

Opinion **Vladimir Putin**

The international cult of Vladimir Putin

If the Russian leader triumphs in Ukraine, his thuggish style will gain new followers

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The western world may be divided about how to deal with Vladimir Putin. But we can surely all agree on one thing? Russia's president is the bad guy in this particular drama.

Actually, no. One of the more revealing and depressing features of international politics is the existence of a Putin cult. There is a significant group of world leaders and influential political figures who greatly admire Putin. His fan club is global, spanning Asia, the Middle East, the Americas and Europe.

Dmitry Peskov, Putin's spokesman, was on to something when he [remarked](#) in 2018: "There's a demand in the world for special, sovereign leaders, for decisive ones . . . Putin's Russia was the starting point."

When Putin first emerged as leader of Russia in 1999-2000, he looked like an anomaly — a strongman nationalist in an era of technocratic globalists. Angela Merkel, Germany's former chancellor, once [suggested](#) that Putin was trying to apply the techniques of the 19th century to a different era.

But, with democratic values under challenge across the world, Putin looks increasingly like a man who foresaw the future of global politics rather than a relic from the past. The Russian leader has attracted fans and emulators who admire his ruthlessness, his willingness to use violence, his macho defiance of "political correctness" and his autocratic style of leadership. As the Russian commentator Dmitri Trenin [put it](#) last week: "Putin is a pre-communist leader . . . He is a tsar."

One great danger of the current Ukraine crisis is that if Putin emerges looking victorious, his style of leadership will gain even more prestige and imitators across the world. Land grabs, military threats, lies and assassinations will look like the techniques of a winner.

Putin has already served as a [model](#) for a new generation of autocratic leaders and populists, including in Europe and the US. Donald Trump had to be a little coy about his admiration for Putin. But some of the former US president's close aides were more open. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Rudy Giuliani [praised](#) Putin: "He makes a decision and he executes quickly . . . That's what you call a leader." During the current crisis over Ukraine, Tucker [Carlson](#), the most influential commentator on Fox News, has been openly supportive of Putin.

Viktor Orban, Hungary's prime minister and the self-styled champion of "illiberal democracy" in the EU, is visiting Putin this week. In the past, Orban has [argued](#) that the EU needs to recognise that "Putin has made his country great again". Like Putin, Orban

has [positioned](#) himself as the champion of a minority in Ukraine — in his case, ethnic Hungarians.

Putin's other prominent fans in western Europe include Nigel Farage, the pro-Brexit campaigner, and Matteo Salvini, leader of Italy's hard-right League and former deputy prime minister. Commenting on Putin's dispatch of troops to the Middle East, Farage [gushed](#): "The way he played the whole Syria thing. Brilliant." Salvini once [posed](#) for photos in Red Square wearing a Putin T-shirt.

The Putin fan club extends into Asia and the Middle East. Rodrigo Duterte, leader of the Philippines, has been widely accused of sponsoring [death squads](#) during his time as president. When Duterte was asked which world leader he most admired, he replied "my [favourite hero](#) is Putin".

Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's former prime minister, another self-styled tough guy, relished trips to Russia to discuss geopolitics with Putin. His 2019 re-election campaign featured a [poster](#) of the Israeli leader shaking hands with Putin, under the slogan "Netanyahu: In a league of his own".

Putin has bonded with strongman leaders elsewhere in the Middle East. He presented Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Egypt's president, with a [gift](#) of a Kalashnikov rifle. Sisi, whose security forces have [killed](#) hundreds of demonstrators on the streets of Egypt, appeared enraptured by the gift.

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Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia's crown prince and de facto leader, is another Putin fan. As he rose to power, some British advisers to MBS [noted](#) his awestruck admiration for Putin, commenting: "He was fascinated by him . . . He liked what he did."

The fellow feeling between the Saudi and Russian strongmen took on a new dimension, after [MBS was accused of ordering the murder](#) of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist. For a while, it seemed as if MBS risked becoming an international pariah. It was Putin who made a point of welcoming him back into the club of world leaders. At MBS's first G20 summit after the Khashoggi killing, the Saudi leader was [high-fived](#) by a grinning Putin. Putin himself was later accused of [authorising](#) the attempted murder of Alexei Navalny, the Russian opposition leader.

That exuberant handshake between Putin and MBS goes to the heart of the international cult of Putin. The Russian leader's biggest admirers are often those, like Duterte and MBS, who share his taste for violence and his contempt for human rights.

That is why the current confrontation between Russia and the west is about more than Ukraine's independence, important though that is. The outcome of the crisis may also determine the tone of world politics. If Putin faces down the western democracies, his thuggish strongman style of leadership will look like the wave of the future.

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