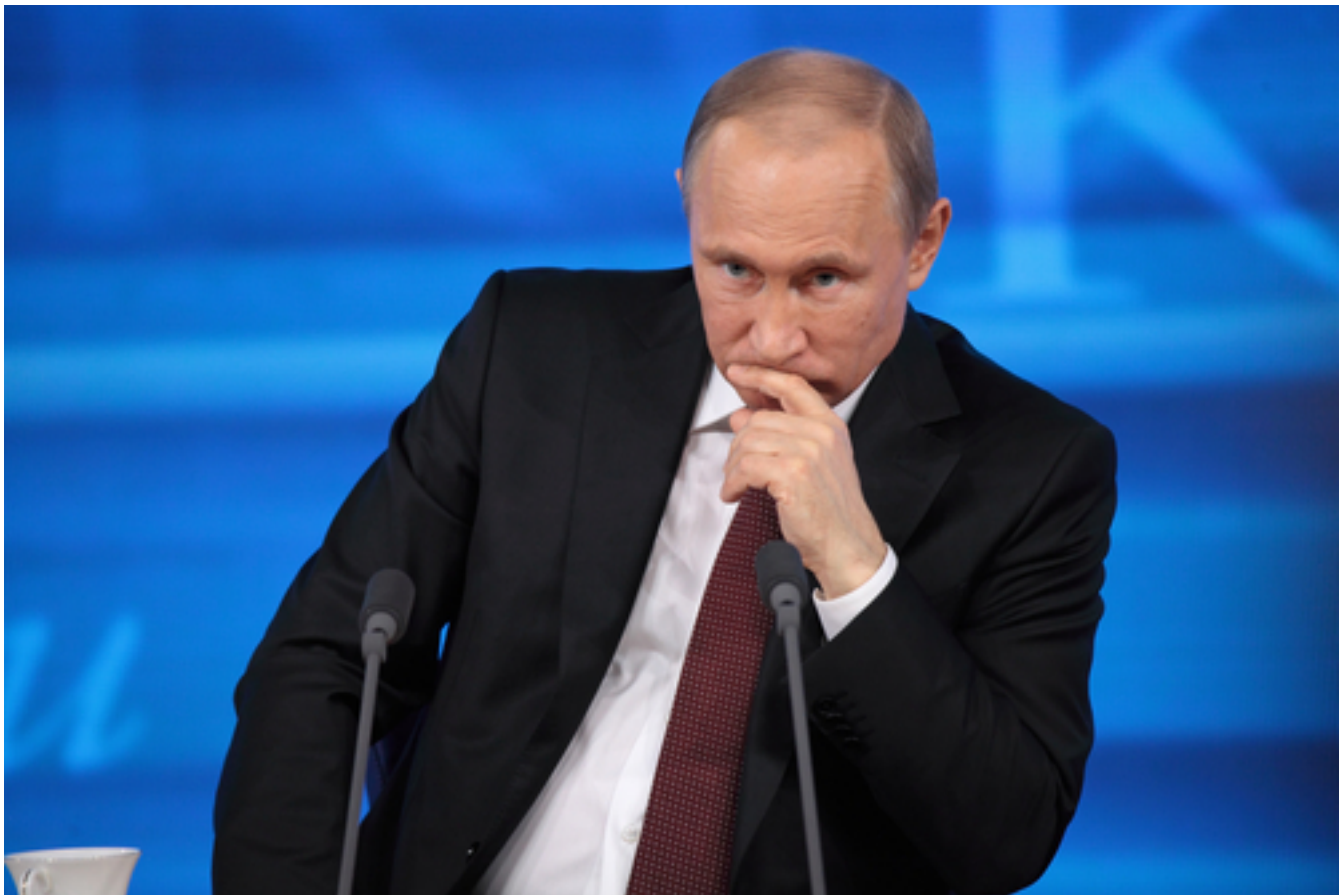




By: *Sergei Stepancev, TA Moscow*

Putin - from a grey man to the leader of the largest global corruption syndicate



John Sipher, author and long-time CIA officer, who also served in Russia, recently described Putin as "the biggest thief in the world".

His long-time enemy number one, Bill Browder, the inspiration behind the global action to pass the Magnitsky Act, has estimated Putin's personal wealth to be more than \$200 billion.

"Putin is the kind of person you cannot talk to when he considers himself to be in a stronger position. No long-term agreement with Putin is possible because he just deceives people," said Mikhail Khodorkovsky, once Russia's richest businessman, who spent 10 years in Russian prisons.

Vladimir Putin had all the attributes to become the wealthiest and most corrupt political leader: he had the motive, the opportunity and the means. In addition, he had a lot of time to build up his personal wealth. How did he do it?

"Social being determines consciousness" is a famous quote by Karl Marx. This expression is commonly used in Russia to explain that people think in different categories depending on their environment. Eventually, the environment defines people's destinies.

The early 1990s was a period of swift transition from the Soviet lifestyle and economic indicators to Western standards.

In the USSR, a family with a carpet in their apartment was considered prosperous. Anyone with a car was extremely wealthy.

Back then, just by being involved in both Russian and Western economic opportunities, it was possible to make more money in an hour than a Soviet person could have saved in a lifetime.

Vladimir Putin benefited significantly from the uncertainty of the early 90s. At that time, he was head of the Foreign Relations Committee at the mayor's office in Saint Petersburg.

But for his future, it was more important that he helped the then mayor Anatoly Sobchak establish a connection with the KGB/FSB as a form of protection against growing organised crime.

Junior partner in crime

Putin started as a typical corrupt medium-level Russian public official, using his government position to get wealthy.

At that time, most Russian commercial entities, particularly the large ones, were owned, co-owned or controlled by organised crime, while state property was still dominant in the country.

Putin's post in the Saint Petersburg mayor's office enabled him to grant petroleum or rare earth elements export quotas and gambling licenses to commercial entities in Saint Petersburg.

That was when Putin started striking lucrative deals with Russian organised crime bosses as a junior partner.

Nearly everyone who had the opportunity during those days was corrupt. Survival and taking advantage of the situation was the new norm only the most passionate Russians dared to explore.

Vladimir Putin was one of them. It is fair to

assume he was not the worst. He was "grey" even in crime. This absence of colour eventually took Putin all the way to the top.

Friends from the Saint Petersburg mafia

After he joined Mayor Sobchak's team, Putin started affiliating with criminal bosses in Saint Petersburg. For example, he started interacting with the head of the Tambovskaya criminal organisation, Vladimir Barsukov-Kumarin or the still powerful Ilya Traber, who controlled the Saint Petersburg port.

These two criminal leaders of Saint Petersburg were involved in various illegal schemes.

Those schemes included theft and exports of state-owned or state-controlled commodities. They used the Saint Petersburg port to smuggle cocaine or radioactive materials to Europe in cooperation with Italian and Colombian crime syndicates.

Ironically, even then, a German business contributed a lot to moving Putin to a global level.

One of the first criminal global entities in which Putin participated was German Immobilien-und-Beteiligungs- AG (SPAG).

SPAG participated in smuggling various substances and materials and in money laundering schemes on a global scale. Putin had a minor consultancy role. He was still a junior partner then.

In the early and mid-90s, Putin had many

other opportunities to get wealthy by exploiting a historical momentum in Russian history.

That was the time when hundreds of various criminal groups around the country together with Russian intelligence and talented and passionate entrepreneurs like Oleg Deripaska, an oligarch who was sanctioned by the US, or Roman Abramovich, an oligarch and former owner of the Chelsea football club were busy grabbing state resources, assets and commodities.

Putin participated in a criminal group of former friends, Saint Petersburg co-workers and KGB comrades who were involved in various embezzlement and corruption schemes and were elevated to the top of the Russian hierarchy after Putin managed to sell his candidacy to Boris Yeltsin.

He was luckier than Lucky Luciano

The world knows New York mob boss Charles Luciano as Lucky Luciano because of his unbelievable luck. He lived and conducted criminal activities when people such as Al Capone were active in American organised crime, and yet, Lucky Luciano managed not only to rise to the top, but died of natural causes.

Putin's luck significantly surpasses that of Charles Luciano. Putin is where he is now in the Russian hierarchy purely because he was extremely fortunate.

Putin's luck might have vanished decades ago when he participated in a \$100 million criminal scheme with Saint Petersburg mafia boss Vladimir Barsukov-Kumarin.

Because of severe food shortages in Russia in 1991 and 1992, the mayor's office of St Petersburg facilitated barter deals trading Russian state-owned commodities in exchange for Western food supplies.

As a result of those schemes in which Putin participated, commodities shipped from Russia disappeared, while the food situation in Saint Petersburg did not improve.

The money from the illegal sale of commodities was shared and embezzled.

Putin was one of those people. Charges against Putin were almost issued, but because of the overall uncertainty and turbulence in the country they were not pursued.

No one saw the danger of the Grey Man

Leaders in Russia, and the leaders in the world, had many opportunities to stop Putin from building the career of the most powerful Russian. But it seemed as if they did not take him seriously.

Putin was colourless - "grey" - using Russian figurative categories describing a person who never revealed any remarkable qualities or features, appeared average and not threatening or dangerous.

Putin had a humiliating nickname in the KGB circles - "okurok" - a cigarette stub, a leftover.

After a career as an intelligence officer in East Germany, where, by Russian standards, he was wealthy because he had a car, VCR or German sneakers, Putin was invited by Mayor Sobchak, who ~~grey~~ "grey" and "

convenient "yes-man" around.

At one point, many people from the Saint Petersburg ~~business~~ '

promoted to the federal level in Moscow. One of them was Petr Aven, now the co-owner of the sanctioned Alfa Bank, who had possibly contributed to Putin's transfer to Moscow.

Having arrived in Moscow, Vladimir Putin, as always, appeared and presented himself as convenience to those who facilitated his success: he posed no competition, he was humble, and most importantly, not too ambitious.

Vladimir Putin was also careful. He was corrupt to the core, but he only accepted income from those within his corruption and criminal circle from the old days - the people whose loyalty to Putin has been tested over time.

The late Boris Berezovsky, the wealthiest and most influential Russian oligarch and one of the main architects of Putin's presidency, concluded at one point that Putin was honest and honourable because he refused to accept a sum of money from Berezovsky himself.

Berezovsky offered Putin \$100,000, but by then, Putin had already taken part in criminal and corrupt schemes, which had yielded him millions of dollars. Putin was not interested in the sum Berezovsky had offered. However, Berezovsky wrongly concluded that Putin was honest.

After Putin was elevated to the top, he utilised all his former accomplices from Saint Petersburg to seize control of Russia.

The leader of the largest global

corruption syndicate

In the same way, Putin managed to infiltrate, subvert and recruit Western politicians. Putin has been using financial leverage to control his sympathisers such as Hungarian Viktor Orbán or former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder.

Putin is still the "okurok". He is still the one humiliated, and had pretended to be weak while rising to the top.

Because everyone in Russia was busy stealing and robbing, no one paid much attention to the colourless and "grey" Putin before it was too late. This was how Vladimir Putin became the global king of corruption.

Vladimir Putin is now leading the world's largest corruption syndicate. He gathered all criminals loyal to him to help him control Russia. *Everett Today*

the National Guard, Viktor Zolotov, was an average criminal in Saint Petersburg.

s head of Gazprom, Alexey Miller, *Today*

assistant to Putin accepting bribes for Putin and *behalfin*

the mayor's office of Saint Petersburg.

No mafia in the world has control of the entire country. Putin's mafia owns and controls the whole of Russia and has been trying to control other counties, including Ukraine.

Putin needs more territory to rob and steal from. Stealing and robbing are already happening in the Ukrainian territories, now under Russia's control.