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What Trump Can Learn from Oliver Stone's *Putin Interviews*

by Jiri Valenta

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The July 2015-February 2017 interviews with Vladimir Putin by US filmmaker Oliver Stone, now streaming on Showtime, provide surprising insights into the mind of the Russian leader. “We like President Trump,” Putin admits, recalling that during the election campaign Trump was open to a new relationship with Moscow. Further progress was stalled by Russo-gate. Trump should not buy Putin’s reasons for his Ukrainian and Syrian interventions, but would be wise to be open to renewing a limited partnership with Russia against Islamic terrorism and Pyongyang’s rogue regime.

2016 Russo-gate and 2012 America-gate

President Trump must remind the Russian leader that his election intervention denials have been exposed as false, as US intelligence was able to record his June 2016 orders to hack Hillary Clinton’s emails. However, he should also address Putin’s charges that twice – during the 2000 and particularly the 2012 Russian elections – Washington aggressively rallied the opposition and funded anti-Putin events. Putin also accuses US diplomats of supporting, controlling, and funding NGOs seeking to influence the outcome of elections. He thus implies that his interference in the 2016 US elections was payback of sorts.

“Dostoevsky character”

Henry Kissinger has described Putin as a “cold calculator of Russia’s national interest” and a “Dostoevsky character.” Indeed, much like Dostoevsky, the Russian president underwent a Kafkaesque metamorphosis from young, progressive revolutionary to conservative thinker and fierce defender of empire and orthodoxy. Stone makes clear,

however, that he does not know what to make of Putin's repeated references to God or his stance as defender of the Orthodox faith, which the Russian leader addresses when he takes him into his private chapel at his dacha.

In fact, Putin has genuinely embraced God, Russian orthodoxy, nationalism, and patriotism – but is humble about it. “I didn't make the church popular ... it was done by the Russian people,” he says. “The communist ideology ceased to exist and there was an ideological vacuum. The vacuum could be filled by nothing else but religion.”

Repudiation of chaotic Gorbachev-Yeltsin reforms

After the 1989 East German revolution, Putin, based in Dresden as a KGB lieutenant colonel, returned to his native city, St. Petersburg. At that time, Moscow maverick Boris Yeltsin and Putin's former law professor, Anatoly Sobchak, were unleashing revolution from below in the form of free elections and economic reforms. Putin helped Sobchak become the city's mayor and served as his deputy for foreign economic relations. He can thus raise a glass with Trump on the common ground of economics, investment, and trade. (It will have to be a non-alcoholic toast, as neither of them drinks.)

During the August 1991 coup, Putin joined Yeltsin and Sobchak in fighting the Communist putschists and resigned from the KGB. “I didn't agree with the actions undertaken by the Communists in the attempted coup against Gorbachev,” he says. Moving to Moscow in 1996, he worked for Yeltsin in his legal department, finally becoming head of the FSB, the KGB's successor. When Yeltsin became ill, he appointed Putin, known for his hard work and loyalty, as prime minister and then as acting president. “In four years I was acting president,” Putin recalls. It was “an incredible story.”

Eventually Putin concluded, however, that privatization and the transformation of Russia to capitalism under Yeltsin were too chaotic. Thus, he came to preside over state capitalism and a highly controlled market economic system. Trump should not be confused by Putin's skillful selling of Russia as a genuine democracy. It is not.

“Russia should think about joining NATO”

An important issue covered in Stone's interviews is how the new Cold War began. “In the 1990s,” Putin says, “we assumed the Cold War was over.” He recalls half-jokingly telling President Bill Clinton that “Russia should think about joining NATO.” Clinton responded, “Why not? I think it's possible.” But when Clinton brought up the idea with his team, “They were bewildered and frightened.” Putin himself began to have misgivings. He ultimately concluded that “There are only two opinions in NATO: the American opinion and the wrong opinion.”

Nevertheless, Trump should explore closer cooperation between Moscow and NATO. Can the partnership with Russia that prevailed during the early George W. Bush years in Afghanistan be restored? And if so, how?

Against regime change

The above question must begin with an examination of American follies in Iraq, Libya, and Syria. Like Trump, Putin did not agree with the US intervention in Iraq. "We had exact data there were no WMDs whatsoever in Iraq," he says. "The most depressing thing is to change the regimes in that part of the world with the hope the next day there will be American-style democracy."

Americans were happy when the Libyan dictator was killed in 2011, but, as in Iraq, the war in that country became a catastrophe. Before Qaddafi's death, there were few terrorists in Libya – but they came in as US-armed rebels, some of whom were jihadists, gained control of the country. Something similar could have happened in Syria, but the 2015 Kremlin intervention saved Assad from Qaddafi's fate.

Putin, McCain, and "Carthago delenda est"

John McCain will be shocked if he watches the Stone interviews. Putin reveals another side of his character when he professes to like the perennial hawk. "I like him because of his patriotism, and I can relate to his consistencies in his own fighting for the interests of his country."

Putin cites the motto of Marcus Porcius Cato, the elder of ancient Rome: "Cartego delenda est [Carthage must be destroyed]." The wars between Rome and Carthage, he explains, were exploited by barbarians who took advantage of the feud and eventually succeeded in destroying Rome. The lesson? "If these cities had not fought one another and had agreed on fighting a common enemy ... they would have both survived."

By citing history in this way, Putin again makes the case for a new partnership with America. "We've been supporting the US fight for independence. We were allies in WWI and WWII," he says. "Right now there are common threats we are both facing like international terrorism [the modern barbarians]."

Why Putin didn't conclude a 2016 Syria agreement with Obama

The agreement on Syria with the Obama administration was that the two powers were supposed to perform strikes jointly there on designated terrorist targets. Putin blames the US for giving up on the agreement for political reasons. He also maintains that Moscow held discussions with the Obama administration on resolving the Syrian crisis, only to conclude in October 2016 that time had run out. The Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs would talk instead to the incoming US administration.

The “art of the deal” on Ukraine

Trump should not take seriously Putin’s explanation that the intervention in Georgia happened simply because of the aggressiveness of Georgian leader Saakashvili. This is only part of the story. Nor should he buy Putin’s convoluted expositions on the conflicts in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, both of which began with Russian military intervention. Trump should lift western sanctions only if Putin volunteers to withdraw his forces from Ukraine and to recognize its territorial integrity and neutrality.

On Israel and the Jews

Putin is perhaps the first Russian leader in history who is not anti-Semitic. He knows that some 40% of Israel’s Jews or their ancestors hail from Russia. He compares the initiators of Russo-gate to anti-Semites who always blame the Jews for their own failures. He clearly does not support the Palestinians, recalling former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s words: “Mr. President, right now you are in a region where no one can ever be trusted on any matter.”

For Trump it is America First. For Putin, it is Russia First

The crescendo of the interviews comes when Stone argues that he himself is neither pro-American nor pro-Russian; he is pro-peace. Putin lectures the Hollywood leftist, “...You’re a man of peace. And I am pro-Russian ... You are too anti-American, and I don’t want to be dragged into it.” Clearly this is a message for Trump that Putin understands his strategy of “America First.” Trump defends his country’s vital national interests, and so does Putin. Russia First! The art of the deal is to reconcile the interests the two powers have in common. This will not be easy.

The North Korean crisis makes partnership with Russia a necessity

Putin does not reveal the details of his phone conversations with Trump on North Korea, which launched its first ICBM on America’s Independence Day. This move will likely be met by a strong, perhaps military, response by the US. But no matter what response Trump chooses, he will need Beijing’s and Moscow’s strong cooperation on both North Korea and Syria.

Trump should use his skills at the art of deal-making to end the new Cold War with Putin. America and Russia need each other.

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