

Putin: A Genius or Unhinged?
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Russia specialists (historians, former ambassadors, intelligence operatives) seem to have some disagreement on the mental state of Vladimir Putin. In his two decades of leadership after the fall of the Soviet Union, he has slowly morphed Russia from a new liberal democracy to a dangerous illiberal democracy.

Liberal democracy is governed by rule of law, (separation of powers, independent press, independent courts, and honest elections). Such democracies are only as good as the people who support these institutions. An illiberal democracy is one in which dubious elections are held, but all the other guardrails are either missing or weak.

Another characteristic of an illiberal democracy is the leadership: one that stays in power by corrupting elections and intimidating the population. We see that now, as thousands of people flood the streets in Russian cities, protesting what they see as an unjustifiable war against their neighbors in Ukraine. Putin's response is to send out masked police to randomly seize people and arrest them.

This situation is not unique to Russia. Public demonstrations have been violently suppressed in Iran, Hong Kong, Belarus, and now in all Russian cities. Peaceful public demonstrations are not suppressed in liberal democracies. It is a rare event that can get millions of people peacefully demonstrating against Putin's unjust war.

As to Putin's sanity, well-qualified observers differ. These are the facts in which reliable sources agree.

Putin was trained as a KGB agent. His first position after the fall of the USSR was mayor of St. Petersburg (formerly Leningrad). But soon, he became the only sober member of the newly elected Russian government, under Boris Yeltsin, and he gathered a coterie of former intelligence operatives who pulled off a great heist: stealing the wealth of the USSR and dividing most of these assets among themselves.

When one of the oligarchs, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who had been given the energy sector, wanted to use that money to support the new liberal democracy, Putin had him jailed and after a decade, kicked out of Russia. This was a message to his fellow thieves: don't mess with Putin. He gives and can take away.

Putin was recognized as a shrewd man, a great chess player who kept his moves close to the chest. He was never burdened with empathy or any values such as ethics, honesty, or kindness. He is apparently governed by a raging anger over the collapse of the Soviet Union, which, in his own words, was the greatest tragedy in the 20th century.

He contrasts Russia's sad state with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, when it was a feared rival nuclear power to the United States and Western Europe. He wanted revenge. If he could not recreate the Russian Empire, he could at least attack and despoil liberal democracies.

When elections still mattered in Russia, he bolstered his failing numbers by creating a war to pull Chechnya, a new republic, back under Russian control. He clandestinely destroyed a Russian apartment block and accused the Chechens of doing it, his first "false flag" operation.

He poisoned political opponents, assassinating them no matter where they were in the world. He assassinated political opponents in Russia itself, and jailed others.

In his attack on liberal democracies, he used Russian money to corrupt politicians and promote otherwise terrible ideas, such as Brexit, which resulted in Britain leaving the European Union.

The unexpected election of Donald Trump, who came to office despite losing the popular vote, has Putin's tactics all over it. Trump has demonstrated his loyalty and admiration for Putin in public, the latest being admiration for his "genius." And through Trump, Putin has turned the Republicans, once enemies of Russia, into toadies.

Now, however, he appears irrational. Ignoring advice from his own intelligence chief and generals, he has invaded Ukraine for daring to prefer liberal democracy to Russian dictatorship. He threatens nuclear war, alarming friends and enemies alike, and rants with an unhinged account of Russia's history.

I am with the historians who think his evil has morphed into madness. His power circle needs to take him out if they are to save Russia.

684 words

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