

How Obama Played Into Putin's Hands at the UN

by [Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](/experts/anna-borshchevskaya)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](/experts/anna-borshchevskaya)

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East.



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The Russian leader's UN speech repeated his longstanding narrative of moral equivalence, and the blatant hypocrisy of his foreign and domestic policy has gone largely unchallenged by the Obama administration.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's September 28 speech at the UN General Assembly did not surprise. He touched not only on traditional themes, for example, complaining about post-Cold War U.S. unilateralism and NATO expansion, but he also accused the West of provoking revolutions, and suggested Washington is responsible for problems in the Middle East.

Putin also highlighted what he perceives as Western hypocrisy, "to make loud declarations about the threat of international terrorism while turning a blind eye to the channels of financing and supporting terrorists." It has become a traditional Kremlin line that the United States created terrorist groups in the Middle East, such as the Islamic State. Putin indirectly restated it in his speech: "It would be equally irresponsible to try to manipulate extremist groups and place them at one's service in order to achieve one's own political goals in the hope of later dealing with them or, in other words, liquidating them." It is in this context that Putin proposed a "joint coalition" to fight global terrorism and work with Syria's dictator Bashar al-Assad to accomplish this.

In his fifteen years in power, Putin has always suggested that for all the West's rhetoric of morality, he is no different than his Western counterparts. If Western leaders accuse Putin of being Machiavelli reincarnate, well, they're no different. In his September 27 interview with Charlie Rose on CBS's *60 Minutes*, for example, Putin said he knows "for sure" that the West orchestrates colored revolutions -- a theme he has stated repeatedly since Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2005. For Putin, an innate desire for freedom had nothing to do with it.

When Putin began consolidating and centralizing his power in his early years as president, his typical response to questions about curtailment of freedom was that the West did the same thing. In a 2005 *60 Minutes* interview, Mike Wallace asked Putin about his new practice of appointing regional governors (previously, they were elected). Putin argued that Russia enjoyed greater democracy than the United States because it had no Electoral College. "In the

United States, you first elect the electors and then they vote for the presidential candidates. In Russia, the president is elected through the direct vote of the whole population. That might be even more democratic."

On issues of terrorism, Putin always stressed that the U.S. and Russia face the same struggle. After Chechen militants stormed a school in Beslan, North Ossetia, and took over a thousand people hostage on September 1, 2004, Russia's special forces stormed the school, leading to the deaths of over 300 people, including many children. In response to why he refused to order a public inquiry into these events, Putin sarcastically told a group of Western reporters and academics in September 2004 at a special meeting outside of Moscow, "Why don't you meet Osama bin Laden, invite him to Brussels or to the White House and engage in talks, ask him what he wants and give it to him so he leaves you in peace?"

With regard to Syria, the West has had no clear policy since protests against Bashar al-Assad's rule first erupted in March 2011. U.S. officials vacillated between pronouncements that Assad must go to those tacitly accepting him as part of the peace process. It is in this context that Putin stepped in and began advancing his own self-serving agenda.

While Putin now seeks the moral high ground as he advances his idea of an "international coalition" to fight terror, he pays only lip service to international law and has no qualms about breaking it as he did in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. It is the West that created and advanced international institutions and, for better or worse, continues to abide by their rules.

It is unfortunate that President Obama did not articulate how the West truly is different from the Russia Putin created. The consistent failure to distinguish the difference in approach and philosophy only plays into Putin's narrative of moral equivalence. Despite the Kremlin's massive and effective propaganda machine, many in Russia would have liked to hear an alternative vision too.

Anna Borshchevskaya is the Ira Weiner Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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