



First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia President Vladimir Putin *Natalya Gevorkyan, Natalya Timakova, and Andrei Kolesnikov. New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2000*

Book Digest

Relevance: Whether trying to understand the leaders of strategic competitors or partners, putting yourself in another person's shoes, also known as perspective-taking, is a valuable approach to understanding their thinking and behavior. However, it can lead to mirror imaging – interpreting another's behavior through the lens of your own cultural background and experience. *First Person*, a series of interviews with Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, provides rich details about his life, experience, and way of thinking along with historical context. The book demonstrates how listening to others' own words can add depth to understanding someone's behavior and decision-making and help to avoid mirror-imaging when trying to discern intent and anticipate action.

Discussion: In early 2000, three Russian journalists interviewed Vladimir Putin, then acting president of the Russian Federation after Boris Yeltsin resigned at the end of 1999, around his kitchen table in six four-hour sessions. They published the transcripts in a book along with interviews with people who knew him well. While one should always be aware of self-serving narratives – Putin was in the middle of his first presidential campaign – the book provides rich detail and insight into Putin's life, experience, and thinking in his own words. The journalists set out to answer the question "Who is Putin," a question many Russians had when a relatively obscure politician in the late 1990s rapidly ascended to power and a question many Westerners are asking twenty years later following Russia's seemingly unexpected return to global politics. The interviewers are interested in every aspect of his life – his parents, childhood, friends, studies, interest in sports, his early obsession with joining the KGB, his career in the KGB, transition to politics, and, of course, his rapid ascendance to the most powerful positions in the state. The authors are not afraid to ask tough questions, including about his alleged involvement in corruption.

What emerges from the conversations are stories told in simple words, revealing a person of contradictions (an introvert whose specialty in the KGB was dealing with people) and certainties (no friend has ever betrayed him). Putin joined the Communist Party because this was a prerequisite for working in the KGB. Yet in the book he spends no time discussing communist ideology or the party itself. He comes out as someone who has no interest in ideology. This does not mean he lacks commitment to an idea – Russia seems to be the idea that guided his KGB and government careers. The collapse of the Soviet Union – from within – deeply affected him. Putin does not blame the West or communist ideology, which to him seemed irrelevant. However, instead of examining the causes, he seems more obsessed with the unexpectedness and ease with which it occurred. The collapse of the East German communist regime, while he was still in country as a KGB officer, was an early lesson about the destructive forces unleashed by regime failure. Witnessing the collapse of two regimes first-hand seems to have left a deep imprint in his outlook. Ungoverned political change is to be feared. Putin, however, does not shirk from making bold moves. For example, he justified his order to move Russian troops into Chechnya as preventing a precedent that might lead to Russia's disintegration, fully aware that failure in the campaign, still underway at the time of the interviews, would forever ruin his political ambitions.

The conversations also reveal a man who values loyalty, his own and in others; he never criticizes people with whom he had worked and protects them from the interviewers' criticism. The only time he cannot hide his ire at someone is when asked about a Russian journalist whom he perceived as sympathetic to Chechen separatists. Lack of loyalty, especially to Russia, seems an unforgivable offense. Values, including loyalty, are a constant theme in Putin's stories. In fact, when asked what the country needs most, he answers "moral values." This might explain his current focus on traditional Russian values and the perceived threat posed by Western values.

Books about President Putin abound. This one, however, is different. It is his story about who Putin is. Much has changed since he gave these interviews. However, understanding who Putin is today requires understanding what he thought of his life and Russia at the beginning of his unprecedented rule.

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