

### 3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript

Lynn Thoman

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#### Ep 11: Former Ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul: What Vladimir Putin Is Really Like and What He Wants Now

**00:00 INTRO male voice:** Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast, which features short, memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton and Columbia: Lynn Thoman.

**00:25 Lynn Thoman:** Hi, everyone, I'm Lynn Thoman, welcome to another episode. Today, I'm delighted to be here with Michael McFaul, former ambassador to Russia. I'm excited to find out what Vladimir Putin is really like and get an inside account of what Putin wants, what's really going on in Russia and US-Russian relations. Welcome, Mike, and thanks so much for our conversation today.

**00:46 Michael McFaul:** Thanks for having me.

**00:48 LT:** Good to be back with you. Let's start with some perspective. As you have said, we forget how quickly things change. In 2010, the US was signing the first major arms control treaty with Russia in decades, working together with Russia to stop Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon and working with Russia in efforts to stop the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Russia was popular in the US, and America was popular in Russia. Your appointment as ambassador to Russia by President Obama two years later in 2012 should have been the opportunity of a lifetime to bring Russia in the US together, since you had thought about, written about and worked towards closer relations with Russia since your high school days. It was not. The relationship soured, although nothing fundamental in US policy toward Russia changed. What happened?

**01:40 MM:** What happened? A great question, a hard question. Although I think fundamentally what happened are two important historic events in Russia that came together to make US-Russian relations were difficult and my personal mission as ambassador more difficult. So the first thing was, there was a parliamentary election in Russia in December 2011. It was falsified under kind of normal, about the same percentages as past elections in Russia under Putin, 5%, 6%, 7% was our estimation. I was still working at the White House back then at the National Security Council. But this time around, voters, especially in the big cities, decided that they didn't want their votes to be stolen and because of new technology, particularly smart phones, by the way, technology had a big role here, people could record the falsification taking place and then spin it around on Twitter and Facebook and VKontakte.

**02:32 MM:** And people suddenly decided, we're not going to take it anymore. No taxation without representation was even one of the phrases that was being used. And first 15, then 500, and later 5000 and then later hundreds of thousands of people came out onto the streets of the

major cities to say we want our votes to be counted. But that scared Vladimir Putin, because he'd never seen that kind of mobilization against him personally, and the last time there was that mobilization against the regime in Moscow was back in 1991, the year the Soviet Union collapsed.

**03:08 MM:** And then the second event was Vladimir Putin decided to run for re-election in the spring of 2012. And the change between President Medvedev and President Putin... Did I just say that wrong? I meant President Putin, he decided to run for a third term, and when he came back to the Kremlin, we learned through interaction with him that he had a very different world view than Medvedev did, and that made our bilateral relationship much more difficult to manage.

**03:34 LT:** So Vladimir Putin has been leading Russia for about the last 10 years. Have the last 10 or so years has been good for Russia?

**03:42 MM:** Mixed. It's always compared to what. I like to remind people of that. Compared to the 1930s in the Soviet Union, yes, this has been a good decade. Compared to World War II, this has been a good decade for people living in Russia and the former Soviet Union, but compared to the previous decade, no, economic growth rates are down, and most certainly, if you care about freedom, democracy, human rights, Russia has become more autocratic over the last decade. And I want to underscore, there's no causal relationship between increased autocracy in Russia and economic growth, that is an argument that Putin supporters sometimes make, well, you know, yeah, it's not as democratic these days, but we're growing. And that correlation, not causation, that correlation was true in the first several years of Putin's rule, but it's not true today.

**04:35 MM:** And on the contrary, I would say that some of Putin's extreme belligerent actions abroad, annexation of Crimea, intervention in Ukraine, support for Mr. Assad in Syria in 2015, violating our sovereignty in 2016 in the United States during our presidential election, there's been some pushback against Russia, from us and our allies on all those matters as actions are starting to cost Russia.

**05:04 LT:** Let's explore Vladimir Putin's character and motivations. Why was the dissolution of the Soviet Union such a formative event for him, how did it shape his perspective?

**05:15 MM:** Well, that's a really intriguing question, actually, because the standard answer is what he said on the record well after it when he was president, that it was the greatest tragic event of the 20th century, and we know the 20th century is filled with communism, fascism, World War II, and that's what he said, right. But if you look more closely at his history, I think it's a little more complex than that. Yes, he was a KGB officer working in East Germany, a counterintelligence officer, and you don't sign up for the KGB in the 1970s unless you support the Soviet Union. But for the next decade, Vladimir Putin was an opportunist. He joined with the democrats, he didn't come back to independent Russia and sign up with the communists to re-create the Soviet Union. He signed up with a very pro-Western democratically-oriented mayor in St. Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak, and then in the mid-90s, he didn't join the anti-establishment, anti-Yeltsin forces. He joined Boris Yeltsin, he worked in the Kremlin for Boris Yeltsin.

**06:17 MM:** I don't think he is a man of firm convictions with respect to those issues. However,

over time, I do believe he's become more paranoid about the West. Before, he toyed with the idea of Russia being part of Europe, joining the G8, cooperating with the liberal international order. Today, he's in a very extreme paranoid posture towards the West, he does truly believe that we are out to get him, that we are trying to overthrow his regime. He's wrong about that, I want to be clear about that, but with age he's become increasingly paranoid, I would say.

**07:02 LT:** So you've met Putin in person, you've even been to his country house. What is he really like?

**07:08 MM:** Well, I think he's changed over the years. I actually met him first in 1991, a long time ago, when he was working in the mayor's office in St. Petersburg. Over time, he's become extremely arrogant. Remember, he's been in power for 20 years, so if you go back and you look at photos and tapes and videos of him in his early years, he was not as arrogant, he didn't know how to run the economy, he was the new guy on the block with respect to foreign policy, and so he deferred a lot more back then to his experts, so he doesn't listen to his government and his advisors hardly at all. And two, he also doesn't think he has many peers left on the international stage. I think Angela Merkel, the Chancellor of Germany, is probably the last one that he believes is in the same category as him.

**08:00 MM:** Number two, you always need to remember when you meet with Vladimir Putin that he's a very smart guy, and he was trained as a counterintelligence officer, so he does his homework well, he gets into your bio and your psychological stuff, he comes prepared for these meetings, because he wants to get into your head. And I've seen him try to trip up Vice President Biden, I saw him try to do that, and other leaders... Not so much with President Obama, by the way. But he does that kind of stuff. He knows, for instance, that Angela Merkel has a fear of dogs, so he once had his dog, Konni, join the meeting and jump on her lap deliberately to intimidate her, and you can see her facial expression, she is... And he knew that, and he did that on purpose.

**08:49 MM:** So those are the kinds of things he does in a meeting. And then he's not afraid to embarrass you once the cameras are on and kind of put you on the spot to try to trip you up. He likes to play those kind of psychological games. And then the last thing I would say is, and I think this is something American diplomats need to understand about him, Putin is always playing a long game motivated by his ideology and his world view. Fundamentally, he is... He thinks of himself, whether he is or not, we can decide, but he personally thinks of himself as one of the last great leaders of conservative values, orthodox values, sovereignty, and he sees as the enemies of that, the liberal international order, decadent liberals in Europe and the United States, and most certainly, the United States government.

**09:45 MM** As I've alluded to before, he has this paranoia about the CIA and the deep state that he thinks is out to overthrow regimes like his own, and by the way, the United States has done that from time to time around the world, so there's some data to support that hypothesis. But he's always playing that long game, that long historical game, he wants to be compared to those great tsars of Russia, and therefore he's not so interested in solving this foreign policy problem or that foreign policy problem, and he can afford to wait for a long, long time. Whereas Americans, I would say, we tend to be more like engineers in our diplomacy, there's a problem in the world

and we need to solve it. And I admire that about American culture, but in my time in government, for instance, I remember very vividly, we wanted to try to solve the civil war in Syria and end the bloodshed there, and so we were engaging with Putin to try to figure out a way to do that and to try to put together a transitional government.

**10:54 MM:** And by the way, we were not really hung up on whether it should be democracy or not, we just didn't think that there could be peace there with Assad in power, and so we had this very engineering approach, let's solve this problem with our Russian counterparts here, whereas Putin was playing a longer game. You need to solve that problem. And he's perfectly willing to live with ambiguity in a way that Americans are uncomfortable with ambiguity, right? So he's comfortable to live with the ambiguity, where is the border of Ukraine between Russia and Ukraine, and Donbass, should that be part of Ukraine or Russia? We think we have to solve that problem. He's perfectly willing to live with that for a long, long time. And I think that asymmetry and the way we approach problems, I think presents difficulties for American diplomats.

**11:47 LT:** What does Putin want now?

**11:49 MM:** I do not believe he thinks of his job as to recreate the Soviet Union. I think that is incorrect. I would not be surprised if there might be a few more attempts at seizing territory, maybe unification with Belarus over the years and decades. That's his regional agenda. But his global agenda is this fight with liberalism, and right now, if you listen to him talk, he thinks that he's winning that battle. Well, he again, as defined by him, I want to keep saying that, right, because the way he defines conservatism and the way I define it would be very different, but as defined by him, he thinks he is a conservative family values, traditional leader; in opposition to the decadent Western liberalism.

**12:39 MM:** For instance, he speaks out against LGBT rights all the time, and those are... That's the West has gone too far down that road, we need to return to Orthodox Christian values. He speaks a lot about Christian values too, right? Russian Orthodox Christian values. Number two, sovereignty. He believes that the multilateral institutions in the world like the United Nations or the World Bank or NATO, the European Union, those are all institutions designed to advance American hegemony, and so he wants to see those break down.

**13:19 MM:** And then number three, related, but somewhat tangential, he doesn't believe in democracy, he thinks that it's all fake. There's no difference between the United States and Russia. It's just all kind of propaganda, and he believes that because of Russian culture and history, that they need a strong leader. And I would say related to that is he kind of fundamentally doesn't believe that people are capable of governing themselves. It's kind of a paternalistic attitude towards his own citizens, that they need somebody to guide them, and he believes that he is that kind of father figure for the nation.

**13:57 LT:** So Putin has taken some very aggressive actions that even Soviet leaders during the Cold War never dared, such as invading and annexing Ukraine and Crimea and intervening in the 2016 and now 2020 US elections. Why did Putin become so aggressive?

**14:16 MM:** Well, it's a great point you just made. To underscore, because a lot of people compare... Is this the Cold War or not? In my latest book, I called it from Cold War to hot peace, to echo, but say it's different. And one way it is different is precisely in the ways you just described, that we did not have annexation during the Cold War, and we did not have the level of intervention in our elections during the Cold War, during the Soviet period that we had in 2016, and are experiencing now. You know, I think he just gave up on interacting with the West, I think he was moving that direction in 2012 when he accused the United States of fomenting revolution against him, and then when there were the massive demonstrations against his ally in Ukraine, President Yanukovich, and Yanukovich fled, he blamed the West again, he blamed the United States, the CIA, for doing that, again, incorrectly, but that is his argument. And that's when I think he just decided, okay, to hell with it, I'm no longer interested in being a member of this international system. I'm going to seek now to destroy it.

**15:28 LT:** Do you think it's partly for domestic reasons- that the Russian economy isn't doing very well- and he can rally the people with nationalism?

**15:37 MM:** I honestly don't believe that was his initial motivation for what he did in Crimea. I think it was really revenge against us and revenge against the opposition leaders that took over, but it had a very positive consequence, his rating went up to 80%, and most certainly once that happened, they nurtured that and propagated that this was a patriotic nationalist fight against the Nazis and NATO in Ukraine, that most certainly has been the case. What is interesting today is that's faded away, the bump from 2014 is completely gone, and I think increasingly Russians are of the mind that it wasn't so great for us and they're more concerned with their domestic economic issues than this kind of Russian imperial ambition.

**16:28 LT:** So, a hot topic now is Russia meddling in the 2020 US election. How significant do you think it is? Do you think it will affect the outcome of the election?

**16:39 MM:** I don't know the answer to that question, and I haven't seen the intelligence, tragically, so I can't speculate. I think it's wrong that our intelligence community knows a lot of things about Russian meddling that they won't share with the American people before the election. That's just wrong, in my view, and it then creates incentives for people to leak and talk about it that may not be accurate, and so I think Americans should know what the Russians are doing before election day.

**17:09 LT:** What does the poisoning of Alexei Navalny tell us about Vladimir Putin's Russia?

**17:14 MM:** Well, I want to be careful. I don't know exactly what happened yet. I most certainly hope that there'll be an international investigation, a domestic one wouldn't lead to any results. Two things I would say. One, novichok is a poison that is controlled by the Russian government, you just don't walk into the store and pick that up and use that, and we know that it was used against Mr. Skripal in 2018, and nobody has any doubt that that was done by Russian agents. But let's speculate, for instance, that somehow Putin wasn't involved or wasn't in direct control. Well, that's equally damning. That means that he's not in control of his own government, his own intelligence officers, that's equally scary to me. And I do think it crosses a Rubicon, this is something... It's just horrible what happened to Mr. Navalny.

**18:10 MM:** And I'm really disappointed in the reaction of the US government that we haven't done anything about it, we haven't sanctioned anything about it, the President of the United States a month later, just a few days ago, wouldn't even acknowledge that it happened, he said we should talk about this later. Whether we can do anything about it is a different kind of debate, but there is right and wrong in the world, there is good and evil in the world. This is evil, what happened to Alexei Navalny, and there used to be a time when the United States, and I mean Democrats and Republicans in our society, tended to side with good against evil, and I just hope we might get back to remembering that time again in the future.

**18:52 LT:** Looking ahead, where do you see Russia in 10 years?

**18:58 MM:** I don't know, social scientists are not very good at predicting the future, and by the way, neither is the intelligence community. Ten years is a long time out.

**19:06 LT:** Five years, then.

**19:08 MM:** I would just say two things. Putin is likely to stay in power as long as he is physically capable, because he's built a very effective autocratic regime, but after he's incapacitated or dies, I think the regime falls apart pretty quickly, because it does not have legitimacy, it doesn't have a political party, there's no successor there, and I think there's a lot of pent-up frustration with that regime. Depending on how long he stays in power, whether those events happen, I hope that it happens sooner rather than later, because I love Russia, I think Russia's a fantastic country and fantastic people. I think Russia's a European country, and I look forward to the day that Russia can be a boring, democratic European country just like the rest.

**19:55 LT:** Is there anything else you'd like to discuss that you haven't already touched upon?

**20:01 MM:** No, no, we've covered a lot. That's great.

**20:04 LT:** So the last question, what are the three key takeaways or insights that you'd like to leave the audience with today?

**20:11 MM:** One, a propose of what I just said about Putin, leaders matter and history is not just the consequence of history or culture or the balance of power in the international system. Two, it is arrogant for people in the West to assume when other countries are autocratic, that somehow there's a cultural reason for that, and over hundreds of years, I would just point out that some of those cultural arguments that we thought to be rock solid turned out to be refuted, so a hundred years ago, people thought all Germans were autocratic and loved autocracy, and then we said the same about the Japanese back then, and those turned out to be really bad theories. So I would caution people about making that argument about Russians and Russian culture. And then third, I would just challenge people to learn more, appreciate the richness of that society and remember that Russia is a very complex society and that Putin is just one person representing some people in Russia, but not all of Russia. What drives me nuts is when we interchange the word Russia when we really mean Putin.

**21:26 LT:** Mike, thank you for a very interesting discussion today. This has been terrific.

**21:31 MM:** Thank you, thank you, that was great. Thanks for having me.

**21:33 LT:** Thank you.

**21:34 MM:** That was really fantastic.

**21:35 OUTRO male voice:** If you enjoyed today's episode, you can listen or subscribe for free on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen. If you would like to receive information on upcoming episodes, be sure to sign up for our newsletter at [3takeaways.com](https://3takeaways.com) or follow us on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn. Note that [3takeaways.com](https://3takeaways.com) is with the number 3, 3 is not spelled out. For all social media and podcast links go