

Could Putin be that “bad”?

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Folha de S. Paulo, March 12, 2012

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The West has a particular view on who are the good and the bad government leaders in developing countries. The “good” leaders are those who open the doors of their countries to Western multinational corporations, to its exports and to the operations of its financial institutions. The “bad” ones are those who are nationalist and think in terms of their countries' national interest; who try to build or consolidate their country and guarantee their industrial development. Vladimir Putin, who has just been elected president of Russia with a vast majority, is among the bad ones. He is not clearly named a “dictator” – the adjective of choice for nationalist leaders, but usually forgotten when it comes to an “ally” dictator – but he is described as authoritarian, as corrupt, and as a persecutor of businessmen by definition.

Could the Russian leader be that “bad”? The West's repeated criticisms make them seem true. And there is certainly some truth in them. But we must consider the results achieved, which can be done, first, by comparing the eight years of the previous administration – Boris Yeltsin's – with the first eight years of Putin's administration. And, later, by comparing those two periods with Brazil. The GDP growth in those four periods is shown below.

	Russia	Brazil
1992-99	-24.8%	22.6%
2000-08	83.0%	38.8%

In the 1990s, Boris Yeltsin was one of the West's “reformist heroes”. Although he was notoriously corrupt and was frequently drunk, the only other leader to whom he might be compared was Carlos Menem, in Argentina. During his administration, the GDP of Russia, then fully subservient to the West, dropped 24.8%. It was a national disaster. In those years the number of suicides in Russia increased exponentially. Yet in the eight following years, under Putin, the GDP grew 83.0%, and the standards of living improved considerably. It is not difficult, therefore, to understand why the Russian people has been giving him such a strong support. He not only headed the resumption of economic development for his country; he also made Russians once again proud of being Russian. And this is no small thing.

But was not Russia supposed to have this extraordinary growth? If so, Brazil should also be supposed to have an extraordinary growth. After all, they are both BRICs. However, while Brazilian GDP grew 38.8% between 2000 and 2008, Russian GDP more than doubled. Part of the Russian growth was destined to recover the loss. Let's

put two years aside, and compare the period 2002-2010: the result is still favorable to Russia: 36.6% for Brazil and 44.8% for Russia, despite the fact that Russia was more severely affected by the 2008 crisis.

Therefore, in view of the data presented, it becomes difficult to consider Vladimir Putin as “bad”, and the Russian people, as incompetent for having elected him. Couldn't we then appeal to the ethical criterion? This is *not* the Western criterion, but it may be ours. However, we must bear in mind that major politicians are seldom angels. They are always ambitious, merciless to their opponents, and not always very honest, but many combine these defects with competence and public spirit. Therefore, if we judge politicians merely according to ethical criteria, we will have to reject many who have always been regarded as statesmen. When we want to evaluate government leaders, it is more reasonable to verify what they really do for their countries.