A “Minute With” Richard Tempest on Vladimir Putin and his Leadership Style in the Wake of Syria

The following is a re-posting of an article written by the Illinois News Bureau about REEEC affiliated faculty Richard Tempest, professor of Slavic languages and literatures. The original posting of this article can be found by following this link.

Vladimir Putin is making headlines again, this time by intervening in Syria’s civil war. At the end of September, the Russian president began a bombing campaign against rebel forces, including ISIS but also U.S.-supported groups, and has announced he is sending ground forces into the country.

Some commentators have suggested his bold moves make President Obama look weak by comparison and risk a Cold War-style confrontation. Richard Tempest, a U. of I. professor of Slavic languages and literatures, sees Putin’s actions in keeping with his “cold” charisma, a style of leadership he shares with Napoleon. Tempest has written and taught extensively on both Putin and political leadership styles and is this fall teaching a course on Putin and Napoleon for the university’s Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. He spoke with News Bureau social sciences editor Craig Chamberlain.

So what is cold charisma and how do you see it demonstrated in Putin’s actions? Why has it made Putin so popular in Russia?

Cold charisma posits an emotional distance between the public figure and his or her audience. Also, there is an element of menace in the cold charismatic’s self-presentation. Hollywood actors provide a useful point of reference for the different types of political charisma. In the case of Putin, think Daniel Craig as James Bond. Athletic, brutal and patriotic, in other words.

Putin’s policies and public image resonated with the Russian public after the politically tumultuous and economically trying 1990s, which were presided over by an ailing and erratic Boris Yeltsin. After he became prime minister in 1999 and president in 2000, Putin displayed an unexpected – probably even to himself – ability to appeal to broad swaths of the public by projecting self-confidence, vigor and decisiveness. That is to say, he turned out to be a skillful politician.

He was able to articulate a widespread feeling of resentment among his countrymen that Russia had been taken advantage of by the West after the fall of communism. Putin’s core message, that the country has risen from its knees, continues to resonate with most Russians, despite falling living standards.

Will a leader like Obama, who you say exhibits “cool” charisma, always suffer by comparison?

Not necessarily. Think of charisma as a filter through which a given politician, in this case Obama, projects his identity and image to the U.S. public. President Kennedy was a cool charismatic, yet in his interactions with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev – who was flamboyantly brutal in his public pronouncements and actions – Kennedy was realistic and practical, an example of realpolitik in the context of the Cold War. Their relationship was in no way contingent on the poetics of Kennedy’s political appeal inside the United States.

By the same token, the stylistics of Obama’s self-
presentation are primarily functional within his domestic political space. In any case, the cool quality that helped Obama win the presidency in 2008 has arguably dissipated. Putin and Obama are working to advance their respective foreign policy agendas rather than engaging in a charisma contest.

Putin's moves in Syria, similar to his moves last year in Ukraine, have raised fears about broader Russian aggression. Your course compares Putin to Napoleon, who conquered much of Europe two centuries ago. How do you read Putin's motives? And how dangerous can he be?

Putin is a rational actor within his own set of assumptions, which may not be adequate to the facts on the ground. I'm reminded of German chancellor Angela Merkel's alleged comment that he lives in his own world. Also, he is an able tactician but not a strategic thinker. For instance, the annexation of the Crimea last year boosted Putin's domestic popularity to unprecedented heights but weakened Russia's position internationally and compounded its economic problems.

Like any politician, the Russian president is motivated by a range of considerations. He has framed his Syrian gambit or gamble as being in Russia's national interest, while using it to put pressure on the United States and its allies and to maintain his political support at home, particularly following the inconclusive results of the intervention in eastern Ukraine.

The danger lies in the volatility of the Syrian situation, with multiple local and external, nonstate and state actors generating a plethora of military variables. These may produce an unexpected clash of arms between, say, Russia and Turkey, a NATO member – note the recent incursion into that country's air space by a Russian military aircraft, which was intercepted by Turkish F-16s. It would take just a twitch of a pilot's thumb on the fire button to escalate tensions to the level of a shooting war.