

**The Trump-Putin Relationship:  
What Does It Mean and What Should We Expect From It?  
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In a campaign that became famous for its surprises, with a candidate who seemed to delight in being unpredictable, one of the few constants of Donald Trump's successful run for the White House was his excessive and rather puzzling admiration for Russia's President Vladimir Putin. How can we understand the Trump-Putin 'bromance', what might it tell us about the kind of president that Trump aspires to be and what clues might it hold for the future of US relations with Russia?

Donald Trump is on record as praising Putin at least as early as 2008, when he compared Putin to then-US President George W. Bush and indicated that Putin was the better leader of the two. Throughout the election campaign, Trump frequently spoke admiringly of the Russian president, describing him as a strong leader who acted in the interests of his own country. Trump also seemed to accept Putin's interpretation of Russia's actions in Crimea (that the Crimeans voted in a free and fair referendum to rejoin Russia), the conflict in eastern Ukraine (that Russia is not sending troops and weapons to support the separatists), and Russia's military actions in Syria (that Russia is targeting Islamic State), despite abundant evidence to the contrary.

Why does Trump admire Putin so much? There seems to be a strong element of hero worship involved. Putin is almost certainly the type of leader Trump would like to be. To some extent this is about image – Putin is famous for public displays of masculinity to emphasize his physical toughness and create a dramatic contrast between himself and his predecessor Boris Yeltsin, whom Russians associate with infirmity and the inability to rule effectively. Trump also seeks every opportunity to remind audiences of his masculinity, although in Trump's case it mainly takes the form of sexualised language and drawing attention to his ability to appeal to beautiful, young women.

But Trump also seems to admire the way that Putin rules his own country – that Putin appears to be able to act without constraints, both at home and abroad. Internally Putin deals with critics very ruthlessly, whether those critics are journalists, opposition political figures or civil society more broadly. In foreign policy Putin is quick to use military force in support of Russia's aims. This is chiefly the illusion of strength – it is easy to look strong when no one is allowed to oppose you openly at home and when you have no strong allies that could act as an external brake in the way that the need to keep NATO members on side does with the United States.

We need to pay attention to this admiration because Putin's methods of dealing with internal opposition are similar to the ways that Trump spoke about dealing with his own critics in the US during the campaign. For example, he has indicated he would use the legal system in arbitrary and inappropriate ways against journalists and media outlets, as well as his political opponents, especially Hillary Clinton – Trump routinely encouraged his supporters to chant "lock her up" at his rallies and has, more recently, stated that any American who burns the flag in protest should be subject to punishment including perhaps the loss of their citizenship. Trump's statements about NATO, particularly his suggestion

that the American commitment to its allies would vary depending on their willingness to pay for it (and whether this means spend 2% of their own GDP on defence or something else isn't clear), indicates a wish to be free from the constraints that alliances have traditionally imposed on the US. We also need to bear in mind other possible similarities between the way Putin rules Russia and the way that Trump has indicated he might seek to behave while in office – for example, in the financial sphere. Putin is widely regarded as presiding over a deeply corrupt regime, while there have been many likely conflicts of interest identified between Trump the president and Trump the businessman. Is Trump looking at Putin and the way he runs Russia for inspiration about the sort of president he should be?

The impact of Trump's admiration for Putin on the course of US foreign policy is the subject of much speculation. Trump and Putin appear to have some common interests on issues that have made the US-Russia relationship particularly tense in the past few years: the annexation of Crimea, the conflict in eastern Ukraine and Russia's military involvement in Syria. Trump appears to have no interest in a values-based foreign policy that promotes the spread of democratic/Western norms and so sees no advantage to the US in opposing Russia's actions in Ukraine. This means the whole basis for economic sanctions against Russia is undermined, so we may see the US withdraw its support for this course of action. The scepticism that Trump has expressed about the value for money that the US gets from NATO may not lead to the dissolution of the alliance, but the very suggestion that the incoming president might not honour America's commitment to the alliance has already undermined it in important ways. NATO members in the Baltic states and east-central Europe are deeply worried about the signal that Trump's words send to Russia.

Trump's base of supporters, in so far as they are concerned about any foreign policy issues, are concerned about the threat of terrorism – defined almost exclusively by them as foreign, Muslim extremist terrorism. One Trump supporter was quoted as saying during the campaign that he wanted a president who was angry about terrorism – if Trump is willing to take Putin's word for what Russia is doing in Syria as being directed against terrorists and isn't concerned about human rights considerations, it looks likely that Trump would take the pressure off Russia (and Assad) in Syria and perhaps even undertake joint operations.

All of this suggests that Russia may be getting a very large gift from the Trump presidency in the shape of acquiescence to Russia's foreign policy actions in some areas that are key for Moscow. But what does Russia have to offer the US in return? Very little or nothing in terms of material opportunities in the economic, political or diplomatic spheres, but a great deal in terms of symbolism. Russia, after all, has Putin. As the ultimate strong, manly world leader, Putin has the ability to grant or withhold the acknowledgement that Trump is a member of the club of strong leaders. Based on what we have seen so far, Trump wants Putin's approval and would probably do a fair amount to get and keep it.

Will Russia have smooth sailing ahead, then? Perhaps in the short term, but at this point the basis for a real understanding between the two countries looks very flimsy, and there are signs that the Trump administration will want to take actions – such as building up the US military further – that Russia would oppose. There is also the very real possibility that somewhere along the line, Putin will do or say something that makes Trump look weak. If that happens, it might fatally damage the budding Trump-Putin bromance.

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