of omen.) Putin reassumed the presidency for a third term in May, this time amid widespread demonstrations against him. As he appears increasingly under pressure at home and more isolated from the West, Roxburgh’s book is more relevant than ever.

Any Western journalist who endeavors to write a serious, nuanced book about Vladimir Putin deserves respect. At a time when social media and the 24-hour news cycle is invading the privacy of leaders around the world, Putin remains impressively opaque. We know almost nothing about his private life. Instead, we get photographs of his athletic feats and close encounters with dangerous animals like tigers and polar bears. In the West, this can create a rather cartoonish impression.

Roxburgh, despite his lack of interaction with Putin himself, forces us to probe deeper. His book is dotted with fascinating diplomatic exchanges, both in front of cameras and behind the scenes. Putin might not feel the need to explain himself to his critics, but Roxburgh would disagree. His book is a truly admirable attempt to understand the Kremlin’s side of the story, and to present it to the world. And yet in the end, Roxburgh too ends up confounded. “The picture of Russia that has emerged from these pages is not the one I would have wished to paint,” he laments. He is unable to come to terms with Putin’s approach. Putin, he writes, ultimately presided over the “smothering of media freedoms and democracy,” poor economic policy and overwhelming corruption.

Still, we must try to understand him, or at least his initial appeal. Roxburgh cites the mistaken American belief that Russia is just a Western country “waiting to be freed.” Putin struck a chord by responding to the desire of many Russians to find their own way forward, and to be respected by the world.

Roxburgh concludes, “If only Putin had combined his intuition with an instinct for democracy, and trust in the people’s choices, he would have been a great leader.”

Emily Parker is digital diplomacy advisor and senior fellow at the New America Foundation, where she is writing a book about the Internet and democracy. She is the co-founder of Code4Country, the first open government codeathon between the United States and Russia. Previously, Emily was a member of Secretary Clinton’s Policy Planning staff at the US Department of State.