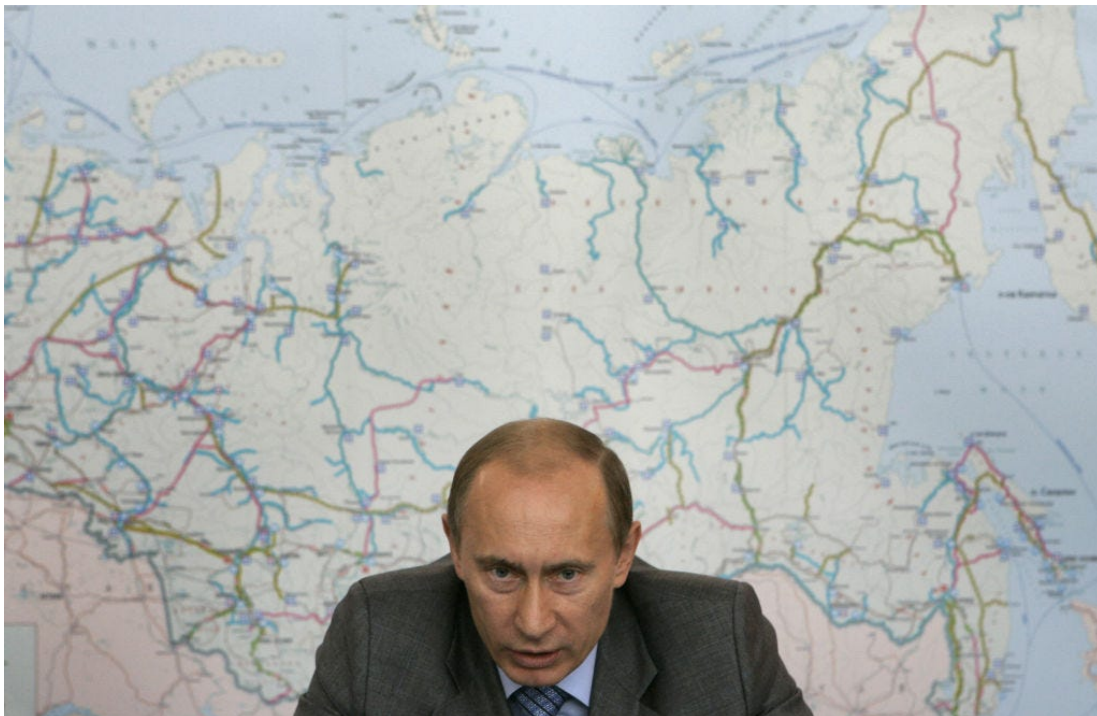


# Why Americans Don't Understand Vladimir Putin

**The Russian president hasn't just gone 'crazy.' He's always been like this.**



"PUTIN RETAINS POWER PRECISELY BECAUSE HE HAS ALWAYS BEEN SOMEONE WHO IS PREPARED TO LIE, MANIPULATE, AND KILL TO ACHIEVE HIS OBJECTIVES," WRITES KONSTANTIN KISIN. (DMITRY LOVETSKY/POOL/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES)

## By Konstantin Kisin

Prompted by a wave of missile and drone attacks on Ukrainian towns and cities which killed 12 and injured dozens over the weekend, President Donald Trump expressed his frustrations with Russia's president on Truth Social Sunday, saying, "I've always had a very good relationship with Vladimir Putin of Russia, but something has happened to him. He has gone absolutely CRAZY!"

This is an interesting theory. Before we examine it in detail, it is worth pointing out that numerous United States presidents have attempted to believe Putin could be reasoned with. President George W. Bush famously “looked into Putin’s eyes and saw a soul,” while Bill Clinton insisted that Putin could be relied on to stick to their agreements. U.S. presidents prefer (or at least pretend) to believe this, because it prevents them from having to face the reality of who Putin has always been, and what that means for America and the West. But, far more importantly, this belief is also a product of the American psyche, which makes even the most cynical U.S. politicians susceptible to manipulation by those who operate within a different moral framework.

You will not find a bigger fan of the United States than me. Spending time in the U.S. is always a joy—one cannot help but be inspired by the culture of openness, cooperation, and positivity. The story of America is that anything is possible, especially when good people get together to do business, make money, and thrive. While most Americans take these cultural traits as given, the reality is they are rare and are, in no small part, the foundation of America’s success. Americans are widely regarded around the world as extremely friendly, welcoming, proactive, and constructive.

But every coin has two sides. The trade-off of this business-focused, open-minded, good faith, let’s-make-money approach is a consistent failure to contend with the reality that not all cultures and not all people are like this.



"The positive attitude that is the default setting in America is widely regarded in many parts of the world as evidence of unseriousness and naïveté," writes Konstantin Kisin. (Shepard Sherbell/Corbis via Getty Images)

My Western friends often say that I come across as "intense," "unsmiling," and even "angry" in interviews. By American standards, they are certainly right. Which is why they are always surprised when I tell them the story of showing a Russian family member a school photo of mine. "Why have you all got that idiotic American smile?" she asked.

The open, welcoming, and positive attitude that is the default setting in America is widely regarded in many parts of the world as evidence of gullibility, unseriousness, and naïveté. It is seen, sometimes justifiably, as an attitude that leaves people vulnerable to deception. Not because Americans are stupid, but because their desire to believe in the good of others makes it harder for them to recognize when others are not, in fact, good.

To fully grasp the cultural chasm between Russia and America, you need to understand the history of the two countries.

The U.S. is a nation of people who conquered a continent. It is filled with the descendants of those who left their homelands to seek a better life on the other side of the world. Facing immense hardships, they did not just overcome, they triumphed. In a few centuries, successive waves of newcomers banded together to build a nation out of nothing through hard work, a go-get-it mentality, and a high trust, collaborative society. Americans have no comparable genetic memory of being invaded by powerful enemies, of being held down and oppressed by foreign conquerors, of mass persecution or extermination by their own governments, of totalitarianism, famine, or failure. The American ethos is defined by overcoming the challenges the country has faced in its history: The Great Depression was merely a precursor to the country's explosion into an economic and manufacturing superpower. Pearl Harbor was followed not only by overwhelming victory in World War II but by America emerging as the world's dominant nation and the center of Western civilization.



Women taking water flowing from broken water mains during the siege of Leningrad, 1941–1944. (Sovfoto/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

Anything is possible, problems are challenges to be solved, and the future is bright.

Now consider the history of Russia. One of the founding experiences of the Russian nation is being occupied by the Mongols. The descendants of Genghis Khan wiped out anyone who resisted and subjugated everyone else. Those are horrors equivalent to your country being invaded by ISIS or Khal Drogo from *Game of Thrones*. They butcher, rape, and torture their way through every major city—and force everyone else to bend the knee.

In Russian, this period is called the “Tatar-Mongol Yoke,” a yoke being a device used to join two work animals, such as oxen, together to pull a load.

This period of time lasted around 240 years, as long as the entire history of the U.S. To this day, the Russian language contains many Mongolian words, especially those related to taxation, weaponry, and war.

Another formative period in Russian history is called Smuta, or Times of Trouble. Ivan the Terrible, infamous for killing his only viable heir in a fit of rage, passed on his crown to a feeble and incapable son, Fyodor I. When Fyodor died without an heir, Russia was thrust into 15 years of chaos in which a succession of usurpers and false claimants battled over the throne. Combined with famine, disease, and a series of foreign invasions, the Times of Trouble saw at least a third of Russia’s population wiped out in just 15 years. One of the key conclusions Russians drew from this is that whatever else he is, a ruler must be strong to maintain order. A weak ruler leads to chaos. And chaos is to be avoided at any cost.



How poorly this is understood in the West is ironically and perfectly encapsulated in the different names Russians and English-speakers have for Ivan the Terrible. The word *terrible* is a telling mistranslation: His moniker in Russian is much more accurately translated as *fearsome*.

In the centuries since, Russia has been repeatedly invaded by its Western neighbors including the Swedes, Lithuanians, Poles, Finns, and, famously, Napoleon Bonaparte and Adolf Hitler. While these attacks were ultimately repelled, they left deep scars in the Russian psyche. There is little triumphalism about defeating Napoleon, whose invasion saw Moscow burned to the ground. And while victory in the Great Patriotic War, the Russian name for WWII, is much celebrated, it came at the cost of around 20 million lives. For contrast, the United States lost just over 400,000 people in the same conflict.



Russian students and revolutionary soldiers staging a pitched battle in the streets of Petrograd against the police during the Russian Revolution, 1917–1923. (via Getty)

Compare also the revolutions and civil wars which took place in the two countries. The Russian Revolution, which sparked the Russian Civil War, resulted in the installation of a tyrannical, murderous communist regime

which exterminated its enemies, expropriated private property, and instituted a decades-long reign of terror ending in economic collapse and Cold War defeat in 1991. Meanwhile the American Revolution is a story of a successful fight for independence, while the American Civil War, although bloody and painful, is seen as the price of progress on the path to ultimate unification.

While American baby boomers lived through a period of economic expansion, success, and triumph, their Russian counterparts—like Putin, born in 1952—grew up in the aftermath of a devastating war, Joseph Stalin's slave labor camps, and economic stagnation. By the time they were in their prime, their country collapsed all around them creating chaos, instability, and a sense of loss, humiliation, and exploitation.

These historical experiences inevitably produce people who see the world through such different lenses that it might as well be a different world. Centuries of pain, poverty, famine, war, brutality, suspicion, and humiliation do not produce happy, smiling, positive go-getters.

Which brings us back to the claim that the normally reasonable, rational, and pragmatic Putin with whom we can do business has suddenly become a different person and gone "CRAZY." This claim is convenient for a number of reasons.

First, it absolves those who have been claiming he is reasonable, rational, and pragmatic while his troops have been butchering civilians, stealing Ukrainian children, and torturing prisoners of war in captivity.

Second, it justifies the foreign policy of turning a blind eye to the reality of Putin's Russia and the man himself. On social media, Americans often accuse me of being a Putin "hater" for stating basic facts about his career history and the regime he has set up in Russia. These facts are worth restating.

Putin is a former officer of the KGB, the Soviet Union's main intelligence and security agency. The agency was the successor to the Cheka and NKVD, which were the tools used by Stalin and other Soviet leaders to murder and imprison dissidents, domestic critics, and foreign defectors. Putin joined the agency long after its crimes under Stalin had been exposed.

Putin has never been elected in a free and fair election. He was effectively handed the presidency in 1999 by his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, in exchange for protection, and has held onto power for 26 years, ending Russia's brief experiment with democracy. Every single one of his political opponents like Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Boris Nemtsov, Alexei Navalny, and Garry Kasparov is dead, imprisoned, or in exile.

In 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea, Putin lied repeatedly that the soldiers without insignia who had taken over the peninsula were not his, saying with a cunning grin that "you can go to a store and buy any kind of uniform." He later handed out medals to the Russian soldiers involved in the operation.

Since the war in Ukraine started, Putin has cleaned house of both liberal and nationalist critics, who have been imprisoned, like Igor Girkin-Strelkov, or assassinated, like Yevgeny Prigozhin.

My point is: To anyone who understands the reality of Putin's regime, the idea that he has "gone CRAZY" and is killing people is . . . well, CRAZY. Putin is in power and retains power precisely because he has always been someone who is prepared to lie, manipulate, and kill to achieve his objectives. That is literally what the KGB trained him to do.

In his post criticizing Putin, Trump went on to add: "I've always said that he wants ALL of Ukraine, not just a piece of it, and maybe that's proving to be right." Finally, it seems, our American friends are beginning to understand who they are dealing with.



In his "[Long Telegram](#)," George Kennan famously wrote that Russia was "impervious to logic of reason, and it is highly sensitive to logic of force." This is why I had high—and so far, false—hopes for Trump's ability to end the war. I assumed he would understand the obvious: that bringing Putin to the negotiating table would require a carrot and a stick.

So far, dangling only the carrot of "ending the killing" and sending a starry-eyed historically and geographically illiterate lawyer to be bamboozled for hours in the Kremlin has, predictably, produced nothing. The only way Trump will get serious negotiations going is to threaten Putin with ramping up not only sanctions but high grade, extensive military aid to Ukraine.

As long as that option is not on the table, Putin will keep calling America's bluff.



***This piece originally appeared on Konstantin Kisin's [Substack](#). For more Free Press coverage of Ukraine, [click here](#).***