

Vladimir Putin as the Prison Yard Thug

***Photo credits Microsoft Encarta**

The Prison Yard Thug

When Bill Browder stated in his book *Red Notice*, that Vladimir Putin plays “by the rules of the prison yard”, he accurately came to the same conclusion that I did some time ago. It’s a very astute observation considering that Mr. Browder has never served time in prison. I, on the other hand, have served 20 years interacting with incarcerated men that I argue do not think much differently from Vladimir Putin. A criminal is a criminal because of the way he thinks and views the world and his place in it. This is true regardless of the means one has at his disposal and is well established in psychological circles. It has been shown that the individual willing to embezzle a client’s funds (read: non-violent crime) and the one who has physically assaulted his victim (read: violent crime) are alike in that they share similar thinking patterns. These similarities are great enough that individual behavior can be accurately predicted to a high degree of certainty.

Vladimir Putin As the Prison Yard Thug

When we view Vladimir Putin’s behavior through this backdrop the irrationality and seeming impulsivity of his actions falls away. In my view he is the ‘textbook’ prison yard thug, and like all thugs they possess insecurities and weaknesses. Oftentimes their actions are a result of their desire and subsequent inability to control their environment. This flawed desire is firmly rooted in past life experiences and over time becomes reinforced through a process of flawed thinking patterns that center on the individual and his perceived place in the world. I know this to be true for I have personally known, observed, and interacted with numerous prison yard thugs.



Western governments have been asking the question: “How does one contain Vladimir Putin?” I argue that a better question would be to ask “What is the language that Vladimir Putin *respects* and listens to?” The prison thug reads passivity and

appeasement as weakness and continues unabated. Anything short of force or the perceived imminent threat of force fails to stop the prison yard thug

In the prison setting, when the thug encounters a response that he expected he continues onward with his actions. For example, in 1999 I watched as one individual spent the entire year going about the yard singling out young, new inmates. He would then corner them and threaten them with bodily harm if they did not buy him the commissary items he had written on scraps of paper. Each of the new inmates buckled under the threat of physical harm, and on commissary day purchased the demanded items. The victims rationalized that appeasement was the 'best' route, and that notifying staff (who could then enact an effective counter-action by physically removing the individual from the population) would have only caused them more trouble than it was worth. It is a response that the prison yard thug expects and receives nearly every time. The prison yard thug preys upon and relies upon his victim's continued inability to resist at a level deemed detrimental to his plan or well being. Had any of the victims notified staff or countered the prison yard thug's advance through the use of *unexpected* force (e.g. use of a weapon or the convincing threat of the use of a weapon or the threat of collective physical action by the friends of the victim), they would have avoided the future they accepted while incarcerated.

When the prison yard thug is not confronted early he begins to amass power. Observers start to rationalize that this is a dangerous individual, and that should they ever encounter him it is best to appease than to resist. This, of course, further perpetuates the prison yard thug's stature. Over time he becomes emboldened until eventually he makes a critical mistake that lands him in a higher security institution or with outside court charges.

Stopping Vladimir Putin

It is difficult to stop the determined prison yard thug who is intent on effecting a means to an end because it requires steadfast resignation to hold one's ground. Force must be met with force or the perceived threat of force, which exceeds what the individual anticipated. The prison yard thug expects the possibility that his victim will

attempt to fight back or seek help from a friend. These are scenarios the prison yard thug has already considered. A victim is chosen after careful deliberation, and he **will not** choose a victim that he does not believe he can subdue. In other words, based on his calculus he moves forward with confidence that he will succeed.

Vladimir Putin chose Ukraine. He concluded that his victim (Ukraine) may fight back which, infact, has happened. He previously calculated that he could overcome any forceful effort by Ukraine with minimal loss to himself (read: Russia's military), which he has concluded correctly.



Vladimir Putin considered the possibility that his victim's friend's (Europe; United States) may attempt to come to his aid, and that their attempt to help would be ineffectual. Again Vladimir Putin calculated correctly. The most important thing here is that Vladimir Putin is far from impulsive. He calculated that Ukraine's most powerful friend (the United States) would either be unwilling or unable to help Ukraine. He has calculated that by the time Ukraine's friends convince themselves to be forceful, he will have achieved most of his objective. It is folly to believe that Vladimir Putin doesn't have a plan should offensive weapons be offered to Ukraine. I suspect he would ramp up offensive capabilities to separatists.

"A half-hearted response confirms to the prison yard thug that his victim and his friends are weak"

the
Why?

Because this is what the prison yard thug would do. For example, in the prison setting, the thug would raise the stakes. The victim that resists half-heartedly is promptly crushed through the use of force. A half-hearted response encourages the prison yard thug and emboldens him. Such a response confirms to the prison yard thug that his victim and his friends are weak and that he, the thug, is in full control. Arguably, there is merit to such a conclusion.

As our prison yard thug, Vladimir Putin could crush a half-hearted introduction of offensive weaponry to Ukrainian forces by using his air forces or threatening to open

another front elsewhere. He could even drop the façade of deniability and ‘openly’ assist the separatists. Above all, it would be a response designed to effectively counter and intimidate, and to cause western governments to rethink further “escalating” the situation. There is one certainty here and that is a half-hearted move by the West will certainly be crushed, for this is what Vladimir Putin expects.

I argue that it’s at this point that the West’s counter-move should be to re-raise the stakes to an extremely uncomfortable level for Vladimir Putin; a level that he underestimated the West would rise to. Whatever form this comes in, such as, denying Russia access to the S.W. I.F.T. transaction system, sanctions targeting critical parts of



the Russian economy and/or the dramatic escalation of the use of force—it will be uncomfortable for both Russia and the West. *Above all, it must not be a bluff* because men like Vladimir Putin will see through such an attempt. The probability that Vladimir Putin will test the West’s resolve by threatening the nuclear option is likely. However, he’s

not irrational, and he’s not insane. When the prison yard thug encounters a similar scenario, say when the victim’s friends rally en-masse to help, the prison yard thug lashes out with extreme threats. He may threaten to kill one or more of the victim’s friends; other times he may threaten to use a weapon, may even brandish one. Nearly every time the prison yard thug chooses to back down. Why? *Because he knows that he can’t win.*

I contend that this is exactly what Vladimir Putin will be forced to do. The nuclear option is not an option and Vladimir Putin knows this.

Where Vladimir Putin Stands

Vladimir Putin doesn’t believe that the West has the will to stand up to him. He doesn’t believe Ukraine stands a chance. He doesn’t believe he has to abide by the rules of the international community. All his life, going back to his days with the KGB, as first deputy mayor of St. Petersburg, as head of the FSB, as prime minister and now president—literally his entire professional life, he has thumbed his nose at the rule of law.

In 2008 he used troops to invade South Ossetia, Georgia; he seized the Crimea after helping Viktor Yanukovich flee Ukraine, all the while denying that there were Russian troops involved in the seizure, only to admit the truth in a 2015 documentary. He has had murdered opposition figures Anna Politkovskaya in 2006 and critic Alexander Litvinenko who was poisoned in London that same year. He has forged his own path in his own image and never been stopped. Vladimir Putin is far from feeling his way through life. He is a calculating man who spends a great deal of time thinking about his life and future and how to achieve the ends he seeks. History reflects this, and he has accomplished this with a close cadre of loyal comrades who now head critical government agencies and organizations in Russia.

I contend that the window for stopping Vladimir Putin is rapidly closing. As men like Vladimir Putin are allowed to continue unabated they become bolder and take greater risks. With this comes the real possibility of terrible miscalculation on Vladimir Putin's part. If the West doesn't move to stop Vladimir Putin now, then the future may indeed belong to Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin's 'Novorussia'.