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Volatile Trump joining Putin's strongman club a threat to global institutions

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Washington: Now, that's how to run an exclusive club. At Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago in Florida, there's a ceiling on membership and newcomers get a look-over only on the recommendation of a current member.

And because the club owner has been in the news, there's a new premium on membership. The down payment has just been doubled, from \$US100,000 to \$US200,000 – and only the churlish would argue that that amounts to the Trumps cashing in on the presidency.

By comparison, the global strongman club is sloppily run and not very exclusive. In the absence of serious vetting, new members are accepted by acclamation, getting in on attitude rather than by recommendation or any strict adherence to a particular creed or ideology.

Foundation members include Russia's Vladimir Putin and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan. China's Xi Jinping gets a guernsey; the obnoxious Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines made a noisy entry in mid-2016 – and this week all eyes are on the man with the potential to be the club's most powerful and most dangerous member – Trump.

After months of campaigning, the transition and just a few days in office, American analysts are still trying to figure him out – "Is Trumpism a scam? And if so, whom is Donald Trump scamming", asks E.J. Dionne in *The Washington Post*. "Or is the country confronting something even more troubling: a President unhinged from any realities that get in the way of his impulses, unmoored from any driving philosophy and willing to make everything up as he goes along, including 'alternative facts'?"

Let's not pretend that we don't have good sense of the man.

Like so many in the strongman club, Trump is all over the place – a bit right, a bit left; as corporatist as he is populist; more opportunistic than he is idealistic; more instinctive than considered. Never quite sure there is a difference between leadership and thuggery. And he brings a paid cheer squad to his own press conferences.

He'll publicly castigate the ranks of the US intelligence services as Nazis, and then happily suggests they should invade Iraq again – this time to steal the oil. Torture is his way to go. He's a dealmaker, so diplomacy is bulls--- and intelligence services are overrated – "I know more than the generals," he said without blushing while discussing the fate of Islamic State.

And he is utterly in love with himself – "the greatest jobs creator God has ever created [at the head of] a movement like the world has never seen before". The last time some of us heard talk like that was in Baghdad – pre-2003.

And more than his childish bromance with Putin, it was Trump's January 20 inauguration speech that nailed him as an autocratic, would-be strongman President – his contempt for the Congress that he must work with; his contempt for the country's history, represented by four former presidents seated behind him; and all his babble about "the people" and what he was going to do for them. He, the man, matters; policy and institutions don't.

On top of that there's his musing about the need for the US to have military parades, as Moscow, Beijing and Pyongyang do; and his borrowing from the songbook of North Korea's Kim Jong-un in his declaration of January 20 as a "national day of patriotic devotion".

To the extent that the speech represented an ideology, Americans heard an end to US subsidies for foreign industry, an end to undocumented migrants; an end to mad military adventures. But the world heard a hammer blow on the post-World War II institutional architecture that has kept the world functioning and at relative peace for decades – the United Nations, NATO, the IMF, the WTO, World Bank, the European Union and more.

The day after the Trump inauguration, in the German city of Koblenz, a gathering of leaders from Europe's radical right parties was jubilant. Threatening governments in Berlin, Paris and The Hague with a post-Brexit, post-Trump backlash at elections in the coming month, French National Front leader Marine le Pen told colleagues from Austria, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands: "In 2016, the Anglo-Saxon world woke up. In 2017, I'm sure it'll be the year of the Continental peoples rising up."

Polls say that Le Pen is unlikely to win the French presidency – but at times they said the same of Trump in the US. In the unlikely event that she wins, the EU could be toast.

To which the controversial leader of the Dutch Freedom Party, Geert Wilders, declared: "Yesterday a new America; today Koblenz and tomorrow a new Europe." All were very excited, hailing Trump and Putin as leaders of a new "populist international".

This week Trump is the man, but Putin is the model.

Like no Moscow leader before him, Putin has mastered a soft-power cocktail of personality, political style and social values that has a particular class of populist leaders prostrating themselves before him – Trump in the US; Francois Fillon and Le Pen in France; Beppe Grillo in Italy; Norbert Hofer in Austria; Viktor Orban in Hungary and Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt.

Going along for the ride are leaders in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bulgaria, all of which were expected to stick with democracy, a gift from the West on the collapse of the Soviet empire.

Just as Trump shocked Europe last week, with his declaration that he would treat Putin and German Chancellor Angela Merkel as equals, Hofer now argues there's no "reason to favour the US over Russia".

As Trump smashed international institutions, so does this lot.

But Putin is the master smasher – unrestrained as an American leader might find himself, Putin sends a diplomat, a tank or an assassin to resolve a crisis but at the same time, as French analyst Benjamin Haddad observes: "All over Europe, Putinism has emerged as an ideological alternative to globalism and the EU ... a bulwark for conservative values – a strongman against gay marriage, immigration and Islam."

Because he thinks he's looking in a mirror as he gazes at Putin, Trump doesn't object to the fact that, in the words of one American observer, the Putin brand is "good old-fashioned fascist-style authoritarianism".

The strongmen and their nationalist followers are on the march amidst a great questioning of globalisation; its actual benefits, particularly in the West; and a loss of confidence in democracy, experts and the mainstream media, all coupled with the power of social media and fake news in what is called a post-truth era.

"[Trump's] impatience with nuance, with the subtleties and long time frames of diplomacy, with the idea of an international order at least partly mediated by supranational institutions, with the give-and-take inherent in bodies such as the United Nations, makes him a natural ally of Putin, as well as of Erdogan in Turkey and [Prime Minister Narendra] Modi in India," Sasha Abramsky writes in the *New Statesman*. "These men, all so willing to treat opponents as enemies, and racial or religious minorities as fifth columns, are the heralds of a new strongman order."

In junking the TPP, Trump has pretty well abandoned the US-designed and -led system of globalisation and free trade that has had bipartisan support in Washington for decades, and has created monumental instability in another relationship which was assumed to be crucial to Washington – with Beijing.

But the outlook is bleaker than a few trade deals gone missing. Daniel Ikenson at the Cato Institute warns of the real consequences of the death of the TPP: "Any remaining expectations that the United States is still capable of leading the world to the economic liberalisation it so desperately needs would erode. And with that diminished credibility, US policy objectives would become more difficult or impossible to meet."

Just as Trump postures as a new sun king for Americans, so too does Xi for the Chinese – in October 2016, Beijing announced that Xi now represented the "core leadership" of the Communist Party, a title that struck some old China hands as decidedly Maoist. And weeks later, *The Wall Street Journal* quoted Chinese sources saying that Xi "wants to keep going after 2020 and ... explore a leadership structure 'just like the Putin model'".

Putin can do no wrong in Trump's eyes. Even when the new President finally acknowledged that Moscow had interfered in the US elections, he did so without passing judgement. And when told during the campaign that Putin kills journalists and his political opponents and invades other countries, he was unflustered: "at least he's a leader".

In seizing control of the American political discourse, Trump has reduced it to a notion that the establishment is always wrong and Trump is always the solution. But determined as he is to destroy the mainstream media as a democratic institution, Trump has a way to go before he can operate as Putin does – which is to not allow the law, protocol and convention act as a brake on his designs.

But we're dealing with a new breed of strongman. Most in the current crop operate within democracies, but at the same time managing to overpower opposition and institutional boundaries by the power of their personalities, their nationalism and a shameless capacity to stare down any who dare to stand in their path – especially the news media.

Analysts Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, describe the consistency of the populist playbook by which they assert themselves: "Deliberately install loyalists in key positions of power (particularly in the judiciary and security services) and neutralise the media by buying it, legislating against it, and enforcing censorship. This strategy makes it hard to discern when the break with democracy actually occurs, and its insidiousness poses one of the most significant threats to democracy in the 21st century."

Trump's promise to "drain the [Washington] swamp" of corruption is taken from the Putin and Xi playbooks. His promise to make America great again, a nationalist revival to avenge humiliation by foreigners, is pure Putin, Xi and Erdogan.

Trump has little sympathy for Ukraine, so he'll likely lift the economic sanctions imposed by Washington as punishment for Moscow's annexation of Crimea; he probably doesn't know where the Baltic States are, so they too will be at Putin's whim.

In *The New Yorker*, Moscow-based analyst Joshua Yaffa writes: "Trump's alpha-male fondness for Putin, combined with his self-professed willingness to make a deal on just about anything, suggests that he is willing to see the world as Putin does: a Second World War map waiting to be divided up between the great and powerful, in the manner of Roosevelt and Stalin at Yalta."

In sizing up Trump last year, *The Economist* was reluctant to get into the "he's a fascist, he's not a fascist" debate because of the implicit accusation of impending genocide. But the magazine detected a "familiar '30s ring" in the combination of elite rot and discredited ideas that Trump feeds on.

Some academics argue that the acts of great men and women make history; others that the drivers are the social phenomena that inspire heroes or villains, such as the pre-existing insecurities and anxieties to which Trump responded.

Princeton historian David Bell splits the difference: those social phenomena exist, but having won the election, it's Trump's character – or lack of it – that will dictate history, he says.

Observing that Republican control of the White House and the two houses of Congress gives Trump the potential to be the most powerful president ever, Bell writes in *Foreign Policy*: "And he is one of the most radically unpredictable men ever elected to that office. He is not guided by a distinct, systematic ideology, and he is not, to say the least, constrained by humility or self-doubt."

Bell lists the traits that he believes will make Trump less likely to appreciate constraints that informed his predecessors' decisions – thin-skinned, convinced of his own abilities, enamoured of his own unpredictability and unable to concentrate on a particular issue.

"In a crisis situation, how is he likely to react? Can anyone know? In these decisions, Donald Trump's personality could assume, difficult as it is to apply these words to him, world-historical importance ... If [social phenomena] lead to Trump's personal rise, it's now all too easy to imagine his troubled personality leading to his country's collective fall."

It could be worse than that, because for all Trump's admiration of Putin, he's not a Putin.

Schooled in the KGB, the Russian has 15 years in power under his belt. As *The Washington Post*'s Jackson Diehl observes: "Putin is skilled at the arts of deception, betrayal, sabotage and tactical aggression. Trump, by comparison, is a dilettante."

The worry, if you peel away the layers of the onion that is the Trump-Putin bromance, is that it's awkwardly one-sided. Yaffa, the Moscow-based analyst, warns: "What if it turns out that Putin is the tactician and bluffer, who only plays the lunatic, and the real strongman, volatile and impulsive, is Trump?"