

The Frightening World of Vladimir Putin

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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At the recent Valdai Discussion Club forum President Vladimir Putin conducted a three-hour tour of his own special world — the same world that German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned us he lives in. I must say that Putin's world is more frightening and filled with hidden terrors than any horror movie.

I was most surprised by one of the Russian president's main assertions — namely, that the collapse of the Soviet Union destroyed a certain system of "checks and balances" that existed during the Cold War.

As a result, according to Putin, the United States began behaving uncontrollably in the international arena. I wonder exactly what "system" the Russian leader had in mind. I would venture to assert that no such "system" ever existed. Both Moscow and Washington more or less did as they pleased, acting as they felt their own national security interests demanded. That thinking led to the invasions of Vietnam, Grenada, Afghanistan and Czechoslovakia.

The only system that existed was mutual nuclear deterrence, the understanding that the potential adversary could always cause unacceptable damage if the need arose. However,

that system remains effectively unchanged to this day: The U.S. and Russian nuclear forces are relatively equal. At the very least, each side has a large enough arsenal to dissuade the other from ever launching a nuclear attack.

The fact is, it was not a system of "checks and balances" that influenced Western governments, but the fear that they felt before unpredictable Kremlin leaders.

But as Putin showed in his speech, it is specifically the violently unpredictable nature of the Soviet Kremlin that he misses most.

It is no accident that, after making this point about checks and balances, Putin praised the most unpredictable former Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev. "True, the Soviet Union was referred to as 'the Upper Volta with missiles,'" Putin said. "Maybe so, and there were loads of missiles. Besides, we had such brilliant politicians like Nikita Khrushchev, who hammered the desk with his shoe at the UN. And the whole world, primarily the United States, and NATO thought: This Nikita is best left alone, he might just go and fire a missile, they have lots of them, we had better show some respect for them."

In all fairness, Khrushchev could only dream of the degree of nuclear parity that Russia now holds with the U.S. That is why he bluffed and waived his shoe around at the UN podium, thereby convincing everyone of his unpredictability.

And now Putin has pulled a similar stunt before the Valdai forum participants. He was obviously using demonstrative aggression to compensate for Moscow's undeniably weak position. Russia clearly lacks all the essentials for a confrontation with the West — the money, the faithful allies and the industrial capacity.

In fact, the Kremlin has only nuclear weapons at its disposal. But Putin finds it terribly annoying that Western leaders know he commands the world's second-largest nuclear arsenal and yet deny him the respect he believes he deserves. That is why he claims that crafty Washington has destroyed a system that granted the Soviet Union superpower status.

In reality, believing in the rationality of the new Russian leaders following the collapse of the Soviet empire, Western leaders became convinced that a situation could not conceivably arise in which either side would push the red button and turn the planet into a radioactive desert.

The result was that the "nuclear factor" gradually lost significance when dealing with the Kremlin. When NATO began military operations against Yugoslavia, Russia's then-President Boris Yeltsin genuinely wondered: "Why aren't they afraid of us?"

Putin wants to regain that same "respect" that the West held for Khrushchev, and he sees no other way but to underscore his own unpredictability. I suspect that the recent sorties by Russian strategic bombers over the Atlantic Ocean and the Baltic, North and Black seas are a manifestation of this new unpredictability.

It is no wonder then that in his Valdai speech Putin said: "Today, we already see a sharp increase in the likelihood of a whole set of violent conflicts with either direct or indirect participation by the world's major powers."

Welcome to the brave new world of Vladimir Putin, a world ruled by 19th-century realpolitik

where disagreements between "major powers" are resolved through war. The only difference is that 19th-century leaders did not have nuclear weapons. Is another Cuban missile crisis already in the making?

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