

PBS documentary *Putin's Way*: Half-truths and lies in the service of US warmongering against Russia

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9 September 2015

Last week, PBS, the major public broadcaster in the United States, re-aired the one-hour exposé *Putin's Way* on its “Frontline” television program. It is currently available for streaming on the “Frontline” web site.

The film was initially released in January 2015. Created by writer, director and producer Neil Docherty, it features the work of investigative reporter Gillian Findlay.

Putin's Way is not so much a documentary as a propaganda piece intended to justify Washington's confrontation with Russia and make the case for regime-change in Moscow, if necessary by military means. Proponents of the anti-Putin campaign among intellectuals and in the government and media are no doubt delighted by the combination of half-truths, omissions and hypocritical expressions of moral indignation that characterize the film. But the viewer genuinely seeking to understand the origins and character of the oligarchy ruling Russia will find little insight.

Putin's Way begins by promising its audience “the inside story of the Russian president's rise to power.” It provides a smattering of facts about Vladimir Putin's childhood and early life and a rudimentary outline of his evolution from KGB officer working in East Germany, to deputy mayor of Saint Petersburg working under the tutelage of Anatoly Sobchak, to prime minister under Boris Yeltsin, and finally to the Russian presidency. This narrative is accompanied by a menacing, horror film-like score.

Along the way, the film presents evidence of corruption involving Putin and his allies. Examples include the future president filching money amassed through the sale of state resources for the designated purpose of purchasing food for Saint Petersburg; Putin's use of his position as Saint Petersburg's chair of foreign economic relations to cut special deals with overseas investors; the funneling of government money intended for construction projects into the purchase of vacation villas; cooperation with organized crime; and turning a blind eye to money laundering.

The documentary asserts that corruption in Russia today is more systematic than at any previous time in the country's history. Russian investigators whose work has been censored speak to the camera.

American professor Karen Dawisha, who recently published the book *Putin's Kleptocracy*, notes that the process of theft began in the 1990s. In relation to the stealing of money intended to purchase food supplies for Saint Petersburg, she indignantly declares, “So millions, millions were made in just that episode alone!”

Dawisha and the filmmaker leave out of this tale two critical facts. First, during the 1980s and 1990s, the United States and Europe

wholeheartedly supported the regimes of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and Russian President Boris Yeltsin, under whose oversight the widespread theft of state-owned property was initiated and then expanded to staggering levels. Second, the privatization “shock therapy” policies that underlay this process and led to the immense inequality Dawisha laments later in the documentary were crafted in Washington. The approach to privatization in Russia became known as the “Washington consensus.”

Harvard academics, working alongside representatives of the Clinton administration, the International Monetary Fund and right-wing reformers inside Russia, drew up measures they knew would place vast wealth in the hands of a tiny minority. Both former Communist Party insiders like Vladimir Putin and overseas investors from the US, Europe and elsewhere—i.e., those individuals who would have been sitting in the lobby of Putin's office when he oversaw Saint Petersburg's foreign economic affairs—fed at the trough.

In his book *Post-Soviet Russia: A Journey Through the Yeltsin Era*, Roy Medvedev lists a string of revelations published in the Russian press during the mid-1990s documenting how major resources, including portions of the country's military-industrial complex, disappeared into private hands with hardly a penny in compensation to the state. But, as Anatoly Chubais, one of the main architects of this process and a darling of Washington, said in 1997, “I held, and I still hold, that the creation of private property in Russia was an absolute value [to strive for]. In order to achieve this goal, it was necessary at times to sacrifice certain schematic notions of economic efficiency.”

In 1993, when a conflict erupted between the Yeltsin regime and the parliament over these deeply unpopular policies, the Russian president bombarded the parliament building, killing hundreds. US President Bill Clinton endorsed these actions, declaring, “President Yeltsin had no other alternative but to try to restore order.” At that time, Washington had no objection to the profoundly anti-democratic methods of the new Russian ruling elite.

While the film later complains that Putin did not “take Russia on a path closer to the West—democratic, liberal and capitalist,” in reality, the present state of affairs is the direct outcome of the Stalinist bureaucracy's liquidation of the Soviet Union through an alliance between Western capitalism, Communist Party bureaucrats and sections of the USSR's aspiring petty-bourgeois intelligentsia. *Putin's Way* intentionally omits this history in an effort to cover up the central role played by American imperialism in the political and socio-economic calamity that brought Putin and the forces he represents to power.

Furthermore, the billions stolen by Russia's oligarchs pale in comparison to the colossal theft that occurred during and after the 2008-2009 world economic crisis, which saw the US and global financial industry bailed out to the tune of trillions even as the home values, pensions and jobs of ordinary people were wiped out. The documentary's efforts to portray Putin as the world's greatest financial criminal are preposterous and hypocritical. When an exercised Dawisha describes the Russian parliament as a "pay-to-play system" and implies that the audience ought to be incensed by the level of wealth inequality in Russia, one wants to retort, "Who are you kidding?"

Changing what needs to be changed, the film's exposures of grotesque levels of inequality could easily be mistaken for an exposé of the situation in the United States.

As one gets further into Docherty's film, it becomes clear that those behind *Putin's Way* do not actually have a problem with criminal oligarchs. They have a problem only with those oligarchs who are insufficiently subservient to Washington. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who was once the richest man in Russia, is featured prominently. His ill-gotten wealth comes from swindling in Russia's nascent banking industry in the early 1990s and control over Yukos, one of the country's energy giants, established through the "loans for shares" scam of the shock therapy era.

This oligarch, who was jailed by Putin in 2003 on tax evasion charges, says he came into conflict with the Kremlin because, in response to the passage of US legislation making it illegal to do business with companies that engage in bribe-taking and other corrupt practices, he suggested that Russian firms clean up their act. Khodorkovsky tells us he thought Putin would "chose the European model... because it was obviously more beneficial for the country."

The viewer is meant to believe that if only the likes of Khodorkovsky were in power, Russia would be delivered from the terrible grip of the Putin machine. Sergei Kolesnikov and Valeri Morozov, wealthy tycoons who abandoned the Kremlin, are also called upon to give testimony against the regime from which they profited handsomely.

While Docherty portrays Russia's oligarchs-turned-anti-Putinists in a flattering light, he derides ordinary people. Observing that in 2011 Putin's regime was the target of mass anti-government protests, *Putin's Way* bewails the Kremlin's subsequent resurgence in popularity on the basis of anti-Westernism. Clips from pro-Putin demonstrations are intended to make the population look like dupes.

The middle chapters of *Putin's Way* deal with the murky circumstances under which Putin, a little known government bureaucrat, was elevated to the presidency. The documentary describes the decrepit state of the Yeltsin regime and the ailing president's need to find a replacement who would block investigations into corruption. Putin is chosen as the man for the job, but the conditions have to be created to put him in power and turn the country's attention away from a burgeoning domestic crisis.

The film moves on to the September 1999 apartment bombings in Russia, which the Kremlin linked to the ethnic-nationalist conflict in the breakaway region of Chechnya. Despite evidence that the country's security services were involved, the attacks were used as a pretext to launch a second war in Chechnya. This coincided with the assumption of the presidency by Putin, who portrayed himself as a national hero fighting to deliver the country from the grip of terrorists. Several commentators recount the ways in which investigations into the apartment bombings were blocked and critics jailed.

The narrator recounts this sequence of events indignant and outraged at the very notion of a government using a terrorist attack to rescue itself from a domestic crisis and start a war. One wonders if Docherty thinks his audience is infinitely gullible and stupid. There are clear parallels between Putin's rise to power and the disputed origins of the Bush administration, which took office on the basis of a stolen election and used the 9/11 attacks—which have never been seriously investigated—to stoke up patriotic sentiment and launch wars of aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq.

One of the clearest expressions of the political bias of *Putin's Way* is the absence of any mention of the US-orchestrated, far-right coup in Ukraine in February 2014 that brought to power a violently anti-Russian government, which has been brutally repressing Ukraine's Russian-speaking population and all those opposed to its fascistic policies. The purpose of this omission is to portray Russia as an imperialist power and the aggressor in Eastern Europe.

We are told by the narrator, "Putin has invaded Crimea and redrawn the map of Ukraine, claiming he is protecting ethnic Russians," as if the Kremlin's intervention in Ukraine was an aggressive action, rather than a defensive response to the US and German drive to turn Ukraine into a client state of Western imperialism and reduce Russia to a semi-colonial status.

Furthermore, Docherty leaves out the fact that Russia's annexation of Crimea was validated by a popular referendum, whose legitimacy has not been questioned. In a turnout of more than 80 percent of the voting age population, over 95 percent of voters supported rejoining Russia.

One accusation is heaped on another. Without presenting a shred of evidence, *Putin's Way* implies that the Kremlin was behind the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17.

The "Frontline" documentary ends on a particularly ugly note. Referring to Putin, Dawisha declares, "I haven't seen any evidence that he's willing to back down. And it's not his style at all, ever. He doesn't back down." Then, Natalia Gevorkyan, a biographer of Putin, concludes a story of the Russian president in which she compares him to a cornered rat. "He will not say, 'OK, let's talk,' he will jump," she says.

What is the point of all this? If Putin is not a man with whom one can negotiate, then, like vermin, he should be stamped out. And if, as the film implies, the majority of the population are also pro-Putin, why should they not be treated the same way?



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