

VVP: Is Vladimir Putin the Super-Villain We've All Been Waiting For?

Written by Robert A. Saunders

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ROBERT A. SAUNDERS, SEP 22 2015

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin makes Dr. Evil look like Charlie Brown. Naive, parochial, and satisfied by small victories (which always lay beyond his grasp). Putin, or at least the man who returned to the presidency of the Russian Federation in 2012, is a proper super-villain, more reminiscent of a Lex Luthor, Dr. Doom, or Sauron (obviously, not a Darth Vader as that role was long-ago assumed by former U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney).

Like all great villains who are governed by the immutable laws of the comic book narrative, Putin attempts to change rather than maintain the status quo. It is up to the 'heroes' (some more 'super' than others) of the West to maintain the way things are, be they the fair-and-balanced Wonder Woman (Angela Merkel), the nerdy-yet-resilient Spider-Man (Barack Obama), or the aloof-and-frequently-absent off-shore balancer Gandalf (David Cameron). Yet even in concert, this league of extraordinary gentlepersons cannot seem to counter the nefarious designs of VVP. He shoots whales with crossbows, dives the Black Sea in submersibles, molests children in broad daylight, rides ponies over mountains in a state of amazing shirtlessness, and conquers those who challenge him in the Soviet martial art of sambo, all while starting a Ukrainian civil war in his spare time. He is the enemy we in the West secretly wish for. Keep your Kim Jong-ils, your Idi Amins, your Saddam Husseins, even your Slobodan Miloševićs. They've got nothing on VVP (I will avoid a reference to Adolf Hitler here as this is just unfair given the reservoir of pop-cultural resonance produced by Hollywood over the past seven decades). Putin is, according to one very wry mash-up video, the 'most interesting man in the world'.

I recently presented a paper on this topic at a conference on 'Russian Culture in the Era of Globalisation' (University of Leeds). While this post does not exactly replicate the content of this essay, it does reprise its themes, those being that popular culture does not only matter in contemporary IR, it is frighteningly important in determining the predisposition of various publics towards foreign policy messaging. However, this is old pat. While those scholars who command the upper echelons of IR scholarship continue to labour under the myth that popular culture is both impervious to measurement and ultimately irrelevant, those of us who 'beaver away' like Solzhenitsyn in exile in the magical-realistic realm that is popular culture-world politics continuum demand more of our work. We expect our scholarship to explain things of which we are only marginally aware.

In the case of Putin-mania in the West (a very different animal than what exists in Russia proper), the super-villain frame is a self-sustaining and organic phenomenon that produces a powerful feedback loop that should be observed with an unflinching gaze. The more we in the West aggrandize Putin's (super)villainy-cum-political mastery, either through effigies on *House of Cards*, Internet memes, or YouTube videos, the stronger VVP becomes in his relationship to our 'heroes'. Nina Khrushcheva, the scion of a *bête noir* of the West in his own right, has actually made the bold claim that VVP is feeding off the West's representation of him qua a super-villain, thus giving us more of what we demand as a viewing audience and concomitantly adding to his own puissance in global affairs. Thus, like a Baudrillardian dreaming of a Qaeda-style attack prior to 9/11, we are the authors of our own geopolitical narrative, no matter how nightmarish it becomes.

Does this then take away the agency of Vladimir Putin? Yes and no. Putin understands us and we understand Putin. Like a James Bond villain seeking world domination—or at a minimum the manipulation of some geopolitical lever

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that will bring unfair dividends back to the man or woman who pulls it—Putin sees in the world system as a grand game to be played. He is the ultimate game theory IR practitioner, and we in the West slavishly adhere to our own rose-coloured *Weltanschauungs* despite their ineffectiveness in countering our 'foe'. Putin, who took his time in the wilderness (placing his shill Dmitry Medvedev in his stead) with aplomb, akin to the Joker languishing in Arkham Asylum or Magneto's retreat to Genosha, has returned to his role as 'geopolitical enemy number one', as he was incautiously and presciently labelled by Mitt Romney in 2012. Putin—and no other—sits happily upon this throne, and we thank him for it. Like Osama bin Laden circa 2000, VVP, while real enough, is more a figment of our popular-geopolitical imagination, and one which we cannot live without.

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Dr. Robert A. Saunders is a Professor in the Department of History, Politics and Geography at Farmingdale State College-SUNY. He is the author of four books, including *Popular Geopolitics and Nation Branding in the Post-Soviet Realm* (Routledge, 2017). His research explores the changing nature of national, religious, and political identity in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.