

Trump's Putin Fantasy

Here's noted US historian Timothy Snyder's excellent dissection of what a Donald Trump victory in forthcoming presidential elections would mean for US-Russian relations – and a whole lot more besides.

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[Timothy Snyder](#), [New York Review of Books](#), 19 April 2016



Donald Trump in Syracuse, New York, April 16, 2016; Vladimir Putin in Moscow, Russia, April 14, 2016. Carlo Allegri/Reuters; Maxim Shemetov/Reuters.

Few foreign leaders seem enthusiastic about the prospect of a Donald Trump presidency. But there is one who should be pleased: Vladimir Putin. Or so Trump seems to think. Most prominent Republicans criticize President Obama for reacting too feebly to Russian domestic oppression, the Russian invasion of southern and southeastern Ukraine, and Russia's growing threat to NATO in Eastern Europe. Trump, on the other

hand, has praised Putin's "strong" leadership at home, called NATO "obsolete and expensive," and made a point of describing his friendship with Putin—though it seems to be entirely imaginary.

From the beginning of his candidacy last summer, Trump has repeatedly claimed that he would "get along very well with Vladimir Putin." Last fall, after he was interviewed on the same segment of *60 Minutes* as Putin, he warmly referred to the experience of being "stablemates" as "going well." This was strikingly at odds with [reality](#), since Trump was in the US and Putin in Russia during the interviews, and the two men did not in fact meet.

More extraordinary still, Trump has indicated, in his selection last month of Carter Page as a foreign policy adviser, that American policy to Europe will be guided by Russian interests. Page, heretofore known as an adviser to Russia's state gas company, has been among the prominent Americans spreading Russian propaganda about Ukraine's revolution in 2014 and the Russian invasion that followed. In his writings he has questioned Ukraine's status as an independent state, which is precisely the line that Moscow took to justify its invasion. He maintains—preposterously—that Ukraine is like Quebec inside a Russia that is like Canada. Quebec is a province and Ukraine is a country. He has referred to Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula, a signal violation of international law, as the "so-called annexation."

It is not hard to see why Trump might choose Putin as his fantasy friend. Putin is the real world version of the person Trump pretends to be on television. Trump's financial success (such as it is) has been as a New York real estate speculator, a world of private deal-making that can seem rough and tough—until you compare it to the Russia of the 1990s that ultimately produced the Putin regime. Trump presents himself as the maker of a financial empire who is willing to break all

the rules, whereas that is what Putin in fact is. Thus far Trump can only verbally abuse his opponents at rallies, whereas Putin's opponents are assassinated. Thus far Trump can only have his campaign manager rough up journalists he doesn't like. In Russia some of the best journalists are in fact murdered.

President Putin, who is an intelligent and penetrating judge of men, especially men with masculinity issues, has quickly drawn the correct conclusion. In the past he has done well for himself by recruiting among politicians who exhibit greater vanity than decency, such as Silvio Berlusconi and Gerhard Schröder. The premise of Russian foreign policy to the West is that the rule of law is one big joke; the practice of Russian foreign policy is to find prominent people in the West who agree. Moscow has found such people throughout Europe; until the rise of Trump the idea of an American who would volunteer to be a Kremlin client would have seemed unlikely. Trump represents an unprecedented standard of American servility, and should therefore be cultivated as a future Russian client.

Trump correctly says that Putin respects strength. But of course Putin prefers weakness, which is what Trump offers. As Putin understands perfectly well, the president of the United States has standing in Russia, and enjoys far superior power to the president of Russia, only insofar as he or she mobilizes the moral and political resources of a rule-of-law state. It is precisely Trump's pose of strength that reveals his crucial vulnerability. As anyone familiar with Russian politics understands, an American president who shuns alliances with fellow democracies, praises dictators, and prefers "deals" to the rule of law would be a very easy mark in Moscow. It is unclear how much money Trump has, but it is not enough to matter in Russia. If he keeps up his pose as the tough billionaire, he will be flattered by the Russian media, scorned by those who matter in Russia, and then easily crushed by men far richer and smarter than he.

Putin has been accordingly circumspect in his return of Trump's wooing. For him Trump is a small man who might gain great power. The trick is to manipulate the small man and thereby neutralize the great power. In his annual press conference last December, after hearing six months of praise from Trump, Putin said that he welcomed Trump's idea of placing US-Russian relations on a more solid basis, and characterized Trump as "flamboyant, talented, without a doubt." It is hard to miss the ambiguity of "flamboyant," but Trump chose to miss it.

The next day Trump seemed pleased. Perhaps having been [misadvised](#) about what Putin actually said, Trump said that, "When people call you brilliant it's always good." After suggesting that killing journalists was normal, he concluded warmly that "I've always felt fine about Putin, I think that, you know, he's a strong leader, he's a powerful leader, he's represented his country." Not long after that, Trump defended Putin from the official British inquiry into the assassination of Alexander Litvinenko. Trump's reasoning was that Putin "said he didn't do it." In March Trump said that Putin was a stronger leader than the president of the United States. For a crumb of praise from Putin, Trump has presented criminality as normal and sold out his own head of state.

Let us imagine the first few weeks of a Trump administration. Most of his domestic agenda will quickly prove illegal, or at least very complicated to implement. He is not a man who has displayed much patience for management. It seems very likely that he would quickly turn abroad for that surge of approval that he seems to find so pleasurable. And there would be no easier way to gain such a feeling than currying favor with Putin. It is so much easier to ignore traditional allies than to cultivate them, and so much easier to ignore aggression than to maintain order. The louche style that Trump seems likely to bring to American foreign policy is all he will need to garner praise from the man he admires. Given what Trump has

done thus far, under no stress and with little encouragement, it is terrifying to contemplate what he would do as a frustrated American president looking for love.

Even as Putin carefully cultivates a future client, the Russian population (alone in the developed world) [prefers Trump](#) to Clinton, and Russian elites reveal their excitement at the prospect of a tame America. It is unusual, of course, for Russian or other public figures to take sides in American elections. Prudence usually overrides preference; even the most willful authoritarians and media figures usually hedge their bets, knowing that endorsing a losing candidate can bring eight years of bad luck while endorsing the eventual winner may bring very little. In this particular election cycle, however, Russian politicians are in an unusual situation. Hillary Clinton has been the target of such criticism from Russia and its current president that it is impossible to create the impression of evenhandedness. In December 2011, Vladimir Putin personally (and absurdly) blamed Clinton, then US secretary of state, for giving a “signal” that prompted Russians to protest faked parliamentary elections.

Once liberated from the normal rules of the game, Russian politicians have been able to give voice to what seems like heartfelt sympathy for Trump. Vasily Likhachev, a Communist in the Russian parliament, explicitly expressed his preference for Trump over Clinton. Dmitry Kiselev, the Russian talk show star best known in the West for reminding us that Russian can turn the US into “radioactive ash” and for advising that the hearts of gays be burned after their deaths, gushes that “a new star is rising—Trrump.” Konstantin Rykov, a member of Putin’s United Russia party and a leading media manager, opines that Trump is “the very embodiment of the American dream.” Aleksei Pushkov, the chairman of the Russian parliament’s international affairs committee, [tweets](#) admiringly about Trump on a regular basis.

Most revealingly, he wrote that Trump “can lead the Western locomotive right off the rails.”

The explicit endorsement of Trump by Aleksandr Dugin, the leading Russian fascist ideologue and a very important media presence in Russia, is particularly alarming. The premise of Dugin’s “Eurasian” movement is that Russia and the West are artificially separated by enlightened ideas of the rule of law and individual rights. Once leaders of the West understand that these are artificial (Jewish) implantations, they can join Russia in the embrace of fascism. Dugin accordingly praises the American people, calling upon them to shed their “oligarchic” elites and return to their true (fascist) values. I read Dugin’s use of “oligarchic” to mean “Jewish”—a suspicion confirmed by Dugin’s reaction to an actual oligarch who enjoys the backing of American neo-Nazis: “Trump is the voice of the real right wing in America,” he writes. “[Vote for Trump!](#)”

The Russian expectation is that a Trump victory would be ruinous for American power, and that such power as remains will be deployed to support Russian interests. Trump’s fantasy friendship with Putin is one more reason to expect that a Trump victory would also be disastrous for American values and institutions. Putin can be expected, if the two men actually meet as presidents, to flatter Trump’s vanity and urge him onward toward a full assault on the Constitution. Russia is in a downward spiral of its own; what Americans must consider now is a weak presidential candidate who wants to follow Putin’s charm where it leads, which most likely means straight to the bottom.

<http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/04/19/trumps-putin-fantasy/>