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# **DOES PUTIN HAVE A CONSCIENCE?**

**THE TWO VALUE SYSTEMS OF A CONSUMMATE CYNIC**

**MARCEL H. VAN HERPEN**

*Director*

*The Cicero Foundation*

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# Does Putin Have a Conscience?

## The Two Value Systems of a Consummate Cynic

Marcel H. Van Herpen

A question which is asked these days is: Does Putin have a conscience? It is, indeed, a legitimate question in the light of his recent actions in Ukraine, where his troops commit war crimes and terrorize the civilian population. Putin is clearly a ruthless and unscrupulous ruler, but calling him a man without a conscience may be too simple. If he isn't a complete psychopath, each human being has some kind of a value system. The question, therefore, is not: does Putin have a conscience, but rather: what is his value system? I think that Putin has *two* value systems which mutually reinforce each other: a mafia moral code and an imperialist ethos.

### PUTIN'S MAFIA ETHOS

To begin with the first: it has often been observed that Putin's political system resembles the mafia - a system in which he is playing the role of the mafia boss. (1) Like a mafia boss he is interested in power – absolute power. However, power is not an end in itself. It is a means to personal enrichment. Putin and his cronies succeeded to take control of 35% of Russia's wealth and Putin became the richest man of Russia. (2) In such a mafia system the *loyalty* of the gang members is crucial. In the autobiographical book *First Person*, published in 2000, Putin is described as a person who "never forgives people who betray him or are mean to him." (3) Putin confirms this. As concerns his friends, he said: "They have never betrayed me, and I haven't betrayed them either. In my view, that is what counts most." (4) Putin's ultimate mafia values are obedience to the leader, absolute loyalty, and in-group solidarity. The ultimate vice is treason. Putin's first value system, therefore, is the mafia's honor code of *omertà*, an honor code in the service of personal enrichment.

## PUTIN'S IMPERIALIST ETHOS

However, Putin's value system is not only characterized by the core values of the mafia. It may be counterintuitive, but he would be less dangerous if he would restrict his ambitions only to the enrichment of himself and his cronies. On top of his core mafia ethos there is a second ethos which forms, as it were, the outer core of Putin's value system: this is an *imperialist* value system. The elements of this value system can be reconstructed as follows:

1. To live a satisfying life one has to live in a *powerful empire*
2. In order to establish or restore a powerful empire one needs a centralized political power, i.e. a *power vertical*
3. Politics must serve the overarching goal of empire building
4. Those who stand in the way of empire building are enemies
5. There can be external, as well as internal enemies
6. Politics is a question of a *friend-foe relationship*
7. In order to realize the goal of restoring national greatness *the end justifies the means*

What does this mean? It means that Putin's central value here is the same as in the mafia ethos: naked power. Power is here not only necessary to enrich oneself, but also to restore the lost power status of the former Soviet Union. This fixation on power does not only apply on external relations with other states, it equally applies internally, where a strict power vertical must be upheld. This power vertical is considered necessary to enable Putin's regime to reach its goal: the restoration of Russia's great power status. For this reason politics has nothing to do with politics as it is conceived in Western, democratic countries, where politics is characterized by compromise, give and take, political alternation, and the peaceful transition of power. For Putin politics is a friend-foe relationship. Opposition parties are enemies and should therefore be banned – directly or indirectly. The same is true for independent journalists and human rights defenders, who are labeled "foreign agents" and are, as such, enemies of the state. It is certainly no surprise that one can find the theoretical foundation of this conception of politics as a friend-foe relationship in *Der Begriff des Politischen* (The Concept of the Political), a book, published in 1932 by the Nazi ideologue Carl Schmitt. (5)

One element of Putin's imperialist value system is that the end justifies the means – *any* means. This is clear in Putin's warfare which is *bespredel* (Russian for: without (moral) limits). Also here his mafia ethos – which has no qualms about murders and assassinations – coincides with and strengthens his imperialist ethos, which is a legacy from his KGB past. In Lenin's and Stalin's Soviet Union killing kulaks and other supposed opponents who stood in the way of the realization of the communist utopia was considered legitimate. This is the reason why Putin's regime indiscriminately targeted civilian populations in Chechnya, Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine, and had no qualms about killing and poisoning supposed opponents, such as Anna Politkovskaya, Boris Nemtsov, Nataliya Estemirova, Alexander Litvinenko, Alexey Navalny, Sergey Skripal, and many others. Killing political opponents became a current practice. It was considered justified by the overarching goal of restoring national greatness.

#### PUTIN'S FLIRTATION WITH RELIGION

But what about religion? Putin is often flirting with his supposed religiosity. In *First Person* Putin mentions with a certain pride that, as a baby, his mother had him baptized. When he went to Israel in 1993, his mother gave him his baptismal cross to get it blessed. "I did as she said," he told, "and then put the cross around my neck. I have never taken it off since." (6) Putin is posing as a genuine Orthodox believer. He has a close relationship with Patriarch Kirill and can often be seen on state TV attending religious services and kissing icons. He is well aware of the fact that common people often consider pious men to be more moral and virtuous than irreligious men. However, Putin is less inspired by the Ten Commandments or the message of the Sermon on the Mount than by the Russian Orthodox Church's usefulness as an instrument in the international power struggle, in which the Church functions as the Kremlin's major *soft power* instrument. It is, therefore, no surprise that in 2007 Putin personally oversaw a merger between the ROC and the ROCOR, the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia which was founded by Russian émigré communities who had fled their country after the October Revolution. This merger brought 323 parishes and 20 monasteries in the U.S. alone and over a million church members in 30 countries under Moscow's control. (7) The Russian Orthodox Church is instrumental in spreading the Kremlin's "traditional values" which boil down to homophobia, attacks on Western-style democracies, and universal human rights. One may dismiss, therefore, the possibility of a genuine religious Christian Orthodox inspiration.

What remains is the combination of Putin's moral mafia code and his imperialist ethos. It is this combination of these two "value systems" (if you may call them so) which reinforce each other which makes him so dangerous, because it makes this consummate cynic a *mafia boss with a vocation*.

## NOTES

1. See Marcel H. Van Herpen, *Putinism – The Rise of a Radical Right Regime in Russia* (New York and Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 198-201.
2. Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), p. 1.
3. *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia's President Vladimir Putin*, with Nataliya Gevorkyan, Natalya Timakova, and Andrei Kolesnikov, (New York: PublicAffairs, 2000), p. 21.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 159.
5. Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2002), pp. 26-34.
6. *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia's President Vladimir Putin*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
7. See Marcel H. Van Herpen, *Putin's Propaganda Machine – Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy*, (New York, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), pp. 165-176.

## **The Cicero Foundation**

**Independent Pro-EU and Pro-Atlantic think tank**

**Founded in 1992**

Hondertmarck 45D

6211 MB MAASTRICHT

The Netherlands

Tel. +31 43 32 60 828

Email: [cicerofoundation@gmail.com](mailto:cicerofoundation@gmail.com)

Website: [www.cicerofoundation.org](http://www.cicerofoundation.org)

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