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Reference List

Stengel, Richard. 2007. "Choosing Order Before Freedom. (cover story)." *Time International (South Pacific Edition)* no. 51/52: 22. *MasterFILE Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 24, 2015).

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Section:

PERSON OF THE YEAR

Choosing Order Before Freedom

His final year as Russia's President has been his most successful yet. At home, he secured his political future. Abroad, he expanded his vast--if not always benign-- influence on global affairs. TIME's 2007 Person of the Year is Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin

In a year when Al Gore won the Nobel Peace Prize and green became the new red, white and blue; when the combat in Iraq showed signs of cooling but Baghdad's politicians showed no signs of statesmanship; when China, the rising superpower, juggled its pride in hosting next summer's Olympic Games with its embarrassment at shipping toxic toys around the world; and when J.K. Rowling set millions of minds and hearts on fire with the final volume of her 17-year saga--one nation that had fallen off our mental map, led by one steely and determined man, emerged as a critical linchpin of the 21st century.

Russia lives in history--and history lives in Russia. Throughout much of the 20th century, the Soviet Union cast an ominous shadow over the world. It was the U.S.'s dark twin. But after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Russia receded from the American consciousness as we became mired in our own polarized politics. And it lost its place in the great game of geopolitics, its significance dwarfed not just by the U.S. but also by the rising giants of China and India. That view was always naive. Russia is central to our world--and the new world that is being born. It is the largest country on earth; it shares a 2,600-mile (4,200 km) border with China; it has a significant and restive Islamic population; it has the world's largest stockpile of weapons of mass destruction and a lethal nuclear arsenal; it is the world's second largest oil producer after Saudi Arabia; and it is an indispensable player in whatever happens in the Middle East. For all these reasons, if Russia fails, all bets are off

for the 21st century. And if Russia succeeds as a nation-state in the family of nations, it will owe much of that success to one man, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin.

No one would label Putin a child of destiny. The only surviving son of a Leningrad factory worker, he was born after what the Russians call the Great Patriotic War, in which they lost more than 26 million people. The only evidence that fate played a part in Putin's story comes from his grandfather's job: he cooked for Joseph Stalin, the dictator who inflicted ungodly terrors on his nation.

When this intense and brooding KGB agent took over as President of Russia in 2000, he found a country on the verge of becoming a failed state. With dauntless persistence, a sharp vision of what Russia should become and a sense that he embodied the spirit of Mother Russia, Putin has put his country back on the map. And he intends to redraw it himself. Though he will step down as Russia's President in March, he will continue to lead his country as its Prime Minister and attempt to transform it into a new kind of nation, beholden to neither East nor West.

TIME'S Person of the Year is not and never has been an honor. It is not an endorsement. It is not a popularity contest. At its best, it is a clear-eyed recognition of the world as it is and of the most powerful individuals and forces shaping that world--for better or for worse. It is ultimately about leadership--bold, earth-changing leadership. Putin is not a boy scout. He is not a democrat in any way that the West would define it. He is not a paragon of free speech. He stands, above all, for stability--stability before freedom, stability before choice, stability in a country that has hardly seen it for a hundred years. Whether he becomes more like the man for whom his grandfather prepared blinis--who himself was twice TIME's Person of the Year--or like Peter the Great, the historical figure he most admires; whether he proves to be a reformer or an autocrat who takes Russia back to an era of repression--this we will know only over the next decade. At significant cost to the principles and ideas that free nations prize, he has performed an extraordinary feat of leadership in imposing stability on a nation that has rarely known it and brought Russia back to the table of world power. For that reason, Vladimir Putin is TIME'S 2007 Person of the Year.

PHOTO (COLOR): Moscow gets a makeover: Giant billboards cover the reconstruction of a building near St. Basil's Cathedral as foreign luxury cars roll by. Russia's once dour capital is now a citadel of glitz

PHOTO (COLOR)

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By Richard Stengel

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