

# Russian psychobabble

## Albright gets in touch with the inner Putin

By David J. Kramer

In the words of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, enough "psychobabble" about Russia's acting president, Vladimir Putin. "What is important," she said during her recent trip to Moscow, "is to judge him by what he does."

Impressed by Mr. Putin's "can-do approach," Mrs. Albright, like her counterparts in Britain, Germany, France and Italy, clearly came away positively impressed by Russia's new leader. Unlike former President Boris Yeltsin, here is a man who can discuss key issues coherently and vigorously.

If Mrs. Albright were to follow her own advice, however, she might think twice before embracing Mr. Putin. The first senior Clinton administration official to visit Moscow since Mr. Yeltsin's resignation last Dec. 31, Mrs. Albright days before her trip dubbed Mr. Putin "one of the leading reformers" in Russia. She based this judgment on his activities as deputy mayor of St. Petersburg in the early 1990s, overlooking the fact that Mr. Putin spent 16 years in the Soviet KGB and then more recently served as head of Russia's unreformed successor agency, the FSB, before becoming prime minister last August.

Until rising to the top last summer, Mr. Putin was not considered one of Russia's real reformers. More importantly, to judge Mr. Putin on his record is to focus on the war in Chechnya. Mr. Putin's rise in the polls and to the presidency rests solely on his handling of the military campaign in the breakaway region. Many Russians like his no-nonsense, take-charge approach after years of impotence under Mr. Yeltsin.

If we in the West are comfortable with what he has done in Chechnya, then we should feel good about four more years of a Putin presidency. If, on the other hand, we are appalled by Russia's bloody, indiscriminate slaughter in Chechnya — which has devastated an already impoverished region, killed countless innocent civilians, created more than 200,000 refugees,

and has seen Russian troops commit war crimes as documented by Human Rights Watch — then we should feel less sanguine about a Putin-led Russia.

Both Mrs. Albright and President Clinton have warned that Moscow's bloody policy toward Chechnya would lead to Russia's becoming "increasingly isolated." Yet the Council of Europe only postponed until April — conveniently after Russia's presidential election — any consideration of suspending Moscow's membership because of Chechnya.

Moreover, high-level foreign visitors, including the foreign ministers of Britain, Germany, France, and Italy as well as U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan have streamed into Moscow in recent weeks. During Mrs. Albright's visit, Russia co-sponsored a round of Middle East negotiations. NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson, on a recent visit, sought to end the thaw in Russian-NATO relations. If this is isolation, Moscow must wonder what engagement would look like.

Beyond empty rhetoric criticizing Russia's campaign against Chechnya, the administration has twice blocked the release of funds to Russia — but without acknowledging honestly that its actions were driven by concern over the war.

Yet few observers doubt that the second \$640 million installment from the International Monetary Fund has been held up for several months because of opposition to Chechnya, not because of Russia's failure to meet ever-changing economic criteria, as the administration and the IMF claim. Why was the IMF not such a stickler for conditionality when it released the first installment last July? The IMF should either give Russia the money and reject linkage to Chechnya, or, preferably, hold up the funds and explicitly link such suspension to the war.

In hiding behind economic criteria that Russia supposedly has not met, the administration and other Western governments are guilty of the worst possible politicization of the IMF.

The same goes for the State Department's intervention last December on a loan from the U.S. Export-Import Bank to Tyumen Oil Co., a Russian company. Hours before the Bank's board members were to decide on the Tyumen

application, the State Department stepped in to block the loan, officially because proceeding with the loan would not be in "the national interests." Despite being under pressure from human rights groups to do something to register its outrage over the war in Chechnya, the administration claimed unconvincingly that Chechnya in fact had nothing to do with the delay. According to government officials, it was Tyumen's questionable business activity and the need to reinforce the importance of the rule of law in Russia that caused State to intervene. The proposed loan was a terrible idea for reasons having nothing to do with Chechnya, yet the administration before Chechnya became an issue never weighed in against the loan.

That Mr. Putin wants good relations with the United States is no surprise; Sergei Ivanov, the head of Russia's security council, was recently in Washington to explore the possibility of a Clinton-Putin summit meeting this summer. To Moscow, it's business-as-usual with the West and the Clinton administration is a willing interlocutor.

Yet a business-as-usual approach to Russia seems wholly unwarranted. In addition to Chechnya, Mr. Putin's record includes the accord he engineered in January between his party and the communists in the Russian Duma, which calls for massive increases in defense spending. He has approved for Russia security services to expand surveillance of the Internet, and he has condoned a crackdown against media critical of his government and its Chechen campaign (including, notably, Andrei Babitsky — a Radio Liberty correspondent arrested for his reporting from Grozny).

It is important for U.S. officials to get a first hand feel for Russia's new leader, but it would be misguided on the basis of Mrs. Albright's one meeting for the administration to jump on the Putin bandwagon. Mr. Clinton's comments in a recent CNN.com interview suggest, however, that he has already hopped on board. "What I have seen of him so far indicates to me that he is capable of being a very strong, effective, straightforward leader," Mr. Clinton said. That amounts to replacing "psychobabble" about Mr. Putin with wishful thinking.