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Strobe Talbott, who served in the Clinton administration, and now head of the Brookings Institution, penned a long piece for Politico on the rise of Putin. We might ask; if William Safire, in January 2000 could see so clearly what Putin would be like, how come all the bien pensants in DC couldn't figure it out? What was the president thinking with the Russian reset? And what was SecState Clinton thinking?

In late January 2000, William Safire wrote a column in the New York Times under the headline "Putinism Looms." Vladimir Putin had been acting president of the Russian Federation for only a month but Safire had already seen that the new Kremlin leader was bent on developing a "cult of personality," "suppressing the truth" and "the resurgence of Russian power." For the remaining nine years of his life, Safire often returned to the subject. He expanded the definition of Putinism as its namesake muzzled dissent, cracked down on the media, exiled or imprisoned those who opposed him, courted China as a counterweight to the United States, and did everything he could to lock the countries of "the near abroad" — fellow former Soviet republics — into a Russian sphere of influence.

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... it's worth remembering that the trust between Gorbachev and Reagan survived the Strategic Defense Initiative. Gorbachev and Bush 41 weathered the strains of the first Gulf war, and the Bill-Boris bond held through the first round of NATO enlargement and the Kosovo air war.

Then, as now, the state-to-state relationship was highly personalized, in large measure because of a deep-seated characteristic of Russian political culture. No matter who's in the Kremlin — whether czar, general secretary, or president — he wields immense personal power, not just bureaucratic power, over what Richard Pipes called a patrimonial state. Though Putin became famous for saying he intended to restore "the vertical of power," when he first came to office, in fact, there has always been a vertical of power in Russia. Whoever is at the top is hard to stop, and hard to remove.

Which is why Putin himself, and not just Putinism, matters. The succession of Kremlin leaders over the last quarter century leading to Putin is an extraordinary story itself, packed with melodrama, irony, suspense, farce, and plot twists — and, of course, tragedy, all worthy of a Mussorgsky opera.

Act I opens in March 1985, when the Politburo convened to choose a successor to the short-timer Konstantin Chernenko. If any of the candidates other than Gorbachev had gotten the job, we might well today, 29 years later, still have a Soviet Union, a Warsaw Pact, and a Cold War. Once Gorbachev was in the Kremlin, he had the power to begin forcing change. He elevated Yeltsin to help him do so, then cast Yeltsin into the political wilderness.

*Act II: Yeltsin fights back and replaces Gorbachev, yet adheres to the key features of Gorbachev's reforms. Yeltsin, too, has the trump card of inhabiting the Kremlin. Despite his late-blooming democratic instincts, he was also partial to the verb *tsarstvovat'* — “to rule as czar,” which he used as he asserted his power, particularly against the opposition.*

But then the opera turns tragic. This democratizing czar plucks a junior operative out of obscurity and anoints him as his heir. Yeltsin does so for an irresponsible, ignoble reason: to protect his family's physical and financial security.

In Act III, Putin is as good as his word on that personal commitment. But, in just about every other respect, he shreds his mentor's political legacy. Putin becomes, himself, the anti-Yeltsin and, by extension, the anti-Gorbachev as well, thereby earning the support of those diehards of old regime who had tried, unsuccessfully, to thwart the reforms of the late '80s and '90s.

The specter of Putinism that Safire saw looming over Russia almost 15 years ago has now settled in to that point that there is talk of “the Putin era,” a phrase suggesting that it will be with us and our progeny for a long time. There are two reasons to question that prediction.

One is what's new about Putinism. In place of the internationalist Soviet ideology of Marxism-Leninism, Putin has asserted the ultra-nationalist proposition that Russian statehood should be based on ethnicity. Putin has used it in Ukraine to expand Russian territory. But his brand of ethnic geopolitics, redolent of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th, is a double-edged sword: It could shrink Russian territory, since vast parts of that country are populated by non-Russian ethnic groups who are unlikely to welcome or, over the long run, tolerate a Russian chauvinist in the Kremlin who wears a crucifix when he bares his chest. Putin, in other words, may inadvertently be hastening the day when the Caucasus and Central Asia will be vulnerable to jihadists who are already planning to establish a caliphate in part of what is now the Russian Federation.

The other reason to doubt the staying power of Putinism is what's old about it. Putinism as a system of governance replicates, in its essence, the regime that failed to modernize the Soviet economy, failed to normalize Soviet society and ultimately failed to rescue the Soviet state from extinction. Besides, Putin's concept of Russian security, like that of every Soviet leader from Stalin to Chernenko, has a perverse and potentially self-defeating feature: Russia won't feel absolutely secure unless all its neighbors feel absolutely insecure. As a result, in the putative Putin era, Russia, once again, is a paranoid state that makes its own enemies. That same zero-sum strategy kept the USSR from being accepted by the international community as a trustworthy and constructive major power.

Speculation about the longevity of the system Putin has put in place should take account of the fate of the one he has, in fundamental ways, brought back to life: the Soviet system, and with it the Soviet state, lasted only seven decades — three score and 10 years, the biblical lifespan of a single mortal. Moreover, that system and state were not destroyed by foreign enemies like those Lt. Col. Putin hunted down in Dresden 30 years ago and those he still obsesses about from the Kremlin. Rather, it expired because of its own pathologies. It was unfit for survival in the modern world.

Safire made that connection in his January 2000 column. “The irony is that a ‘Putin era’ would mean an uncompetitive, economically weakened Russia,” he wrote. Rather than fearing a “resurgence of Russian power,” Safire predicted that the result would be “the surly stagnation of what would come to be called Putinism.” In other words, precisely because Putinism is a conscious attempt to bring back a proven failure from the past as model for the future, it’s doomed.

Still, that’s no excuse for complacency on the part of the West. Under its current leadership, Russia is an immediate threat to its neighbors, a disruptive and divisive force in the evolution of Europe, and a potential threat to world peace. It’s also an impediment to the ability of the international community to manage other perils, including the existential ones of climate change and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

But in designing new strategies for dealing with the Kremlin in the months and years ahead, we should remember, too, that Russia today is not the Soviet Union. It’s not stuck in the mid-20th century, to say nothing of the 19th. It’s nowhere near as monolithic and isolated as it was in the bad old days. Its people have had more than a taste of what it’s like to live in a normal, modern country. Russia is bigger and more resilient than Putinism; it will outlive the Putinist system just as it survived the one he is trying to resurrect.

And yet another example of how the government always screws up, the [NY Times](#) reports on the Workforce Investment Act and the chaos it has left behind for the people who were foolish enough to believe in promises from the state. The Times article portrays for-profit schools as the villain of the piece.

When the financial crisis crippled the construction industry seven years ago, Joe DeGrella’s contracting company failed, leaving him looking for what he hoped would be the last job he would ever need.

He took each step in line with the advice of the federal government: He met with an unemployment counselor who provided him with a list of job titles the Labor Department determined to be in high demand, he picked from among colleges that offered government-certified job-training courses, and he received a federal retraining grant.

In 2009, Mr. DeGrella, began a course at [Daymar College](#) — a for-profit vocational institute in Louisville — to become a cardiology technician. Daymar officials told him he would have a well-paying job within weeks of graduation.

But after about two years of studying cardiovascular physiology and the mechanics of electrocardiograms, Mr. DeGrella, now 57, found himself jobless and \$20,000 in debt. He moved into his sister’s basement and now works at an AutoZone.

Millions of unemployed Americans like Mr. DeGrella have trained for new careers as part of the Workforce Investment Act, a \$3.1 billion federal program that, in an unusual act of bipartisanship, was reauthorized by Congress last month with little public discussion about its effectiveness. Like Mr. DeGrella, many have not found the promised new career.

Instead, an extensive analysis of the program by The New York Times shows, many graduates wind up significantly worse off than when they started — mired in unemployment and debt from training for positions that do not exist, and they end up working elsewhere for minimum wage. ...

... The Times examination, based on state and federal documents, school and court records, and interviews, shows that some of the retraining institutions advertise graduation and job-placement rates that often do not hold up to scrutiny.

The idea of dividing responsibility between federal and state officials was to give local and state authorities more power in helping the unemployed in their areas. But the unemployed who sign up for training are often left to navigate a bureaucratic maze with almost no guidance. To avoid any appearance of favoritism, federal job counselors are not allowed to recommend schools to job seekers, leaving many of the unemployed to unwittingly select institutions that are expensive, have a history of legal trouble or are academically substandard.

There is, for example, no mechanism for students to check in with counselors to gauge their progress or determine whether the training program is a good match. States say they investigate complaints and audit programs with poor outcomes, but students say they tend not to register formal complaints about a program's quality. ...

... In some states, data and academic [studies](#) have suggested that a vast majority of the unemployed may have found work without the help of the Workforce Investment Act.

In South Carolina, for example, 75 percent of dislocated workers found jobs without training, compared with 77 percent who found jobs after entering the program, according to state figures.

A group of for-profit schools frequently at odds with regulators over the quality of their training and their costs charge some of the highest tuitions but place relatively few students in jobs. ...

Politico

[The Making of Vladimir Putin](#)

by Strobe Talbott

In late January 2000, William Safire wrote a column in the *New York Times* under the headline "Putinism Looms." Vladimir Putin had been acting president of the Russian Federation for only a month but Safire had already seen that the new Kremlin leader was bent on developing a "cult of personality," "suppressing the truth" and "the resurgence of Russian power." For the remaining nine years of his life, Safire often returned to the subject. He expanded the definition

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Putin’s aggression only makes sense against the backdrop of what has been the defining theme of his presidency: turning back the clock. For years that has meant repudiating the transformational policies of his immediate predecessors and reinstating key attributes of the Soviet system within the borders of the Russian Federation. But there were also indications that, if given a chance, Putin might extend his agenda, his rule, and what he hopes will be his legacy beyond those borders. In 2005, he famously lamented that the breakup of the Soviet Union “was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.” Three years later, Russia invaded Georgia and granted “independence” to two breakaway ethnic enclaves, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Not until this year, however, did Russia expand by military conquest and unilateral decree its own territory by seizing Crimea. In doing so, Putin also proclaimed the right to “protect our compatriots and fellow citizens”— i.e., Russian-speaking minorities — elsewhere in the near abroad, from Estonia on the Baltic to Kazakhstan in Central Asia.

Therein lies the most malignant manifestation of Putinism: it violates international law, nullifies Russia’s past pledges to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its neighbors, carries with it the danger of spinning out of control and sparking a wider conflict, and establishes a precedent for other major powers to apply their own version of the Putin Doctrine when convenient (think of China, for example, and its running feuds with Vietnam, the Philippines, and Japan over territorial and maritime claims).

While Putin has earned the *ism* that Safire attached to his name more than 14 years ago, the phenomenon he personifies — its content, motivation and rationale, as well as the constituencies behind it — predates the appearance of Putin himself on the scene. A number of students of recent Russian history — including some, like myself, who have dealt with Putin — can, in retrospect, trace the roots of his policies today back more than a quarter century to the battle between Soviet reformers and their reactionary and revanchist foes.

The backstory begins in the late 1980s, when Putin was a mid-level KGB officer, attached to the Second Chief Directorate, stationed in Dresden. His job was not espionage but counterespionage: that is, identifying, thwarting, defeating and often destroying the enemies of the Soviet state. In Moscow at that time, there were influential individuals who saw the president of that state, Mikhail Gorbachev, as an enemy bent on destroying the system to which they had devoted their lives and from which they had amassed power and prestige.

Gorbachev had ascended to the pinnacle of power in the Soviet Union 29 years ago with what he believed was an obligation to save the country. The status quo, he was convinced, was holding the USSR back, preventing it from competing and prospering in a globalizing world. His supporters often expressed this aspiration with a deceptively modest-sounding phrase: Russia’s

need to become “a normal, modern country.” Yet normalization and modernization required a radical break with previous Soviet leaders, starting with Vladimir Lenin.

The vocabulary of Gorbachev’s program was, tellingly, made up of two Russian words, glasnost and perestroika, and two borrowed from English: demokratizatsiya and partnyorstvo (partnership) with the West. These were not just descriptors of the Kremlin’s new policies — they were antonyms of the watchwords of the Soviet internal regime and the Soviet worldview. As such, they were anathema to some of Gorbachev’s supposed comrades.

In June of 1991, his own prime minister, Valentin Pavlov, mobilized an effort in the parliament to weaken Gorbachev’s powers as a prelude to removing him. The proximate incitement was a plan, known as “the Grand Bargain,” that Gorbachev’s advisers had proposed as a way of garnering Western economic aid in support of perestroika. Lt. Col. Putin’s ultimate boss in the KGB, Vladimir Kryuchkov, was active in this cabal. He and Pavlov saw the Grand Bargain as “a conspiracy to sell out the motherland to foreign interests.”

Senior officers in the Soviet military and security services had their own version of that complaint. They were infuriated by Gorbachev’s willingness to compromise, largely on American terms, in arms-control negotiations on conventional forces in Europe, the “zero option” for intermediate nuclear forces, and, most stunningly, in Reykjavik, on Ronald Reagan’s proposal to eliminate all nuclear weapons.

The so-called constitutional coup of June 1991 failed, but its instigators didn’t give up. The fear that Gorbachev was selling out to the West grew stronger, leading Kryuchkov and the KGB to attempt a real coup two months later. The plotters put a defiant Gorbachev under house arrest at his vacation retreat in the Crimea, then treated the world to a Keystone Kops performance of ineptitude, including a public rollout of the putative new leadership in which the front man, Gennady Yanayev, was visibly drunk.

The putsch backfired spectacularly. It accelerated not just the terminal decline of the Soviet system, but the terminal weakening of the centripetal forces that had, for all those decades, kept the Soviet Union itself intact.

The No. 1 terminator was Boris Yeltsin, a Gorbachev protégé turned rival, a Soviet functionary and Communist Party member who ultimately converted to an anti-Soviet, anti-Communist revolutionary. Yeltsin was impatient with Gorbachev for proceeding too slowly and too timidly with perestroika, glasnost and demokratizatsiya. In other words, Yeltsin out-Gorbacheved Gorbachev as a reformer, which made him popular with the growing numbers of citizens who were fed up with Soviet rule. That also meant he out-Gorbacheved Gorbachev as a threat to the old guard. Gorbachev, seeing Yeltsin as a political liability as he tried to manage the increasingly fractious leadership, expelled him from the Politburo.

Yeltsin’s reply was, in effect: “You can’t fire me — I quit!” He resigned from the Communist Party. But he didn’t stop there. Having quit, he set about liquidating the mega-firm of USSR Inc. and making himself the CEO of its largest spinoff —an independent, democratic Russian Federation.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union was the last thing Gorbachev wanted, and it became the wedge issue that Yeltsin used to replace Gorbachev, bringing down the hammer-and-sickle Soviet flag over the Kremlin and flying in its place the Russian tricolor.

But on other issues, the transition between them was almost seamless. Those issues included how Russia should govern itself and how it should behave beyond its borders. For Yeltsin, that meant deciding where Russia's borders were. His decision was crucial to what happened in the years that followed — and what didn't happen.

Yeltsin made it an imperative of his presidency to maintain the inter-republic borders of the old USSR as the international borders of the new Commonwealth of Independent States. There would be no redrawing the political map to align with the ethnographic one.

Yeltsin's insistence on that point further riled his already fraught relations with the enemies he had inherited from Gorbachev. For them, the most emotive bloody-flag grievance was not just the loss of territory, but the stranding of some 25 million ethnic Russians in what were now 14 neighboring, independent states. A common phrase — mumbled, growled and sometimes screamed in the debates of the time — was that Yeltsin was guilty of "the mutilation of Mother Russia," leaving her orphans outside the care of Moscow.

Much as Pavlov had turned against Gorbachev, Yeltsin's own vice president, Alexander Rutskoi, then turned against him. Rutskoi had a large map of the Soviet Union on the wall of his office. "That's the past," he liked to tell visitors, "but it's also the future." The first step in bringing about that future, he often said, would be the recovery of Crimea, which had been briefly part of Soviet Russia from the end of World War II until 1954, when the Kremlin leader of the time, Nikita Khrushchev, transferred it to Ukraine as a way of celebrating the three hundredth anniversary of Catherine the Great's conquest of the peninsula. The second would be Transnistria, a long, thin sliver of Moldova with a largely Russian population and a contingent of Russian troops.

This aggressive nostalgia for the past and the territory that came with it rattled Yeltsin's team, so much so that in December 1992 — about the time of post-Soviet Russia's first anniversary — Yeltsin's foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, shook up an international conference in Stockholm with an alarmist impersonation of what a different Russian foreign policy, as carried out by resurgent nationalists, could look like if Yeltsin were overthrown. Kozyrev played it for real, pretending to announce a new set of policies: first, Russia's traditional and fated orientation was toward Asia, not Europe; second, Russia would use military force to compel other former Soviet republics, particularly Ukraine, to join a new federation with its capital in Moscow. Only at the end of Kozyrev's speech did he say it was a bit of shock treatment designed to bring the world's attention to a real danger.

Kozyrev's gimmick was largely dismissed at the time. But the following year, in October 1993, a critical mass of Yeltsin's parliamentary opponents, whose views and intentions Kozyrev had laid out in Stockholm, exploded into violent rebellion. Rutskoi and others converted the Russian White House into an armed camp and dispatched gangs to maraud around the city, even firing rocket-propelled grenades at the central TV station. Yeltsin responded with lethal force to crush the uprising.

Two months later, Yeltsin's enemies struck at him again, only this time by taking advantage of the very reform that first Gorbachev and then Yeltsin had embraced and benefited from: democratization. Russia's first post-Soviet parliamentary election produced a big win for Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's ultranationalists and a strong showing as well by Gennady Zyuganov's communists. The platform of their so-called "national-patriotic bloc," included the obligation to defend the rights of the Russians in other post-Soviet republics. Zhirinovskiy even vowed to regain Russia's lost lands in Turkey, Finland and, on several occasions, Alaska.

The best word for what might be called ethnic geopolitics is, appropriately, a musty Italian one coined in the post-Napoleonic wars of 19th century Europe: irredentism (an Italian word connoting the recovery of “unredeemed” territory and ethnic kinsmen). Throughout the 1990s, that atavistic urge was at the core of the anti-Yeltsin opposition. Yeltsin’s stubborn refusal to countenance irredentism — his affirmation of the existing inter-republic borders — made possible the relatively amicable and orderly self-dismemberment of the USSR. It also facilitated the creation of a NATO-sponsored Partnership for Peace as well as other institutional arrangements that were meant to bring countries of the former Soviet bloc, including Russia and the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), into an inclusive, integrated, post-Cold War, pan-European, and, to some degree, pan-Eurasian security structure. This wasn’t a Western demand or aspiration that was imposed on post-Soviet leaders. It was an aspiration of their own that we in the West responded to and supported.

Had Yeltsin and his counterparts in the other republics set off irredentist free-for-all in the post-Soviet space, stretching across 11 time zones with tens of thousands of nuclear weapons in the mix, it might have triggered a world-threatening cataclysm. On a more specific and less apocalyptic level, it would have been impossible to persuade Ukraine to turn over its Soviet-era nuclear arsenal to Russia, especially if Yeltsin’s opponents had succeeded in their demand that Ukraine surrender Crimea as well. It wasn’t hard to imagine what that scenario looked like: Throughout the 1990s, the world had, in Yugoslavia, an ongoing reminder of the violent fate that the USSR avoided.

That was the good news. But there was bad news as well. Under Yeltsin, Russia’s relations with the West were stressed almost to the breaking point by the mayhem in the Balkans, particularly during the conflict over Kosovo in 1999. That was for multiple reasons: NATO went to war for the first time; it did so in disregard of Russia’s opposition in the United Nations; its principal target was the capital of a nation with a Slavic Orthodox majority and, therefore, with strong historical and cultural ties to Russia; and the operation’s beneficiaries were Muslim secessionists inside Serbia. That last factor led many Russians at the time to analogize Kosovo to the long-running fight with separatists in the internal Russian republic of Chechnya. They felt they were impotent bystanders watching a preview of what NATO would someday do to dismember Russia itself. On top of all that, Yeltsin was in decline, physically and politically, and already pondering his own retirement.

All that makes it even more extraordinary that it was Yeltsin himself who helped bring the war to an end, and on NATO’s terms. He did so by investing his former prime minister, Victor Chernomyrdin, with plenipotentiary powers to convince the Serbian dictator and the Balkans’ ethnic-cleanser-in-chief, Slobodan Milosević, that Russia was not going to save him from a NATO invasion. Chernomyrdin also agreed that Russian forces would participate, under NATO, in an international peacekeeping force in Kosovo. That was, from the Western standpoint, a vital condition to assure that there would be no ambiguity over who had ultimate command.

But the Russian military saw the deal as yet another galling, humiliating capitulation to the West. Some of the top brass in Moscow held out against the arrangement throughout the many weeks of negotiations. Their agent within Chernomyrdin’s traveling entourage was a three-star general named Leonid Ivashov. Ivashov insisted that the Russian peacekeeping force in Kosovo must be independent of NATO and have responsibility for its own “sector,” which would have become a haven for militant Serbs, who, under Russian protection, could then destabilize the rest of Kosovo and, all too predictably, create the conditions for Russia and NATO to themselves come

into conflict. Chernomyrdin repeatedly overruled Ivashov's efforts to thwart an agreement. But Ivashov didn't give up. That was because some of his superiors in Moscow were not giving up.

The result was an episode that was, for me, in my capacity as the Clinton administration's point man for policy toward the former Soviet Union, an early opportunity to see Vladimir Putin as a contributor to what would become the "ism" that now bears his name.

In June 1999, when a cease-fire was in effect on the ground and in the air over Serbia, I went to Moscow with a U.S. delegation to put the finishing touches on the arrangement Chernomyrdin had endorsed. While we were there, it became clear that the deal was coming undone. Our group included two generals who represented the Pentagon; they met with Ivashov, who not only reasserted the Russian demand for an independent sector but threatened that if NATO didn't back down on this point, Russia would establish one unilaterally. Meanwhile, a Russian armored unit attached to the international peacekeeping force in Bosnia suddenly pulled up stakes and set off on a mad dash eastward, presumably toward Kosovo.

I asked for an urgent meeting with Yeltsin. I was told he was "indisposed." My colleagues and I knew what that meant: the Russian president's alcoholism was perhaps the worst-kept secret in the world. We settled for a meeting with his national security adviser, Putin, who had recently been promoted to that post from the position of deputy mayor of St. Petersburg. It was a creepy encounter. His manner was superficially cool, professional, and courteous, but iciness and controlled contempt were just under the surface. For no good reason other than to make sure I knew that he had read up on my KGB dossier, he dropped the names of the two Russian poets I had written about in dissertations at college and graduate school in the late '60s.

But what really struck my colleagues and me was the aplomb, smugness and brazenness with which Putin lied. He had to know exactly what the military was up to. Yet he assured us that the terms Chernomyrdin had agreed to were still valid and "nothing untoward" would happen to upset the hard-won peace and the U.S.-Russian deal that made it possible. Then he told us that he'd never even heard of "this Ivashov." That added touch of disingenuousness was as gratuitous as it was implausible, since Ivashov was the senior military representative in Chernomyrdin's high-stakes diplomatic mission.

Within hours, the Russian unit of about 250 troops was setting up a base camp at the Priština airport, thereby creating a risk that a NATO-Russia collaboration might turn into a NATO-Russia confrontation.

Meanwhile, our delegation set up our own version of base camp in the Defense Ministry on Arbatskaya Square, where we pulled an all-nighter trying to defuse the crisis. While the talks were tough, they were nothing compared to the knock-down/drag-out shouting match that we witnessed among the Russians.

On one side were the defense minister, Marshal Igor Sergeev, and the foreign minister, Igor Ivanov. Squared off against them was the chief of the General Staff, Anatoly Kvashnin, who was clearly behind the Priština end-run and had been backing Ivashov's obstructionism of the Chernomyrdin mission. To make a long, bizarre, and suspenseful story short, Sergeev ultimately prevailed over Kvashnin — but just barely, and not until Yeltsin re-emerged from his indisposition to put the original deal back in place.

As for Putin's apparent role, I could only conclude that he was either hedging his bets on how Russia's own interagency dynamics would play out, or he was actively throwing in his lot with

Kvashnin and Ivashov — who, in turn, were defying their minister and superior officer, Sergeyev, not to mention their commander-in-chief, Yeltsin himself.

Eight weeks later, Yeltsin stunned the world by promoting Putin to prime minister and designated successor. During the interregnum, Putin did everything he could to burnish his law-and-order image, including identifying himself with Moscow's scorched-earth conduct of the war in Chechnya ("Russia's Kosovo," as we kept hearing).

I saw him again just before Christmas, nine days before Yeltsin resigned. Russia, Putin said, "belongs in the West." He was still sticking, at least officially, with the soothing line of partnership and told me he wanted to show "our own people and the world that on the really big issues, we're on the same side," adding that he had "no use" for those in his country who thought "isolation, retrenchment, and confrontation were an option for Russia." While he made no reference to Yeltsin, at least he was affirming Yeltsin's basic orientation. That was, no doubt, the message he wanted me to pass to Washington. While I did so, I remembered that this was the same Kremlin operative who had assured our delegation a few months before that there was nothing to the reports we were hearing about the Russian army breaking bad over Kosovo.

During that same visit, a beleaguered reformer who still had access to the Kremlin told me about a private ceremony in which Putin joined a group of Communist politicians to toast Joseph Stalin's birthday. "This information," my informant said, "is more important than anything you hear face-to-face from our new leader."

The following June, when Putin was settling into the Russian presidency and Bill Clinton was making his farewell calls on foreign leaders, the two met in Moscow. Putin was civil but clearly not prepared to do any meaningful business. On several occasions, he subtly but unmistakably disparaged his predecessor — and Clinton's friend — Yeltsin.

Just before flying back to Washington, Clinton paid a call on Yeltsin at his retirement dacha. "Boris," Clinton said, "you've got democracy in your heart. You've got the trust of the people in your bones. You've got the fire in your belly of a real democrat and a real reformer. I'm not sure Putin has that. Maybe he does. I don't know. You'll have to keep an eye on him and use your influence to make sure that he stays on the right path. Putin needs you. Whether he knows it or not, he really needs you, Boris. Russia needs you. You really changed this country, Boris. Not every leader can say that about the country he's led. You changed Russia. Russia was lucky to have you. The world was lucky you were where you were. I was lucky to have you. We did a lot of stuff together, you and I. We got through some tough times. We never let it all come apart. We did some good things. They'll last. It took guts on your part. A lot of that stuff was harder for you than it was for me. I know that."

Yeltsin was now clutching Clinton by the hand, leaning into him. "Thank you, Bill," he said. "I understand."

Neither of them had any inkling of how radical a break Putin would make Yeltsin and with the West.

So much for the backstory. Here we are 15 years later, living through the unfolding big, bad-news story in which Putin is the protagonist and, to an increasing degree, our antagonist. He has made himself, particularly in his third presidential term, the champion of precisely those in his country who have, for a quarter century, favored retrenchment in its domestic order. He's rolled back democratization and enfranchisement of the regions. He's muzzled and monopolized the media on behalf of propaganda and disinformation. He's come up with his own highly revised vocabulary for what are essentially reinstatements of the pillars of Soviet rule.

In foreign policy, Putin has replaced partnership with competition when it comes to the West. He's scorned Russia's European vocation and embraced the Eurasian option. Putin's bracing speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 echoed Pavlov and Kryuchkov's accusations in 1991 that Gorbachev was letting foreigners foist their interests, rules and values on Russia.

Flash-forward to this past March. In asserting the right to annex other territories inhabited by ethnic Russians, Putin gave a speech to the Duma that channeled, from the past, Yeltsin's enemies Ruskoi and Zhirinovsky, in the mid-'90s. Putin has repeatedly given his own version of Kozyrev's "April Fool's" speech of 22 years ago — only Putin isn't fooling.

As for glasnost, it has given way to reliance on disinformation at a scale that has led *The Economist* to characterize Russia as a mendocracy, particularly during the Ukraine crisis. Russia's government and its largely obedient media have done their best to characterize the popular uprising against the previous Ukrainian government as a coup instigated by the West. In an attempt to avoid culpability for the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17, which was blown up by a Russian-supplied long-range surface-to-air missile in contested eastern Ukraine, killing all 298 people aboard, Russia flooded the airwaves with false accusations, denials, and diversions. Back in Moscow, Putin tried to blame the catastrophe on the Ukrainians since their airspace was endangered by the conflict on the ground — a conflict, of course, that Putin himself was waging.

That resort to the Big Lie alone was up to the standards of Mikhail Suslov, the long-time Cold War Politburo member in charge of agitprop who was buried in [Kremlin Wall Necropolis](#) 32 years ago.

Names from the more recent past have appeared on the active roster since Putin's ascension to the presidency. He invited Kryuchkov, the former KGB chief who plotted the August 1991 coup against Gorbachev, to his inauguration; and he kept General Kvashnin on as chief of staff for the first five years of his rule. Kvashnin's subordinate in the Priština gambit, General Ivashov, is today a member of Putin's informal brain trust and vice president of a recently formed Academy of Geopolitical Affairs. As for Yeltsin's principal tormentors, Ruskoi remains active in Russian politics. So does Zyuganov, and when he celebrated his 65th birthday, Putin attended and presented him with a first Soviet edition of the Communist Manifesto. Zhirinovsky, while largely marginalized, has had a bit of comeback as supporter of separatists in the eastern regions of Ukraine. Some veterans of the coup, meanwhile, have shown up in senior roles as part of the secessionist forces in and around in Eastern Ukraine.

So while Putin may be a relative latecomer to the ranks of those determined to restore as much as they can of the Soviet regime, he has made it possible for them to succeed in recent years where they had failed before. His mindset reflects public longing for Russia's geopolitical heyday, disillusionment with the downside of Gorbachev-Yeltsin reforms, and grievances with

various policies of both the George W. Bush and Obama administrations: the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM treaty in 2002; the invasion of Iraq in 2003; Western support for the “color” revolutions in two post-Soviet countries, Georgia and Ukraine, in the mid-2000s; Kosovo’s attainment of formal independence in 2008; and the second and third rounds of NATO expansion in 2004 and 2009, which brought into the alliance another six former Communist countries as well as the three Baltic states that had been annexed by Stalin after his pact with Hitler in 1939.

But those external irritants do not, in and of themselves, fully explain the deterioration in U.S.-Russian relations in recent years. Rather, Putin has used them and his increasing monopoly of the media to whip up public ire, and he sees them as confirmations of his own combative, paranoid worldview, which was dramatically evident in his accusation that then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton incited the protests in Russia over Putin’s peremptory announcement in September 2011 that he was going to return to the presidency.

In contrast, it’s worth remembering that the trust between Gorbachev and Reagan survived the Strategic Defense Initiative. Gorbachev and Bush 41 weathered the strains of the first Gulf war, and the Bill-Boris bond held through the first round of NATO enlargement and the Kosovo air war.

Then, as now, the state-to-state relationship was highly personalized, in large measure because of a deep-seated characteristic of Russian political culture. No matter who’s in the Kremlin — whether czar, general secretary, or president — he wields immense personal power, not just bureaucratic power, over what Richard Pipes called a patrimonial state. Though Putin became famous for saying he intended to restore “the vertical of power,” when he first came to office, in fact, there has always been a vertical of power in Russia. Whoever is at the top is hard to stop, and hard to remove.

Which is why Putin himself, and not just Putinism, matters. The succession of Kremlin leaders over the last quarter century leading to Putin is an extraordinary story itself, packed with melodrama, irony, suspense, farce, and plot twists — and, of course, tragedy, all worthy of a Mussorgsky opera.

Act I opens in March 1985, when the Politburo convened to choose a successor to the short-timer Konstantin Chernenko. If any of the candidates other than Gorbachev had gotten the job, we might well today, 29 years later, still have a Soviet Union, a Warsaw Pact, and a Cold War. Once Gorbachev was in the Kremlin, he had the power to begin forcing change. He elevated Yeltsin to help him do so, then cast Yeltsin into the political wilderness.

Act II: Yeltsin fights back and replaces Gorbachev, yet adheres to the key features of Gorbachev’s reforms. Yeltsin, too, has the trump card of inhabiting the Kremlin. Despite his late-blooming democratic instincts, he was also partial to the verb *tsarstvovat’* — “to rule as czar,” which he used as he asserted his power, particularly against the opposition.

But then the opera turns tragic. This democratizing czar plucks a junior operative out of obscurity and anoints him as his heir. Yeltsin does so for an irresponsible, ignoble reason: to protect his family’s physical and financial security.

In Act III, Putin is as good as his word on that personal commitment. But, in just about every other respect, he shreds his mentor’s political legacy. Putin becomes, himself, the anti-Yeltsin

and, by extension, the anti-Gorbachev as well, thereby earning the support of those diehards of old regime who had tried, unsuccessfully, to thwart the reforms of the late '80s and '90s.

The specter of Putinism that Safire saw looming over Russia almost 15 years ago has now settled in to that point that there is talk of “the Putin era,” a phrase suggesting that it will be with us and our progeny for a long time. There are two reasons to question that prediction.

One is what's new about Putinism. In place of the internationalist Soviet ideology of Marxism-Leninism, Putin has asserted the ultra-nationalist proposition that Russian statehood should be based on ethnicity. Putin has used it in Ukraine to expand Russian territory. But his brand of ethnic geopolitics, redolent of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th, is a double-edged sword: It could shrink Russian territory, since vast parts of that country are populated by non-Russian ethnic groups who are unlikely to welcome or, over the long run, tolerate a Russian chauvinist in the Kremlin who wears a crucifix when he bares his chest. Putin, in other words, may inadvertently be hastening the day when the Caucasus and Central Asia will be vulnerable to jihadists who are already planning to establish a caliphate in part of what is now the Russian Federation.

The other reason to doubt the staying power of Putinism is what's old about it. Putinism as a system of governance replicates, in its essence, the regime that failed to modernize the Soviet economy, failed to normalize Soviet society and ultimately failed to rescue the Soviet state from extinction. Besides, Putin's concept of Russian security, like that of every Soviet leader from Stalin to Chernenko, has a perverse and potentially self-defeating feature: Russia won't feel absolutely secure unless all its neighbors feel absolutely insecure. As a result, in the putative Putin era, Russia, once again, is a paranoid state that makes its own enemies. That same zero-sum strategy kept the USSR from being accepted by the international community as a trustworthy and constructive major power.

Speculation about the longevity of the system Putin has put in place should take account of the fate of the one he has, in fundamental ways, brought back to life: the Soviet system, and with it the Soviet state, lasted only seven decades — three score and 10 years, the biblical lifespan of a single mortal. Moreover, that system and state were not destroyed by foreign enemies like those Lt. Col. Putin hunted down in Dresden 30 years ago and those he still obsesses about from the Kremlin. Rather, it expired because of its own pathologies. It was unfit for survival in the modern world.

Safire made that connection in his January 2000 column. “The irony is that a ‘Putin era’ would mean an uncompetitive, economically weakened Russia,” he wrote. Rather than fearing a “resurgence of Russian power,” Safire predicted that the result would be “the surly stagnation of what would come to be called Putinism.” In other words, precisely because Putinism is a conscious attempt to bring back a proven failure from the past as model for the future, it's doomed.

Still, that's no excuse for complacency on the part of the West. Under its current leadership, Russia is an immediate threat to its neighbors, a disruptive and divisive force in the evolution of Europe, and a potential threat to world peace. It's also an impediment to the ability of the international community to manage other perils, including the existential ones of climate change and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

But in designing new strategies for dealing with the Kremlin in the months and years ahead, we should remember, too, that Russia today is not the Soviet Union. It's not stuck in the mid-

20th century, to say nothing of the 19th. It's nowhere near as monolithic and isolated as it was in the bad old days. Its people have had more than a taste of what it's like to live in a normal, modern country. Russia is bigger and more resilient than Putinism; it will outlive the Putinist system just as it survived the one he is trying to resurrect.

NY Times

[Seeking New Start, Finding Steep Cost](#)

Workforce Investment Act Leaves Many Jobless and in Debt

by Timothy Williams



Joe DeGrella of Louisville trained as a cardiology technician but works at AutoZone.

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — When the financial crisis crippled the construction industry seven years ago, Joe DeGrella's contracting company failed, leaving him looking for what he hoped would be the last job he would ever need.

He took each step in line with the advice of the federal government: He met with an unemployment counselor who provided him with a list of job titles the Labor Department determined to be in high demand, he picked from among colleges that offered government-certified job-training courses, and he received a federal retraining grant.

In 2009, Mr. DeGrella, began a course at [Daymar College](#) — a for-profit vocational institute in Louisville — to become a cardiology technician. Daymar officials told him he would have a well-paying job within weeks of graduation.

But after about two years of studying cardiovascular physiology and the mechanics of electrocardiograms, Mr. DeGrella, now 57, found himself jobless and \$20,000 in debt. He moved into his sister's basement and now works at an AutoZone.



"I've worked my whole life," said Joe DeGrella, who had hoped for a new start as a cardiology technician, but has yet to find a job in the field. "I'm just angry that I was trying to improve myself and my situation, and end up \$20,000 in debt."

Millions of unemployed Americans like Mr. DeGrella have trained for new careers as part of the Workforce Investment Act, a \$3.1 billion federal program that, in an unusual act of bipartisanship, was reauthorized by Congress last month with little public discussion about its [effectiveness](#). Like Mr. DeGrella, many have not found the promised new career.

Instead, an extensive analysis of the program by The New York Times shows, many graduates wind up significantly worse off than when they started — mired in unemployment and debt from training for positions that do not exist, and they end up working elsewhere for minimum wage.

Split between federal and state governments — federal officials dispense the money and states license the training — the initiative lacks rigorous oversight by either. It includes institutions that require thousands of hours of instruction and charge more than the most elite private colleges. Some courses are offered at [for-profit colleges](#) that have committed fraud in their search for federal funding. This includes Corinthian Colleges Inc., which [reached](#) an agreement last month with the federal Education Department to shut down or sell many of its campuses.

The Times examination, based on state and federal documents, school and court records, and interviews, shows that some of the retraining institutions advertise graduation and job-placement rates that often do not hold up to scrutiny.

The idea of dividing responsibility between federal and state officials was to give local and state authorities more power in helping the unemployed in their areas. But the unemployed who sign up for training are often left to navigate a bureaucratic maze with almost no guidance. To avoid any appearance of favoritism, federal job counselors are not allowed to recommend schools to job seekers, leaving many of the unemployed to unwittingly select institutions that are expensive, have a history of legal trouble or are academically substandard.

There is, for example, no mechanism for students to check in with counselors to gauge their progress or determine whether the training program is a good match. States say they

investigate complaints and audit programs with poor outcomes, but students say they tend not to register formal complaints about a program's quality.

When the newly unemployed seek government benefits, their skills and education are assessed at a federal employment office. If there are too few jobs in their current field, they are selected for retraining through the [Workforce Investment Act](#). They choose from among dozens of professions, with each successful applicant receiving a stipend of up to \$3,000 a year to pay for the training. The rest typically comes from federal grants and loans.

A divorced father of two, Mr. DeGrella said he was among many in the course at Daymar who were unable to find jobs and who now owe thousands of dollars. One classmate is \$25,000 in debt and works at a McDonald's. Daymar, which declined to comment, is being [sued](#) by Kentucky's attorney general for misleading students.

"I've worked hard my whole life," said Mr. DeGrella, who also once managed a manufacturing company. "I'm just angry that I was trying to improve myself and my situation, and end up \$20,000 in debt."

While government officials defend the retraining program as useful — and clearly it does lead some unemployed people to new careers — neither federal nor state agencies collect data on the number of people who finish job training or earn professional certificates. As a result, officials acknowledge that they are unable to determine how many students the program has helped find appropriate jobs during the past 15 years.

Carolyn Heinrich, director of the Center for Health and Social Policy at the University of Texas at Austin, has [studied](#) the training program extensively and considers it deficient.

"The jobs they are being trained for really aren't better paying," she said. "We have not used our work force investment system to help people make the choices they need to succeed. For some of the workers, we know what we're doing for them isn't working."

The law was enacted in 1998 and expanded in 2009 as part of the federal economic stimulus package. As the economy has improved — which has led more of the long-term unemployed to try to re-enter the labor market — training and apprenticeships have become a central component of the Obama administration's [plan](#) to match the unemployed with job openings. About 21 million jobless people entered retraining in 2012.

The training program offers courses at community colleges, vocational and business schools, and four-year universities where students can study everything from petroleum pump systems to makeup for the cinema.



President Bill Clinton after signing the Workforce Investment Act in 1998.

Nolan King, 35, completed an 18-month respiratory therapy training program in 2011 at a [Concorde Career College](#), a for-profit school, in Orange County, Calif. He said that he borrowed \$42,000 for the course, and he has not been able to find a full-time job.

Though his school claims a 95 percent job-placement rate within six months of graduation, Mr. King, who has sued Concorde, said only five of the 25 students in his class have found full-time jobs. A Concorde official did not dispute those figures.

Mr. King, who has a bachelor of arts degree from California State University, Fullerton, said he has so little money that he alternates the months in which he pays his two credit card bills and has delayed indefinitely a visit to the doctor to check a worrisome mole.

“I’ve applied for every job under the sun,” he said. “I’m doing everything I’m supposed to do. My wife, who works, expected not to have all the weight on her shoulders.”

The problem is also present at [public institutions](#) that offer federal job training.

At [Florida Keys Community College](#), for instance, training for a two-year associate degree to get a job as a nursing assistant costs \$10,958, compared with the \$6,630 annual tuition at the University of Florida.

Students at Florida Keys default on their loans at a rate of 19.4 percent; at the University of Florida, the rate is 3 percent.

Juggling Cost-Effectiveness

The [South Texas Vocational Technical Institute](#), which operates several campuses, is among a number of schools nationally that have been allowed to offer Workforce Investment Act courses despite having defrauded the federal government.

The school, which calls itself “a leader in the field of technical and vocational training,” has also failed to find jobs for as many as two-thirds of its students in some programs — many of whom have taken out thousands of dollars in loans to enroll, according to school records.

It trains medical and dental assistants, air-conditioning technicians, welders and automobile mechanics for [between \\$18,000 and \\$25,000](#) a year.

During the past seven years, the institute’s [former president](#) has been sentenced to federal prison for defrauding the Department of Education; the Texas Workforce Commission has prevented it from offering some Workforce Investment Act training courses for failing to meet required graduation and job placement levels; and two of the institute’s employees, including the former admissions director, have been indicted on a charge of attempting to defraud the government of nearly \$500,000 in student aid funds.

In January, the school’s parent company, ATI Enterprises Inc., filed for bankruptcy after having agreed to pay \$3.7 million [to settle a Justice Department lawsuit](#) for submitting false student financial aid claims.

The school’s new owners, STVT-AAI Education Inc., declined to comment, but in an August 2013 [news release](#) announcing its purchase of the schools, it lauded what it said was a reputation for excellence.



Kamala Harris, the California attorney general, in October 2013 announced a lawsuit against the for-profit Corinthian Colleges.

But only 30 percent of those studying to be medical assistants at the South Texas institute graduate on time, and only 48 percent of those graduates find jobs, according to school [documents](#) — all while paying fees nearly three times the tuition of the University of Texas.

Additionally, nearly 30 percent of the institute's students default on their loans, according to Department of Education records, compared with about 5 percent at the University of Texas at Austin.

And though the institute's medical assistant students borrow an average of \$10,801, according to federal data, they can expect to earn as little as \$10 an hour, according to local job listings — yielding an annual salary roughly equal to the poverty level for a three-person family.

“It's a lot of money for a potentially low-paying job,” said Pat Hobbs, executive director of the Cameron County work force board, which manages Workforce Investment Act training programs. “But these are kids who are at home, and maybe no one is working. So they see light at the end of the tunnel, and figure any job is better than no job.”

South Texas Vocational Technical Institute's campuses, located in one of the poorest areas of the nation, are made up nearly entirely of Latinos, two-thirds of whom are women. Cameron County, home of the Brownsville campus, has an annual per capita income of less than \$11,000. About 40 percent of the work force lacks a high school diploma.

In May, one day after a Times reporter told state authorities that three of the institute's programs had fallen below the state's minimum 60 percent employment rate for graduates taking part in the training program, the Texas Workforce Commission sent the school a [letter](#) seeking corrective action.

Nonetheless, the commission said the school stands in good stead.

“There are no administrative actions that would affect the school's licensing status with T.W.C. at this time,” Lisa J. Givens, a spokeswoman for the state commission, wrote in an email.

Assessing the Training

When Congress reauthorized the Workforce Investment Act last month, it did not address concerns about the cost of some of the schools, the level of debt students were left with or whether counselors should be allowed to offer more direct professional advice. In a nod to past criticism, however, the updated law does require states to better track former students to determine if training helped them find work with sustainable wages.

During interviews, Labor Department officials said the program works well. They said that assessing the quality of training is up to the states, and that the agency does not regulate tuitions and is unaware of concerns related to prices.

“If providers fail to meet the state's requirements and job-placement policies, states have a process in place to revoke their eligibility,” Eric Seleznow, a deputy assistant secretary in the Labor Department, said in response to written questions.

While the Labor Department said four of five [dislocated](#) workers had found jobs after undergoing training, a spokesman acknowledged the figure does not distinguish between people who completed job training and those who quit.

In some states, data and academic [studies](#) have suggested that a vast majority of the unemployed may have found work without the help of the Workforce Investment Act.



"I could live on \$15 an hour because it is not that expensive to live here," said Jarrod Howard of Atwater, Calif., who has been unemployed for two years, and recently finished a welding course. "But I'm trying to put away as much money as I can to retire. If I ever retire."

In South Carolina, for example, 75 percent of dislocated workers found jobs without training, compared with 77 percent who found jobs after entering the program, according to state figures.

A group of for-profit schools frequently at odds with regulators over the quality of their training and their costs charge some of the highest tuitions but place relatively few students in jobs.

One for-profit school, Corinthian Colleges Inc., based in California, is being [sued](#) by the attorneys general of California and Massachusetts, accused of violating securities and consumer protection laws and pressuring students into high-interest subprime loans. Corinthian agreed in July to have a federal monitor oversee its operations as it sells many of its campuses.

Kent Jenkins, a Corinthian spokesman, said its typical student is from a low-income family and has failed in previous attempts to earn a certificate or degree.

"We offer training in health care programs, where if you complete the training, the first job pays in the low- to mid-\$20,000s a year," he said. "That's not a fortune. But it gets you out of unemployment, and gets you on a track for a career. It's a good investment."

A medical assistant course offered by Corinthian that costs \$19,000 represents what Mr. Jenkins said was a "consequential amount, but not the proverbial mountains of debt."

Job-training programs can cost more than \$50,000 at Concorde, a competing group of for-profit schools based in Missouri that had its policies criticized by a United States Senate committee report in 2009.

Tim Foster, Concorde's chief executive officer, insisted that the schools' educational standards were worth the cost, but he acknowledged that Concorde had recently reduced prices to make up for fewer students enrolling.

At Daymar College, the for-profit school Mr. DeGrella attended, students pay \$18,000 to earn a certificate in dental assisting, or \$36,000 for an associate degree.

But more than one-third of those who earned the associate degree failed to find a job, despite taking out an average of \$18,475 in loans, according to school data. In another Daymar training program — for billing and coding specialists, which also costs \$36,000 — just 38 percent of graduates find jobs, according to the school's accreditor, the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools. Daymar refused to comment, saying it had few students enrolled in Workforce Investment Act courses, but it declined a request to provide supporting data.

In the Central Valley of California, where unemployment hovers around 16 percent, the program needs more intense focus from the federal government, according to local officials.

At Central Valley Opportunity Center Inc. in Merced, Calif., of 34 people enrolled in a cooking course in 2012, only three found work, according to school [data](#).

More than one-third of the students who graduated from the center's welding course and more than two-thirds from its general business course earn less than \$20,000 a year, according to [school records](#).

Jarrod Howard, 45, who has been unemployed for two years, recently finished a welding course in nearby Modesto. He said that welders with his skills could earn \$60 an hour, but that he would settle for \$20 an hour if he were able to stay within 50 miles of the house he shares with his mother.

"I could live on \$15 an hour because it is not that expensive to live here, but I'm trying to put away as much money as I can to retire," he said. "If I ever retire."





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