

Welcome to Putingrad

*The Incredible Story of the Only Man to
Collect Money from Vladimir Putin*



Part One

Go East, Young Man

TM

by

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with John Weisman

CHAPTER 1

Welcome to Putingrad

“The KGB has one little sister—the police.
Unfortunately, she’s a whore.”

– KGB Joke

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Sept. 2nd, 1993: Stone Island Company Headquarters, Stone Island, St. Petersburg.

My friend, Vladimir Putin, is arriving.

He jumps out of the car, shakes hands with Russian dignitaries, waves at the cameras, heads my way and bids me a good day in perfect German, then makes a quick escape up the stairs leading into our headquarters building where I hurry to catch up with him. The TV camera crews and journos in the reportorial free-for-all are still outside. They have problems keeping up with Putin. He’s just too fast for them.

I guide him to our dining room. Today, it doubles as the photo op location for the official launch of the GRAD counterterrorist SWAT team that Putin, St. Petersburg’s Deputy Mayor, suggested that I conceive, build, and train for the Leningrad office of the FSB, Russia’s new domestic counterintelligence service and successor to the KGB’s Ninth Directorate.

We’ve got about 300 guests attending. It’s a warm, late summer day and the sun is shining. Our headquarters is a huge log and stone chalet on Stone Island—*Kamenny Ostrov* in Russian—one of three islands sitting in

the delta where the mouth of the Neva River meets the Gulf of Finland.

The place is buzzing with reporters and local brass, all trying to get a glimpse of the FSB's newest counterterrorist team, as well as get some face time with Putin, St. Petersburg mayor Anatoly Sobchak's chief foreign affairs advisor, and since June, the head of the mayor's powerful Committee for External Relations. It is Putin's responsibility to encourage foreign investment, register business ventures, and promote St. Petersburg's international relations. Putin has other functions too—shadowy assignments I hadn't known about when we first met the previous year.

But these days he's a friend and a supporter. He takes a seat facing Vladimir Schulz, the FSB general for whom I built the team. Directly behind Putin stands Igor Sechin, Putin's gatekeeper, handing out the transfer documents. They'll be signed by Putin for the city, and Gen. Schulz for the FSB. Putin executes his signature and immediately turns to the TV cameras at the far end of the table. The deputy mayor thanks me for the equipment and training my company has given the new unit, and reminds us that the Goodwill Games will be held in St. Petersburg next year. His expression growing serious, Putin stresses that with the GRAD unit now in play, the city is ready to deal with any terrorist challenge.

“And *that*,” he emphasizes to the cameras, “is something that you will understand when you see GRAD's capabilities for yourselves.”

Putin wishes General Schulz lots of success. Then, we all shake hands and head for the courtyard, where the demo will take place.

Within minutes, sirens go off and the shooters demonstrate their tactical skills rappelling down a building, assaulting a target, and evacuating victims. Squad cars do wheelies and perform a felony stop. Most, but not all of the tactical gear is on display. Still, it's a pretty good show. Everyone seems to have fun and I've made sure that a copious amount of free beer is flowing.

One of the journalists volunteers to play a bad guy. Boy, does the

team have fun with him. After tackling him, they grab his head to restrict any movement, then yank his arms as high as possible—it’s an old KGB technique known as the Chicken Wing and then lift him up and toss him into the back of a paddy wagon like a sack of potatoes.

Not exactly what we were training for, but it looks impressive. The poor reporter puts on a brave smile, even though he’s probably going to be in pain for days. But who cares? The video crews are eating it up.

We didn’t know it that morning, but six years later—August of 1999, to be exact—when Russian president Boris Yeltsin would name Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin prime minister of Russia, the photos and videos taken that day on Stone Island would blanket the Russian media, visual evidence buttressing Putin’s forward-thinking, hard-edge commitment to counterterrorism.

Until that time, Putin had been largely invisible to the Russian public. He was ex-KGB, one of those unremarkable “grey men” who make good spies. But by 1996, he’d gone from being a bureaucrat—a politician’s aide and fixer—to a Kremlin insider. So, the Stone Island video made him look tough: the kind of strong leader Russians admire. Indeed, those videos bur-nished the bare-chested, black-belt, tall-in-the-saddle Marlboro Man persona Vladimir Putin has encouraged until today. Certainly, they helped cement his image as the new prime minister in 1999. And they reinforced his aggressive nature: a couple of months later in October, the same footage played a vital agitprop role as Putin launched the second war in Chechnya.

But in September, 1993? No one—probably not even Putin—had any idea that he’d go so far so fast.

I certainly didn’t.

My introduction to Russia was accidental. In the mid-80s, after service in the German Army Airborne and college in the U.S., I joined my family’s Munich-based defense products business, where I handled NATO sales. But it didn’t take me long to become convinced that counter-

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terrorism was about to become a growth industry, and that we should get in early. In Germany, we had the Red Army Faction; Spain and France had ETA Basque separatists; Italy had the Red Brigades. Palestinian and Iranian-sponsored terrorism were expanding exponentially in Europe—and police departments were not prepared. So, I started a line of counterterrorism equipment for police—the sorts of supplies American SWAT teams and elite hostage rescue units like the German police unit GSG9, the American Delta Force, and SEAL Team 6 were using. What we could not manufacture we sourced from other producers, most of them located in the United States.

In early 1989, an officer in the Bonn-based Federal Border Patrol Command told me that the Leningrad Police Department was looking for supplies and training for its ill-equipped and undertrained force. I made inquiries. For whatever reason, German government bureaucrats declined to follow up on the Russian request. But they were delighted to pass the Leningrad police contact on to me.

It was a real opportunity: Gorbachev's introduction of *perestroika*—restructuring—not only gave the Soviet people a rather limited degree of economic freedom, but also contributed to a burgeoning crime epidemic that many local police forces could not handle. Within a couple of weeks, I visited Leningrad. Within a few months, I had a toehold there and built a successful business as a security consultant.

In 1991, at the age of 28, I started the Stone Island Company. And by 1992, I'd built it into a successful full-service tactical equipment and training enterprise, a joint venture with St. Petersburg's police department—the GUVV.

That's when things got sticky.

I'd invested heavily. I spent a lot of cash obtaining specialized police and SWAT vehicles, rehabbing the shabby office space in the run-down chalet we used as our headquarters-cum-training center, and stocking a wide range of expensive tactical equipment. And then? Then it was

like being dumped into the middle of a *Sopranos* episode. My company became the target of a takeover initiated by a corrupt GUVD deputy chief, a bully and a gangster named Leonid Pinchuk.

It was classic Mafiya. First, Pinchuk tried to insinuate his people into Stone Island Company's management so he could juggle the books and skim the cash. When that didn't work, he tried to replace me as president. And when *that* did not work, he had the company headquarters invaded, assaulted my staff, and tried to take physical control and arrest the management—that would be me—all because he wanted to gobble up the assets for himself.

Pinchuk's assault on Stone Island—it was a total fiasco and I'll explain why in a bit—took place on April 29, 1992. A couple of days later, I heard from Stew Swanson, a foreign service officer with the U.S. consulate. Stew and I stayed in touch because Stone Island was a U.S. registered corporation. Of course it was: most of our equipment was U.S.-made.

I gave him a sit-rep about Pinchuk's intentions. "You should meet with Vladimir Putin from the mayor's office," Stew said. He gave me a wry wink. "I hear he has a soft spot for Germans."

Asking Putin to help fix the situation hadn't occurred to me. I'd seen his signature on our company's registration certificate. And I knew he was responsible for foreign commercial relations for St. Petersburg. But I knew very little about him, and said so.

Obviously, Stew knew more. "Definitely worth a call. He's well connected politically—and very, very close to Anatoly Sobchak." Stew rubbed his two index fingers together. "Very, very close."

I thought, hmm... well-connected politically and an intimate of Mayor Sobchak. Maybe Mr. Putin could fix things.



The St. Petersburg city hall is located in the Smolny district, in a building complex that once housed the Russian Empire's Institute for Noble Girls. In 1918, it was turned into a government building by Lenin. Putin's office was on the ground floor and access was tightly controlled by his beefy, scowling doorkeeper, Igor Ivanovich Sechin. Sechin would go on to greater things. Today he is CEO of Rosneft, Russia's largest publicly traded oil company. But even so, he is still sometimes referred to as Putin's *eminence grise*.

Before entering Putin's office, I had to pass a reception room featuring lounge chairs and a huge wooden glass case displaying souvenirs, gifts, and memorabilia, predominantly presented by international socialist organizations like the Communist Party of the United States. Igor's desk was located on the right-hand side of Putin's office door and no one, absolutely no one, could bypass him. He never seemed to leave Putin's side, was a very well-organized bureaucrat, cordial, quiet, and always maintained a stoic face. I only learned later that Igor could actually smile, possessed a good sense of humor, and, because of his background as a military translator who'd done tours in Africa, spoke fluent French and Portuguese.

Once I had gained entrance, Putin came around his big desk and offered me and my translator seats at a small four-person conference table in the middle of the room. He is not a very tall man. And he never smiled during our conversation—not once—coming across as pale and formal, his thinning hair styled in a very 1980s style comb-over.

Still, he had a firm handshake and did his best to dominate the situation by displaying an unsettling façade: a mélange of implied power tinged with self-important arrogance. He also worked hard to create the illusion of how pressed he was for time, as if he had far better things to do than talk to me.

In other words, he came across like every typical German bureaucrat/civil servant I'd ever met—and thus not very Russian at all.

It was, I decided, an act.

My suspicion was reinforced by what I saw on Putin's desk. At his right elbow sat a small cluster of telephones. In those days, you could tell the standing of bureaucrats in the Russian hierarchy by counting the number of telephones on their desks. In the Soviet Union, multiline telephones were unheard of. Each phone connected to its own network. The more phones an apparatchik possessed, the more networks he could access. The other indicator was phone numbers. The shorter the phone number, the more important that network was. The Kremlin network, for example, had two digits, FSB and GUV D had three, and other, less important agencies four or five. I couldn't see the numbers, but Putin's desk held nowhere near the number of phones I'd seen on high-ranking Russian bureaucrats' desks.

I began to state my case in English, pausing after each phrase as my translator put it into Russian. Putin sat and listened, cold as a fish. Then, after a couple of minutes, he impatiently raised his arm and cut her off—“*Stoy!*”—stop!

Then, he turned and addressed me in perfect German.

It blew me away: he *was* a German civil servant!

But it also helped. We'd gone from speaking through a translator to a conversation only Putin and I understood.

In a 15-minute monologue, I told him how I'd entered into a joint venture with the St. Petersburg police nearly a year before, invested heavily in terms of money, vehicles, office space, and tactical equipment, only to find myself the target of a corporate raid by a totally corrupt deputy GUV D chief.

“I'm committed to being here,” I told Putin. Which is why, I explained, it would be in the city's best interest to help avoid such ugly incidents for the future by helping me now.

It was my hope, I said, that Putin could talk to the GUV D brass and settle this unnecessary dispute once and for all. After all, wasn't city hall doing its utmost to attract foreign investors? Wasn't the St. Petersburg government embarrassed by the negative publicity? Indeed, hadn't the abortive GUV D takeover already made the nation's primetime television newscasts?

When I finished, Putin was blunt. "I have no intention whatsoever of interfering in a commercial dispute. I'm busy enough trying to keep the peace between city hall and all—*all* the executive departments for Mayor Sobchak."

He paused and fixed me with a stare. "Besides, what have *you* ever done for the city?"

My answer was, "Quite a lot, Mr. Deputy Mayor."

My rationale? In those days there were only 150 private joint ventures operating in the St. Petersburg area, and most of those were owned by Russians who had emigrated under communism. The Stone Island Company was not only a Western-registered joint venture that brought outside capital to the region, but one of the larger ones in terms of assets. Its future growth would bolster the local economy.

Besides, I pointed out, we'd already done a lot for St. Petersburg. We'd invested greatly, created a good number of jobs, introduced new know-how and products, and moreover we consistently acted in compliance with the laws of the land. "All I expect is that city hall not treat us worse than any Russian national. How can city hall ignore strong-arm tactics by a corrupt individual just because he happens to be deputy chief of the GUV D?"

Putin's answers grew evasive. He deflected. He was oblique. He obviously didn't want to comment on my accusation. It made me wonder for a fleeting second if our meeting was being recorded. And then, he suggested my problems could be solved if I'd strike a deal with the GUV D, specifically with Leonid Pinchuk.

I told him flat out I'd never do that. I knew enough about corruption in Russia to understand that trying to pay my way out would open a door that could never, ever be shut. Pinchuk was corrupt. Worse, he was greedy. He'd destroy my company—suck every bit of blood out of it and then leave me with the corpse.

And so, the meeting was over. Putin shook my hand. His expression told me he didn't expect to see me again.

But I wasn't about to concede. I told him, "Mr. Deputy Mayor, you will soon realize the city needs the Stone Island Company and the people who run it. We are true friends of St. Petersburg. Don't worry—I'll be back in touch soon."

He stared at me in total disbelief.

No, I hadn't received his support. But I left his office wiser than I'd entered it. I left the meeting convinced Putin was afraid of crossing swords with the GUVD.

The question was why. After all, he was KGB. And GUVD? It was the police—part of the Interior Ministry. And for decades, the KGB had lorded it over the Interior Ministry and its police units. Insiders called GUVD the KGB's "Little Sister." It wasn't a compliment.

That same day, I started digging. And it didn't take me long to discover that Putin's real job was to protect his boss, Mayor Anatoly Sobchak—and Mayor Sobchak's considerable assets.

Here's a little modern Russian history for you. From the time of Gorbachev until the present, Anatoly Sobchak is widely credited throughout Russia as having been a true anti-Stalinist and democrat; an individual who did great things for the City of St. Petersburg and for Russia as a whole. Tall, charismatic, a powerful speaker, Sobchak gained fame when he took a stand against the 1991 Kremlin putsch, which ended the existence of the Soviet Union. And he would become the co-drafter of the new Russian constitution in 1993.

Sobchak's second wife, Lyudmila Narusova, was a Parliament member of Russia's Supreme Soviet—it was later renamed the Duma for many years. Their child Xenia became a prominent TV journalist and talk show host, and actually managed to annoy Putin and the Kremlin insiders so much that they started a tax case against her, making sure she never went on the air again. (These days, Xenia has found her new home as a presenter on the Internet. She's known to sympathize with the Kremlin's opposition and is considered Russia's answer to Paris Hilton.)

In 1997, under investigation for financial crimes, Sobchak fled Russia. He returned in 1999, just after Putin became prime minister and was able to quash the charges against his old boss. Sobchak died under mysterious circumstances in 2000 during a visit to Kaliningrad, a campaign trip he made at Putin's request.

What I quickly discovered after my meeting with Putin was that there was another and much more sinister side to Anatoly Sobchak. He was corrupt. Through and through corrupt. And of course, being a crook, he had to make sure that the local authorities—GUV D and Leonid Pinchuk—turned a blind eye to what he was doing. Maybe even pay them off.

Which was why Putin did his utmost to maintain good relations with the Big House, which was the nickname for GUV D headquarters. The pre-war building (it remained unscathed during the brutal 872-day German siege of Leningrad because the Russians kept captured German officers on the top floor) is located on Liteyny Prospekt next to the Neva River, near a huge drawbridge. The front door leads to GUV D headquarters. The KGB's separate entrance is just around the corner.

There's even a Stalin-era joke they still tell about the place: "What's the tallest building in Leningrad?"

"It's the Big House."

"Why is that?"

"Because from the basement, you can see all the way to Siberia."



So, here's how Sobchak was getting rich, and there was no telling how deep Vladimir Putin, the former KGB officer, was involved.

Yes, he was most certainly involved.

Why? Because with the turmoil going on in the USSR under Gorbachev, the Communist establishment had become increasingly nervous. *Glasnost*, Gorbachev's mild form of democratic progress, not only brought more openness to the Soviet society, but also threatened the influence of the organs of power, namely the KGB and the Communist Party.

And so, from the mid-1980s on, the spooks and the Party started to privatize state assets, passing them on to their friends and taking a cut under the table. They also "parked" loyal operatives inside Soviet enterprises, government agencies, new political parties and movements, universities, trade unions, and other nonprofit associations and, once they'd started allowing them, joint ventures.

This was the situation Lieutenant Colonel V.V. Putin found in 1990, when he came back from his KGB assignment in East Germany. Like many former officers, Putin remained active even though he'd officially left the KGB.

And why not? After all, in the intelligence business, retirement is often just another form of cover.

And so, newly-retired KGB officer Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin's first assignment in Leningrad was to assist the tall, charismatic university professor, legal scholar, and aspiring democrat politician Anatoly Sobchak. I have heard conflicting accounts of Sobchak's role in and for the intelligence services, and have never—even to this day—been sure whether or not the mayor was the KGB's asset, or the KGB's pawn.

But one thing is certain. It made perfect sense for the KGB to place Putin close to Sobchak. After all, you cannot leave a charismatic democrat

unsupervised, especially if he ends up running the city government. There's too much money at stake.

In 1991, Leningrad became St. Petersburg. A new name, but the city's problems remained. The KGB was also renamed. Its foreign intelligence branch became known as the SVR, while KGB's domestic intelligence branch was now the FSB—although it was certainly a case of no new tricks for either of those old dogs.

Little Sister GUVD, of course, never changed a single letter!

Putin must have been a valuable asset when Sobchak started to profit from his newly-won position as Leningrad's mayor. And as it was Putin's real full-time job to cover up his boss's under-the-table dealings, perhaps Putin was benefiting as well. All of this, of course, would be known to the GUVD.

Which is precisely why Putin didn't want to ruffle GUVD's feathers. Because doing so would affect Sobchak's profits.

Of course, that's what Putin meant when he'd told me his job was keeping the peace “between city hall and all—*all*—the executive departments.”

That was the essence of what I discovered in the days following my visit to Putin's office. Not that I was a trained investigator, but one of the necessities when running a business in what at times can be a hostile environment is knowing how to obtain good intelligence.

For example, soon after I arrived I'd made it a point to cultivate an FSB officer named Alexander Sibarov. Alex was a chain-smoking, leather-skinned, prematurely grey guy who looked ten years older than he was—he was in his early 50s when we met but he looked late 60s.

He commanded the bodyguard department of the newly established Russian Ministry of Security (formerly known as the KGB's 9 Ninth Chief Directorate) in St. Petersburg. His department was responsible for the physical safety of all Russian and foreign dignitaries residing or traveling in

the region. We became drinking buddies, and then friends.

Which is why in April of 1992, Alex showed up at Stone Island, a worried expression on his face. I took him into my office and I poured us a couple of beers.

“I hear you’ve got problems with the GUVD.”

“Word travels fast.”

“Pinchuk is planning to raid you.”

“I’ve heard rumors.”

“They’re more than rumors. He’s been bragging about it all over the Big House.”

“And?”

“Look, Franz, Stone Island is currently guarded by OMON.”

“Affirmative.” OMON was the St. Petersburg riot police unit. I paid them a monthly fee to protect our headquarters and equipment. But ultimately OMON came under GUVD’s authority. Which meant Leonid Pinchuk pulled their strings.

Alex’s expression grew serious. “What are your contingency plans when Pinchuk shows up?”

“That’s the million-dollar question, Alex. Look—my guys are reliable. But OMON is subordinate to GUVD. To be honest, I’m not sure how they’ll react. If they take our side, someone will get into trouble. If they fold, Pinchuk wins and I’m out of business—he’ll loot the place.”

“I have a proposal for you. You know I’m in charge of the FSB’s protection force. Moscow hasn’t paid my guys in more than six months. But here’s the thing: we’re allowed to moonlight. If you want, we can take over your security. That’s what we do and we are very good at it. This is good for you, for me, and the money will help my boys no end.”

“Alex, you just made my day!”

After Alex left I called the OMON commander and invited him to Stone Island. Over a couple of drinks, I explained that we’d no longer be

needing the services of his men and thanked him for the good work done. The look on his face told me everything I needed to know. A huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Of course he knew all about Pinchuk's plans. I could literally see how he relaxed upon receiving the news.

He told me he knew about my problems with Pinchuk and told me I shouldn't worry about OMON becoming involved. Best of all, he assured me of his warm feelings for me and my staff.

I appreciated that. We'd developed a great working relationship over the previous two years. I liked his guys and he was a true gentleman to the end.

The biggest laugh I had, though, was when I learned that the OMON commander had never bothered to report back to the Big House that OMON no longer provided security for Stone Island.

Pinchuk tried to conceal his intentions by scheduling a board of directors meeting on the day he planned the raid. Of course, he broke security and bragged about his brilliant plan, which meant I had plenty of notice. So, on the day of the "meeting," my wife Vlada and I decided to visit Peterhof, a fabulous palace initially built by Peter the First and finished by Catherine the Great, just outside St. Petersburg.

Pinchuk showed up with a dozen cops and a lady lawyer in tow, demanding entrance. First, the raiders discovered FSB personnel instead of OMON troopers. Even better, when Pinchuk called the OMON duty officer to request backup, he was told no one would come to Stone Island as there were no criminals to arrest, only innocent employees. He went apoplectic.

Pinchuk pounded at the gate. The speaker next to it came to life: a very polite voice said, "I am very sorry, comrades, but I am not authorized to let anyone in. Franz Sedelmayer instructed us not to open the gate to anyone until he returns from his business trip."

Pinchuk started to scream and ordered his guys to break down a small

entry gate off to the side of our main gate.

It took them a while, but they got through.

But not far. Alex Sibarov had sent us two of his best FSB officers. There was Misha, a young guy in his early 20s, about 5 feet 11, 160 pounds, and an experienced hand-to-hand fighter, and a second chap by the name of Seriosha, in his early 30s, about 7 feet tall with hands the size of dinner plates. Both were well-trained, well-prepared, and loved a good brawl.

So, when the little gate eventually gave in to the blunt force, Pinchuk's sidekick Nefiodov tried to force his way in by pushing Seriosha, eventually punching him.

Big mistake. Seriosha grabbed him by the chest, tossed him into the scrum of GUV D cops, and slammed the gate shut in Pinchuk's face.

That's when all hell broke loose. The GUV D guys broke through the gate and the two FSB men took them all on. In the confusion, a couple of cops managed to slip past Misha and Seriosha and headed for the main building, Pinchuk right behind them. The rest of the GUV D cops were busy trading kicks and punches with our two-man security force—and losing badly.

Inside the main house, Pinchuk attacked one of my employees, a retired naval officer we called Eduardovich, knocking him to the ground. Then he got hold of a phone and requested backup from OMON, which of course never came.

Pinchuk wouldn't use his radio. Of course not—he wanted no one at the Big House knowing how badly things were going—or worse, anyone at FSB headquarters, which routinely monitored GUV D transmissions.

Within minutes, Seriosha and Misha made it back to our main building. It didn't take them long to “convince” the last few GUV D raiders it was time to leave Stone Island.

By the time my wife and I returned later in the day, we found the company headquarters safe and our people largely unharmed. Eduardovich

seemed a little traumatized, but he said he was OK.

Seriosha and Misha just smiled. Of course they did—they'd had a ball. Over the next couple of days, the staff who had seen anything sat down and wrote detailed reports, which our lawyer took to the public prosecutor's office. Filinenko, the prosecutor, immediately issued a restraining order against the GUV D.

Then Pinchuk did the stupidest thing imaginable: in reaction to the prosecutor's restraining order, Pinchuk held a press conference. He whined about how badly GUV D had been treated by the FSB's brutal security forces. (He didn't say, "All two of them.") Officer Nefiodov even took off his shirt to display the black-and-blue imprints of Seriosha's hands, while other GUV D officers showed off their "war wounds" to the cameras.

The local news media covered the story. It came and went. I visited Putin's office and he turned me down. But then, in the following weeks, something incredible happened. The footage of my appearance on a TV show named *600 Seconds* was very favorable to me, and Pinchuk's press conference, for which he received negative reviews, got picked up by Russia's mainstream media: TV, newspapers, magazines. They went viral.

St. Petersburg's GUV D became a laughingstock. The stories ridiculed Pinchuk—rhetorically asking whether a corrupt cop trying to take over a law enforcement and security company was the brightest bulb on the Christmas tree.

And about two weeks later, Slava Butin, an undercover FSB operative and close Putin associate, came by my office. Over a glass (or two, or three) of good Bavarian beer, he reported that both city hall—by which he meant Putin and Mayor Sobchak, and the Big House (the FSB)—were laughing their heads off. His comment made me smile: the law of unintended consequences had worked for me by giving Putin and his boss Mayor Sobchak some juice over the Little Sisters at GUV D.

Within weeks, the GUV D started investigating the FSB, and the FSB

opened an investigation of the GUVV.

And Putin, who'd initially refused to intervene on our behalf, realized that not only were we in St. Petersburg to stay, but we had value to him and to his boss, Mayor Sobchak. And so, like the good intelligence officer he was, Putin became my fixer and my friend. He was a regular visitor to Stone Island, where we'd trade gossip over cold beer or long dinners. Indeed, it was Putin, who, over one of those evenings, suggested that I cement my relationship with the city by equipping and training a new FSB SWAT team in time for the 1994 Goodwill Games.

By the time I put GRAD in play the following September, he made sure it was his face the cameras focused on as he shook my hand.

Little did we know on that September day that GRAD would go on to play a key role in preventing the turmoil caused by the unsuccessful Moscow White House revolt in September and October of 1993 from spilling over to St. Petersburg. Or that a few weeks later, GRAD would take out the group of rogue snipers who had indiscriminately shot and killed civilians from the roofs surrounding Russia's parliament.

Almost overnight, GRAD became a serious tactical asset in a volatile society. It was also Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin's first huge political success as St. Petersburg's deputy mayor—something he took credit for and let no one forget. Little did I imagine that the relationship I'd have with Putin would become a metaphor for the path Russia has taken into authoritarianism, corruption, and kleptocracy.

Welcome to Putingrad.