

A full-page photograph of Vladimir Putin walking through a set of highly ornate, golden double doors. He is wearing a dark suit and a red tie, and is holding a white folder. Two guards in blue uniforms and black hats with gold bands stand on either side of the doors, holding them open. The interior beyond the doors is also ornate, with a large eagle emblem on the wall and a chandelier. The floor is covered with a red carpet.

INTERNATIONAL

Czar Putin?

Putin at the
Grand Kremlin
Palace in
Moscow

Few world leaders have been called more names than President Vladimir Putin of Russia. He has been described as a ruthless dictator trampling on democracy and “the most dangerous man in the world.” And his increasingly **authoritarian** rule has some people calling him “Czar Putin,” suggesting that he’s acting like Russia’s imperial rulers of the past.

To many Russians, however, Putin is a hero—a strongman who has restored Russia to its past greatness as a world power. He cultivates this macho image by riding a horse shirtless, posing with tigers, and showing off his judo skills. In a recent poll, 87 percent of Russians supported Putin and his policies.

Love him or hate him, Putin is casting an increasingly long shadow on the world, even as Russia faces a slew of challenges, including a looming economic crisis.

Putin’s Rise

Putin was born in the Soviet Union, the massive Communist country that was America’s fierce rival during the Cold War (1945-91). Like heavyweight fighters, the two

Words to Know

- **authoritarian** (*adj.*): requiring people to obey strict rules or laws that restrict personal freedom
- **annexation** (*n.*): the act of taking control of another country or territory

AP/GETTY IMAGES (VLADIMIR PUTIN)

President Vladimir Putin is flexing Russia's muscles

nations vied against each other for power and influence around the world. Each nation had nuclear weapons aimed at the other, and war was a constant threat.

As the U.S. economy grew and prospered, the Soviet Union faltered. In 1991, the country collapsed and dissolved into 15 independent nations. Russia, the largest of the former Soviet republics, entered a decade of chaos. Adjustment to a capitalist system was difficult, and the economy suffered. Poverty and crime were rampant.

In 2000, Putin was elected to his first term as president. He served two terms but was prohibited by law from running for a third consecutive term in 2008. Although he stepped down, he continued to call the shots as prime minister. In 2012, Putin won his third term as president in a disputed election.

In his early years in office, he cracked down on crime and the economy improved, fueled by the country's vast oil reserves. Russia also seemed to be on its way to becoming a democracy.

Over time, however, Putin tightened his grip on Russia. He began to limit freedom of expression and freedom of the press. He jailed opponents, including the members of an all-female punk band who'd been singing anti-Putin songs.

As he took more control at home, Putin sought to restore Russia's image on the world stage. In 2008, he sent troops into



neighboring Georgia in response to a conflict over two small regions with Russian ties. The world was outraged but did little about it.

Last summer, Putin alarmed the world with Russia's **annexation** of Crimea, a part of Ukraine.

A New Cold War?

The U.S. and Europe have warned Putin about aggression against his neighbors. But Putin has not budged, leading both the U.S. and the European Union to impose sanctions on Russia aimed at hurting its economy. The new chilled atmosphere between Russia and the West has led to fears that a new Cold War is developing. The tensions also make it harder for the

U.S. and Russia to work together on many important issues: the civil war in Syria, fighting terrorism, and preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

Putin's push to strengthen Russia, however, has hit an economic roadblock. The recent drop in oil prices has been great news for the U.S. but bad news for Russia's economy. It's now likely that Russia will slip into a recession.

How will sanctions and a struggling economy affect Putin? He may feel compelled to change his aggressive, anti-Western stance. But he could do just the opposite, and try to divert attention from economic problems at home with further mischief abroad.

If Putin runs for president again in 2018 and serves until 2024, he could end up ruling Russia for 24 years.

—Charles Piddock



What point is the cartoonist trying to make about Putin's strength today? Do you agree?