After having read forty thousand headlines revolving around what Russian President Vladimir Putin “wants” for the past decade, I wonder if anybody but Putin knows? Based on what I have learned about the Russian leader, I can tell you this. He absolutely wants what almost all Russians want, for the west to just quit the crazy speculation.

Western policymakers rely on experts to help determine the course of international relations. Or, at least we assume Washington politicians are consulting somebody. Since the think tanks seem to reflect (or construct) what’s going on, it seems natural to assume there is some uniformity of purpose. And where Russia’s president is concerned, it’s uniformly apparent that somebody(s) wants the public to believe Vladimir Putin wants something bad for other peoples and nations. Just to check my memory, I used a Google refined search to see how many times the public has been told what Vladimir is really after.

I began with a timeframe of 2011 until the end of 2015. Up first in the results I found Brookings experts saying Putin wanted to “pull Europeans away from the United States,” and to divide and to create a new “Yalta” agreement of borderlines between the U.S. and Russia influence. Then there was “BEYOND CRIMEA: What Vladimir Putin Really Wants”, a semi-scholarly paper by Jeffrey Gedmin telling future foreign service trainees how the Russian leader was set on conquest. Of course, Gedmen is the former president of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, so I guess we know how his bills get paid.

A year before these prophetic strokes of predictive genius, the Atlantic ran a piece entitled, you guessed it, “What Putin Wants” a la 2014. In this one, a former speechwriter for President George W. Bush, David Frum comes to the conclusion that “So long as Putin retains power, Russia can never evolve into a normal state.” And with this the essence of all “Putin wants and needs” inquiry is revealed. It’s all about definitions. Russia is not normal, according to the thinkers Washington is relying on. Or, Washington employs a lot of “thinking” in order to prove Russia is not
I could go on, indefinitely since there are limitless pages of search results telling us what Russia’s leader is allegedly after. The Washington Post, the Daily Beast, Politico, the New Yorker, BBC, NBC, Slate, NPR, RAND, and etc, etc, etc. If it’s bad for us... But just for fun I created a similar search for 2016 to 2019, and guess what? The same media outlets recreated the headlines on Putin’s desires. The Atlantic led off with “What Putin Wants” followed (in the search) by the New York Times asking “What Does Putin Really Want?”, and the rest followed suit in a weird redux somebody decided appealed to American readers. The funny thing is, all the prophecies say the same thing, which should make intelligent people wonder “why all the journalistic/analytical mind reading?”

Fortunately, there are still voices of moderation, experts who seem to at least understand the Russia position on things. Take this “What Putin Wants” analysis for Foreign Policy by Dmitri Trenin, who’s the Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, the other day. Trenin, who’s a former colonel of Russian military intelligence, and who served for 21 years in the Soviet Army and Russian ground forces, surely knows the positioning here, even if his tilt is naturally with the Carnegie funders. The essence of his report is correct, for once, in assessing that what Putin is after is stopping NATO’s advance. The rest of the report is of no consequence, but Putin seeking to protect Russia’s frontiers is the point.

Vladimir Putin and the Russian people want to live in peace, and to prosper from their legacy resources, ingenuity, and hard work. That’s it. The Russians do not want to have their country chopped up into manageable little territories as was the case with Yugoslavia. Russians have a national identity they would prefer remained intact. And the Russian president, put in power by rich oligarchs or the deeply prideful Russian gatekeepers, or both, is doing the Russian nation’s bidding. End of story. NATO moving onto the doorstep of Moscow reminds every Russian of the lead up to the Nazis’ Operation Barbarossa, or to WWI, or even Napoleon’s ill-fated escapades. After all, what is the ultimate purpose of expanding NATO? What’s the mission for the average American in Utah who cannot find Europe on a labeled globe? Who and what is served?

Maybe we should be asking the pertinent question “What Does America Want?”

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