

"The Putin Charisma"

Vladimir Putin has not been getting good press in the United States or even Western Europe in the last year or so. He has been charged with being authoritarian, with attempting to recreate Russia's imperial control over its neighbors, and with reviving Cold War obstructionism in the United Nations.

So it is with some surprise that we read the remarks of Jean-Claude Killy, France's great Olympics champion and currently the French member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). The IOC met on July 7, 2007 in Guatemala City to decide on the site of the Olympic Winter Games in 2014. There were three contenders: Salzburg in Austria, Pyeongchang in Korea, and Sochi in Russia. Salzburg argued that it was a safe, risk-free site. Pyeongchang argued that its choice would forward peace and reconciliation on the Korean peninsula. Sochi arranged for Putin to come in person to argue its case.

The Korean site was the favorite and did indeed lead on the first round. But with Salzburg eliminated, Sochi won the second and definitive round. To hear Killy tell the story, it was Putin's personal charisma that made the difference. He spoke both English and French, which he never does in public. And he used his charm, what Killy calls his charisma. To be sure, victories in IOC decision-making may be gratifying and symbolic, but they are after all a secondary matter, reflecting rather than creating political influence.

So one must ask, is this the only place where Putin has been exercising his charisma? And the answer has to be no. There is first of all his internal political strength in Russia. Yes, he has upset a good portion of the intelligentsia, but there is every indication that he is quite popular with most Russians, unlike some other presidents of major states today. It seems that Russians see him as someone who has done much to restore the strength of the Russian state, after what they see as its humiliating deterioration during the Yeltsin era. In general, we know that what one person calls authoritarian tendencies another often calls the restitution of order. This is a conflict of interpretation that is widespread, even in the North Atlantic countries. Nicholas Sarkozy has just recently profited from this double perspective.

Even more important however are Putin's political accomplishments on the world scene. He has resisted, so far successfully, any and all attempts by the United States to obtain United Nations authorization of real punitive action against Iran, North Korea, and Sudan. He has held up any moving forward to independence for Kosovo. To be sure, Russia's positions have been China's positions on these questions, so Russia is not alone. But in the 1990s, such strong and so far effective Russian political stands were not thinkable.

Then there are Russia's dealings with Europe. He has opposed United States plans to install antimissile structures in Poland and the Czech Republic, and has gotten support for his stand (if quiet support) from Western Europe. He has used control of gas and oil exports from Russia itself and from both Central Asian and Caucasian countries not only to obtain greater rent for Russia (and thereby greater world power), but more or less to impose his terms on energy issues on Western Europe.

If a neutral referee were to assign points for Putin's actions on some scale of positive/negative consequences for Russia, I think a fair observer would have to say that Putin has done well as a geopolitical player. Call it charisma, call it what you will, the victory of Sochi at Guatemala City reflects this positive rating and reinforces it.

by Immanuel Wallerstein