

A small man pings in the darkness

By Curtis Seltzer

**BLUE GRASS, Va.**—My phone rang yesterday morning. I picked up. A stern woman's voice commanded me: "Hold for The President, please."

"Comrade Seltzer?"

"Is that you President Obama?"

"Nyet. It's Vladi. I was just thinking of the good times we had partying in Siberia a few years back. Remember I showed you how to shoot frozen mammoths?"

"Of course," I said. "Poot the Hoot."

"Comrade Seltzer. We need your help. You are America's most trusted journalist, except maybe for O.J. Simpson. You need to tell my story so that Americans will understand that I am nice guy and friendly as wolf pup."

"I'd say that most Americans think you are a thief, that you grabbed Crimea because Ukraine is weak."

"I want to assure all Americans that Crimea is the last of Russia's territorial ambitions in Crimea."

"Are you sure about this interview, Pooty?"

"I am always sure about everything. We now start interview."

Me: President Putin. Tell America what Russia wants?

Putin: We want piece.

Me: Wonderful. We, Americans, also love peace.

Putin: We want big piece.

Me: Peace everywhere. That's so admirable.

Putin: In particular, we want piece of Ukraine, Poland and Belarus. We want just like before when Soviet Union was one big piece.

Me: But you can't just take land from another country.

Putin: Who take?

Me: You took. You annexed Crimea, which was part of Ukraine until a couple of weeks ago?

Putin: This was not taking; that was not annexation. It was just an administrative *reintegration*. Crimea was giving itself back to Russia where it should be.

Me: It sure looked like you took Crimea from Ukraine.

Putin: No. No. For Russia, Crimea is like your Hawaii, off-shore but part of us. Like little twist-off cap that always goes with big bottle.

Me: I thought the Soviets gave Crimea to Ukraine in 1954.

Putin: Crimea was not a gift. It was a loan. It's like when you have your car repaired, and dealer gives you a loaner. You don't get to keep the loaner. You return it. Russia repossessed our loaner from deadbeat borrower.

Me: Can you do this? Is it legal under international law?

Putin: Russians always obey laws, especially those we make up for the occasion. My parliament -- its official name escapes me at the moment -- approved my actions. All my judges said: 'Go for it, Vladi!' The reintegration of Crimea into the bosom of Mother Russia is as legal as a two-dollar ruble.

Me: Do you plan to 'reintegrate' more lands where there are Russians?

Putin: We believe in self-determination for all Russians. If people want to join Russia, who am I -- little Pooty -- to stand in the schoolhouse door and say, 'Nyet'? Strong leaders say 'Da!'

Me: 'Duh?'

Putin: Da!

Me: There are lots of Russian-speakers in Poland, Ukraine and Cuba, not to mention New York and Israel.

Putin: I want all comrades in exile to know that I hear their cry: 'Give us justice, Pooty,' they plead. 'Make us one with the Motherland. Bring us home!'

Me: When exactly do you hear these voices?

Putin: When they are speaking to me, of course. That's a very stupid question, Comrade. Great leaders listen to their people. I have 20-20 hearing.

Me: Some in America are a little suspicious, because you spent 16 years in the KGB.

Putin: What's the matter with KGB? It's just a big department store in St. Petersburg. My job? I revitalized the wardrobes of Russian women by selling them elbow-length silk gloves for evening wear on the steppes and in the factories. These accessories made our stumpy babushkas look like Audrey Hepburn. Unfortunately, silk gloves are not good for handling hot pig iron in our steel mills, which is where our ladies choose to spend their nights.

Me: Let me try a different tack. What is your vision thing?

Putin: Great question. I am for big Russia. We should have more time zones than you can shake a big stick at. Russia should be as big as we once were under Stalin, not itsy-bitsy like that little state of yours that covers under the skirts of Massachusetts. We Russians like big—big dogs, big dachas, big armies, big hidden bank accounts.

Me: Tell me, Pooty. How have you amassed a big net worth of \$70 billion on your annual presidential salary of \$187,000.

Putin: I am shrewd investor.

Me: What's your secret?

Putin: I'm short borscht and long burgers.

Me: Explain!

Putin: I read Wall Street Journal every day like Hillary Clinton. I, too, invest in cattle futures. Americans eat less and less beef each year, so price always goes up! Only someone like me who thinks the law of supply and demand is unconstitutional could have figured this out.

Me: Do you see yourself as an entrepreneur?

Putin: I see myself as having been born in the wrong era. I would have made wonderful American robber baron. Instead, the times forced me into mergers and acquisitions.

Me: But aren't you a Communist?

Putin: Of course, but I just celebrate the big holidays. I mean I'm not religious about it.

My ideology is that I am fair to all. I steal from poor and give to my rich oligarch friends. I also steal from the rich and give to myself. I treat everyone the same.

Me: So how do you respond to those who say the Russian economy is weak and basically a gas station?

Putin: I say, 'Follow the money!' It's clear that my top one percent is richer than America's top one percent. And my homeless are less homeless than your homeless, because we always provide five-star shelters for them in pollution-free Siberia.

Me: Five stars?

Putin: Right. Five stars are what they see through each breathing hole in their barrack's roof. Don't be judgmental, Comrade. Your homeless see thousands of stars from their heating grates.

Me: Well, 50 stars at least. So tell me, who are your heroes? Ivan the Terrible? Stalin?

Putin: You disappoint me. My heroes are Big Bird and Mr. Rogers. In my soul, I am small, happy child skipping through the daisies in a sunny field.

Me: So all of this macho stuff you do is just....

Putin: ...just image-building and public relations. Russians like to think they have strong leader. That's why I treat them like dirt, wrestle musk ox naked and bungee jump from airplane at 35,000 feet. But George W. Bush knew that down deep I am just little teddy bear looking for his Momma's lap.

Me: Is that your message to the American people?

Putin: Da.

Me: I have one final question. Why should any American believe anything you've said in this interview?

Putin: Because I am great friend of America.

Me: Friend?

Putin: Sure. I love America—Harleys. Davy Crockett. Off-shore prisons. But you've never learned to be subtle in world affairs like Russia has.

If you want to quiet the Taliban, build Disneylands in Afghanistan. If you want to beat Al-Qaeda, hit them with banana splits from Dairy Queen, not drones. Frozen custard has never turned a single local into a jihadist.

Me: Are you planning to reintegrate Poland and Ukraine by loading them up with the Russian version of Tastee Freez?

Putin: Nah. Tanks are faster and cheaper.

Me: Thank you, President Putin. Americans now know the real you.

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