



The *Khuligan* approach: A three-step guide to Vladimir Putin's tactics

European View
2019, Vol. 18(1) 113–115
© The Author(s) 2019
DOI: 10.1177/1781685819847946
journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



Roland Freudenstein

Many accuse Russian President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin of having been a *chekist*, a member of the USSR's secret police and intelligence service. I've always thought this a bit unfair—in any event, it doesn't do justice to his resume in its entirety. For what was he before he became a trusted officer of the KGB? He was a *khuligan*—what a beautiful appropriation of the time-honoured Anglo-Irish word 'hooligan'. Putin the *khuligan* was a member of a street gang in his early to mid-teens, in the urban backyards of 1960s Leningrad. He is openly proud of this time, calling it his 'street "university"' (cited in Hill and Gaddy 2013, 93). My claim is that much of Putin's behaviour today, as president of a Russian Federation highly centralised around his person, can be explained by the core takeaways from those Leningrad years. The key points concern his capacity to fight enemies seemingly stronger than himself, his uncanny ability to turn causality on its head and his keen sense of his opponents' psychological weaknesses.

Asymmetrical warfare

Putin is, for a Russian, comparatively short and skinny. This means that, back in the day, he frequently had to contend with opponents considerably taller and heavier than he was. And this can only have meant that he had to be faster, more determined and more ruthless than they were. He had to know exactly where to strike to exert maximum pain. Allegedly he developed a technique whereby he would jump up on taller opponents and punch them in the face from above. All of this means that asymmetrical warfare is in his DNA. And this certainly pays off in a situation where the economic, technological and even the

Corresponding author:

R. Freudenstein, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, Rue du Commerce 20, 1000 Brussels, Belgium.

Email: rf@martenscentre.eu



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

overall military balance between Russia and the West is definitely not in the Kremlin's favour.

Victim–culprit reversal

When squaring off against you, Putin—like any good *khuligan*—always leaves you a choice. First, he punches you in the nose, and then he says:

You can decide how to proceed now. You can be stupid and try to hit me back, which I would strongly warn against, or you can be reasonable and give me your wallet. And then I will smile at you again and not punch you for a while. So each of us is giving something here—it's an honest compromise.

In my humble opinion, this is a fair rendering of, for example, the Crimea/Donbas confrontation with Ukraine and the West. From the annexation of Crimea as a 'reaction' to the democratic upheaval in Ukraine in 2014 to the utterly unwarranted attack on Ukrainian ships in the Kerch Strait in late 2018, Putin has—at least in the eyes of many Russians and a number of gullible Westerners—only reacted to threats against Russia's vital interests.

Spotting fear and indecision

Another survival skill of a successful *khuligan* is the ability to sense, and even gauge, the fear in an opponent's eyes and to adjust his own actions accordingly. This skill is vital today, when Russia is weaker and often outnumbered. The development of Russian military doctrine to include a first strike with nuclear weapons is a case in point (Assenova 2019). On that memorable first weekend after the occupation of Crimea in early March 2014, the Kremlin's chief propagandist Dmitry Kiselyov—on prime-time Russian TV and against a backdrop of missile silos and mushroom clouds—famously called Russia 'the only nation that can reduce the United States to radioactive ashes' (cited in Kelly 2014). This made the news on prime-time TV in the West the following evening, especially in Germany. Mission accomplished, Mr Putin! It's true that the EU's sanctions regime against Russia probably wouldn't have lasted longer than a few months without the leadership of Chancellor Merkel. But looking at Berlin's failure to see the danger posed by the NordStream 2 pipeline project, and its staunch refusal to come even close to honouring its commitments in defence spending, one could get the impression that, when it comes to making others fearful and indecisive, the little *khuligan* in Putin has been doing awfully well in Germany.

The response

The obvious answer to all this is to proceed just as one would with the bully down the street: Confront the *khuligan*! This would involve taking risks. But *khuligans* are not suicidal. A third world war is not on the cards. The West has to brush up on its

self-defence techniques, immunise itself against the Kremlin's logic and improve its own determination. All this can be done without us becoming *khuligani* ourselves. But it would work miracles in the next confrontation—which is only a question of time.

References

- Assenova, M. (2019). Nuclear race defines Russia's military doctrine. *Polygraph.info*, 18 March. <https://www.polygraph.info/a/fact-check-russia-nuclear-wepons-military-doctrine/29828431.html>. Accessed 1 April 2019.
- Hill, F., & Gaddy, C. G. (2013). *Mr Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*. The Brookings Institution, Washington, DC. <http://static.squarespace.com/static/538f6712e4b0c1af61fbb317/t/53d27f17e4b0498d331ad768/1406304023526/MrPutin.pdf>. Accessed 12 April 2019.
- Kelly, L. (2014). Russia can turn US to radioactive ash: Kremlin-backed journalist. *Reuters*, 16 March. <https://www.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-russia-kiselyov/russia-can-turn-us-to-radioactive-ash-kremlin-backed-journalist-idUSL6N0MD0P920140316>. Accessed 3 April 2019.

Author biography



Roland Freudenstein is Policy Director at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies.