



REALISM, POWER AND GEOPOLITICS: AN IMAGINARY CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN MACHIAVELLI AND PUTIN

20 October 2026

The two letters that follow are an imagined correspondence between Niccolò Machiavelli and Vladimir Putin. They test how far the realism of *The Prince* still explains contemporary geopolitics. Machiavelli, the admiring tutor, applauds Putin's skill in exploiting the West's political weaknesses and dividing Europe from within. Putin, in reply, embraces the cold calculus of power. He dismisses human rights and international law as Western pieties, and presents Russia as a resilient civilisation, able to endure immense sacrifice under a strong leader.

Machiavelli writes to Vladimir Putin

To Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin
18 October 2026

Most esteemed Prince,
Among the rulers of our age, few have understood as clearly as you that power does not belong merely to those who possess the greatest resources, but to those who understand the weaknesses of those who possess them. Empires often decline not when they become poor, but when they become distracted by their own reflections. You have shown uncommon skill in recognising this truth and acting upon it.

I have observed with particular interest your dealings with the American prince. Many of your critics mistake patience for hesitation and restraint for uncertainty. They fail to understand that you recognised before most others that a leader who seeks constant recognition from his own people can often be guided more effectively by his ambitions than resisted by force. The man who now occupies the centre of American power is driven by the desire to demonstrate strength, avenge perceived slights, and secure visible bargains. Rather than treating these impulses as obstacles, you have treated them as instruments.

This is the mark of political intelligence. Lesser statesmen waste their energies condemning a man's nature. Greater ones adapt their strategy to it. You have understood that volatility is not necessarily a danger. Properly managed, it can become an advantage. A predictable adversary is easy to calculate. An unpredictable ally is far more useful when his uncertainty compels others into caution.

Equally noteworthy has been your understanding of Europe. Many still describe the European Union as though it were a unified political body. You have consistently treated it for what it is: a permanent negotiation among states whose interests frequently diverge beneath a carefully maintained rhetoric of solidarity.

You have understood that such a structure is strongest when confronting an obvious external threat and weakest when confronted by its own internal contradictions. The objective is therefore not to attack it directly. Direct attacks create unity. Rather, the wiser course is to allow each member to become increasingly conscious of its own particular interests, grievances, and burdens.

The tactician seeks surprise. The strategist seeks position. You have repeatedly demonstrated that it is possible to declare an objective openly and still advance towards it because others lack either the unity or the resolve to prevent it.

You have recognised that those who bear the largest fiscal costs, those whose industries suffer most from energy transitions, and those most affected by migration pressures require little persuasion. They already understand that the burdens of the common project

are not distributed equally. They need only be reminded that bilateral arrangements can often achieve in months what Brussels struggles to deliver in years.

The elegance of this approach lies in its moderation. One need not encourage departure from the Union. One need merely encourage delay, exceptions, conditions, and national calculations. A political union that hesitates before every decisive step gradually loses the capacity for collective action. It may survive institutionally while ceasing to matter strategically.

You have shown similar insight in your treatment of the Union's newer members. These states entered the European and Atlantic structures seeking certainty and protection. Yet security guarantees remain political promises, and political promises are only as durable as the governments that make them. When American leaders openly discuss burdens, costs, and obligations, they merely give voice to doubts that already exist. Here again, you have not needed to create suspicion. You have only needed to appreciate its existence.

Indeed, one of your greatest strengths as a strategist is your willingness to display your intentions more openly than your opponents expect. This is why you should be feared, but also why you must be respected. Many leaders conceal their objectives beneath layers of rhetoric and in doing so deceive themselves as much as others. You have often preferred clarity. Those who listen carefully usually know what you seek long before you act. Yet because they assume statesmen must always disguise their aims, they fail to take your words seriously until events force them to do so.



This quality distinguishes the strategist from the tactician. The tactician seeks surprise. The strategist seeks position. You have repeatedly demonstrated that it is possible to declare an objective openly and still advance towards it because others lack either the unity or the resolve to prevent it.

Your handling of Europe's domestic politics reflects the same understanding. Governments that have invested heavily in sanctions, migration policies, industrial strategies, and collective initiatives inevitably create domestic opposition to those measures. The wise ruler does not argue endlessly against such policies. He merely ensures that their costs remain visible. Political reality then performs the rest of the labour.

Energy disruptions at sensitive moments, shifting commercial opportunities, pressure points exposed at electoral junctures, and the unequal distribution of economic pain often influence governments more effectively than a thousand speeches. Leaders who must answer to voters frequently choose pragmatism over principle when the political cost of principle becomes sufficiently high.

Above all, you have avoided the mistake of presenting yourself as an enemy of Europe itself. You have understood that Europeans unite most effectively when they can identify a singular adversary. Far better, therefore, that they remain preoccupied with their own differences, their own budgets, their own elections, and their own competing priorities.

The uncertainty generated by Washington serves this purpose admirably. Not because it destroys European cohesion directly, but because it encourages each capital to calculate independently. Once governments begin asking whether American commitments are conditional, temporary, or negotiable, they inevitably begin asking the same questions about European commitments. The habit of strategic calculation spreads. And every union ultimately rests upon the suppression of certain calculations in the name of a larger purpose.

You have demonstrated throughout your rule that enduring influence rarely comes from delivering a decisive blow. It comes from understanding which tensions can be maintained indefinitely. A wound that heals disappears from politics. A wound that remains open reshapes the behaviour of entire nations.

For this reason, your approach towards Europe deserves recognition not merely for its determination but for its patience. You have grasped that a union need not be conquered to become ineffective. It need only become uncertain of itself.

But let add an additional concern. I admire, Excellency, how you have used the West's divisions, and I do not dispute your cunning. But I must ask whether the war in Ukraine was a prudent use of power. A prince should win quickly or not begin at all, for a long war drains the treasury, wears out the soldiers and teaches the people to count their dead. You expected a swift conquest and found a protracted struggle, and that is the mark of an adventure rather than a design.

Your core lesson is as true today as it was in Florence: politics is about power, not nice ideals. Rules do not create order; power does. When the balance of power shifts, treaties and international laws get thrown away.

Such lessons would have pleased many princes of my own age. But beware, my prince: cruelty badly used breeds hatred, and hatred, joined to reckless adventures abroad, has brought down more rulers than any rival's sword, so even when you are feared, take care to be seen as virtuous, for men judge by appearances and forgive almost anything in a prince who seems to deserve his throne. You have made yourself feared, which is useful, but you have let yourself be hated, which is dangerous. And you treat your allies as instruments, to be discarded when they cease to serve. A prince may do so when strong, but he must never look as though he does, lest at the first reverse he finds himself alone. Tell me honestly: is this scorn for friends and for opinion a strength, or merely the pride that comes before a fall?

Your servant in prudence and statecraft,
Niccolò Machiavelli
From beyond the grave

An imaginary response by Vladimir Putin to Machiavelli's letter

To Niccolò Machiavelli
Moscow, 20 October 2026

Most esteemed Florentine,

I thank you for your letter dated 18 October 2026. I have a great admiration for your political ideas. You alone understood that power is the absolute measure of all things, and you mastered the cold calculus of how to seize it and how to keep it.

I must reply to your wise words. But, let us be completely clear: I am writing this letter not just for you, but for our own Russian people. We are a great, ancient civilisation—far superior to the weak, dying societies of Western Europe.

You speak as a Florentine who never governed a civilisation of this size. Appearances are the currency of weak states that must beg for approval. Russia has endured invasions, famines and revolutions, and has outlasted every power that predicted its collapse. As for allies, I have never needed friends who must be flattered, only partners who understand interest. If Europe hates me, let it. A hated prince who is obeyed is safer than a loved one who is ignored. And the sacrifice you call imprudent is what my people will remember as greatness.

When we talk about grandeur, it is important to be clear. Grandeur does not mean luxury shops or easy living. It means raw force, power, and global influence. True grandeur only happens when a people have a strong leader. Even when our economy struggles, and even when people in our villages live in very modest conditions and make huge sacrifices every day, they know why they do it.

I know that old-school idealists and UN veterans—like Victor Àngelo, who spent decades in conflict zones and likes to write about human rights and international principles—call me a war criminal. But these dreamers do not even know what true democracy means. They think people want endless talk and procedural rules. They are wrong. Strong authority is far more effective. And it is deeply appreciated by a people who know they are better than all others when it comes to discipline, order, and culture.

Your core lesson is as true today as it was in Florence: politics is about power, not nice ideals. Rules do not create order;



power does. When the balance of power shifts, treaties and international laws get thrown away.

After the Cold War, Western elites thought military competition was dead. They thought their temporary dominance would last forever. But history doesn't work that way. When vital security is on the line, countries throw out the rulebook and use raw power. Whining about sovereignty is what weak states do. The strong make the rules; the rest obey.

That is why I did not invite European leaders or Kyiv to talk about the future of European security. I invited Washington and Beijing.

Wars involve many actors, but peace is always carved up by the few. Europe is just a collection of wealthy protectorates that cannot act without American permission. Only three powers carry the weight to shape this world: Russia, China, and the United States.

I have deep respect for China's leadership, especially President Xi Jinping. We are building a powerful alliance for the future.

As for the American prince, he is a predictable narcissist who only cares about his image and wanting to look like a deal-maker. I know exactly how to manage his vanity. My wider relation with the US is designed to mislead Washington, as certainly you have already noticed, and deepen the fierce political divisions tearing their country apart.

Our plan for Europe is simple: break its weak unity so it shatters into manageable pieces.

Some people complain about the cost and length of the war in Ukraine. But our goal is absolute: to conquer Ukraine, crush the anti-Russian project, and secure our borders once and for all. Nearly five years of campaign against the leaders in Kyiv – I do not call them Nazi leaders, since that term did not exist in your day – show that we consider this endeavour vital for the survival of Russia. What others condemn as a violation of international law is, to us, critical for our true sovereignty, and that is why we willingly bear its high cost.

This is not a new game. In this mission, I am guided by the spirit of Russia's greatest leaders – Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, Alexander III, and Pyotr Stolypin. They knew that state power cannot show weakness.

You wrote that a ruler must learn how not to be good when necessity demands it. You meant clear-eyed judgment. A statesman's first duty isn't popularity or moral purity. It is knowing the difference between what ought to be and what actually is.

History does not care about excuses. It only records the power we hold and the results we achieve. History is written by the strong men, not by the so-called democrats.

Yours in the service of necessity, might, and our civilisational destiny,

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin.●

<https://doi.org/10.26619/2183-4822.2026.OM.11>

Note by the author

These texts represent a fictional correspondence; they do not reflect the opinions of the author, nor do they bind any institution. The letters were written based on the works of N. Machiavelli and the political statements and stances of V. Putin. The text in no way reflects any support for V. Putin's policies; quite the contrary. Please note that power is transitory. Every great power is eventually tested by decline; wise powers prepare for that reality before circumstances impose it upon them. The empires of Charles V, Napoleon, and Britain all appeared durable to contemporaries. None proved immune to the passage of time. Furthermore, I should add that power does not guarantee wisdom, justice, or permanence. It merely determines which actors cannot be ignored when the architecture of order is being constructed.