

Putin's Dictatorship—and Antisemitism

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The Russian leader has long exploited anti-Jewish politicians and rhetoric to further his own authoritarian goals.

In an NBC [interview \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mhi_AyQAYw\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mhi_AyQAYw) aired on March 10, Russian President Vladimir Putin suggested that the 13 Russian nationals that the US indicted for election interference may not be ethnically Russian: "Maybe they are not even Russians, but Ukrainians, Tatars or Jews, but with Russian citizenship, which should also be checked," he said. Since then, many have commented on Putin's statement, but most missed the main point.

Putin most likely made the statement for cynical and pragmatic reasons. In the context of the upcoming March 18 presidential election, he was rallying support and reinforcing the "besieged fortress" anti-Western narrative.

Some rightly [pointed \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/03/12/was-putin-really-blaming-jews-for-interfering-in-the-u-s-elections-probably-not/?utm_term=.a80a87547562\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/03/12/was-putin-really-blaming-jews-for-interfering-in-the-u-s-elections-probably-not/?utm_term=.a80a87547562) to a major point that got lost in translation. In English, the word "Russian" can mean either an ethnic Russian or a Russian citizen—there is no distinction. In Russian, the word "russkiy" means ethnic Russian, and "rossiyanin" means Russian citizen. Russian Jews are considered citizens of the Russian Federation, but not ethnic Russians. Thus, a Ukrainian, a Tatar, or a Jew would be a "rossiyanin," but not a "russkiy."

Putin's comment came towards the end of the interview—after Megyn Kelly asked about election interference three times, Putin provided a number of other explanations before suggesting it could have been "Ukrainians, Tatars, or Jews." Throughout the interview, Kelly used the word "Russians," but the translators sometime translate the word to Putin as "rossiyane" and sometimes as "russkiye." This context casts doubt on the idea that Putin's comment was antisemitic for antisemitism's sake alone.

But don't let him off the hook just yet. If anything, Putin knows how to play the media—domestically, and internationally. More to the point, he strategically uses the word for an ethnic Russian or a Russian citizen

depending on the circumstance to subtly influence the listener. A far more obvious example is his March 2014 Crimea annexation speech, when he **defined** (<https://www.kyivpost.com/article/opinion/op-ed/anders-aslund-12-ways-in-which-putins-rhetoric-resembles-germany-in-the-1930s-340335.html>) nationality by language and ethnicity.

For the former KGB man, the collapse of the Soviet Union was "**the greatest geopolitical catastrophe** (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4480745.stm>)" of the 20th century. He spent years trying to understand what mistakes led to this collapse. Putin doesn't seek the return of Communist ideology, even though he routinely invokes Soviet symbolism—indeed he tends to look further back into Russia's tsarist past—but in this context, he seeks great power status, and views the West as Russia's main adversary.

Putin came to believe that among the mistakes that led to the Soviet Union's collapse were its anti-Jewish policies. They led to the refusenik movement that connected with Western elites and resulted in Western pressure, and led, among other things, to the passage of the powerful Jackson-Vanik amendment that pressured the Soviet Union on its human rights policy.

More broadly, these efforts helped expose the true evil of the Soviet regime, and that there was no moral equivocation between the West and the Soviet ideology. The lesson Putin drew is that a more pragmatic policy is to neutralize the Jews.

Thus, Putin appears to have done more for the Jews in Russia than any other Kremlin leader. Yet a degree of antisemitism always underpinned his regime. To give but a few examples, senior members of his United Russia party have periodically make antisemitic comments. Russian Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova **said** (<https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-government-spokeswoman-trump-won-thanks-to-jews/28124518.html>) in November 2016: "If you want to know what will happen in America, who do you have to talk to? You have to talk to the Jews, naturally."

The most prominent opposition party Putin allows is the Liberal Democratic Party, headed by known antisemite Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, who was a presidential candidate this year. This type of antisemitic undercurrent was always useful to Putin. By comparison, he appears as a far better, saner alternative. At the same time, it helps bolster his anti-Western narrative, rallies nationalism, and appeals to both the far right and far left.

Thus, it is doubtful that Putin's comment during the NBC interview was innocent or accidental—Putin is too aware of the messaging attached to using such language. Indeed, he first mentioned Ukrainians in his comment, as the Russia-Ukraine crisis rages on.

The March 18th presidential election was a manipulated sham with no real competition—a predetermined result. As part of this sham, the Kremlin cared about the appearance of legitimacy. This year, it worked especially hard to rally support and ensure a high turnout. Putin's comment could have been a part of these efforts.

*Anna Borshchevskaya is the Ira Weiner Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article originally appeared **on the Algemeiner website** (<https://www.algemeiner.com/2018/03/29/putins-dictatorship-and-antisemitism/>). ❖*

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