

## WHY DO THEY HATE VLADIMIR PUTIN?

Since the Russian army's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Vladimir Putin has been portrayed in the West as a tyrant who has lost all touch with reality. Surrounded by cowardly slimeballs, he no longer understands the world he lives in. Obsessed with the belief that he is a new Peter the Great, he does not represent Russian interests. Without him, Russia would be a democracy, indeed an ally of the West. There are no limits to the anti-Putin fantasy. In John Sweetly's book "The Killer", for example, you can read that Putin is traumatised because he is a child born out of wedlock; he is also a paedophile and will not die a natural death.

However, this highly critical portrayal of the Russian president is nothing new. Back on 1 November 2003, *The Economist* presented the Russian president, who had been in office for just three years, as "Vlad the Impaler". In it, Putin is portrayed, like Dracula, as mentally ill and cruel. The reason: Putin had begun to liquidate the system of his predecessor Yeltsin, which had led Russia into the abyss, and was in the process of putting oligarchs in their place. Countless reports of this kind followed. In a special edition of the same British weekly in October 2016, for example, "Putinism" is blamed for the fact that 25 years after the fall of communism, Russia is not a democracy and not an ally of the West.

This total rejection of Vladimir Putin initially emanated from political circles in the USA. Not only Senator John McCain was an influential Russia-hater at the time; leading media outlets soon adopted an extremely critical stance. President Biden called him a "killer" and today Senator Lindsey Graham is not the only one calling for Russia to be defeated with the help of Ukraine. Russia's ambition to be a great power alone is seen as an outrage by these circles. They hate Putin, who is committing this outrage. "They" are Western elites, media, think tanks and those politicians who have sworn allegiance to an anti-Russia policy. Putin hatred has become a strategy.

In his speech to the Munich Security Conference in February 2007, Vladimir Putin had already settled accounts with Western policy over the past 15 years. In front of the top of the Western elite, the German Chancellor, the US Secretary of Defence and the NATO Secretary General, he spoke of how Russia had been treated by the West after the Cold War not as a partner, but as a defeated nation. Promises were not kept, disarmament treaties such as the ABM Treaty were unilaterally cancelled and NATO was aggressively expanded eastwards. Russia's influence in the country's immediate neighbourhood was to be undermined through "colour revolutions". Western NGOs were trained and deployed for "regime change". The West had replaced the United Nations-based system with a "rule-based order". This meant that only the USA was allowed to set the rules that should apply in international relations. National sovereignty as the basis of the international community, as still enshrined in the UN Charter, was replaced by the right to intervene in the name of nation-building and democracy-building. In this new world order, the West has established itself as the "world police force" under the motto "global fight against terrorism", which is

authorised to intervene anywhere and at any time. The rest of the world had to accept these "new rules". President George W. Bush has given this policy a messianic, almost religious character.

In his Munich speech, Putin pointed out that the new power structures created by the West were very one-sided. In fact, the West, which repeatedly referred to itself as the "international community", represented barely 10% of the world's population. But the high-ranking representatives of the West in Munich were in no way prepared to respond to the Russian president's criticism. On the contrary, they declared that Putin had declared war on the West with his speech.

If one reason for seeing Putin as an enemy was that he rejected the new international order unilaterally established by the West, another was probably even more serious: he made "Russia great again". The years following the collapse of communism were a catastrophe for Russia, politically, economically and socio-politically. Russia, as the heartland of the Soviet Union, lost 24% of its territory and 48.5% of its population with its dissolution; 41% of its gross national product and 39% of its industrial potential. But the Russian population was hit particularly hard. 30% were living below the poverty line in 2000. Life expectancy for men fell below 60 years and criminal gangs ruled the entire country. While the rouble was officially equated with the dollar for a long time, by the 1990s it was worth just one cent. In 1998, the country's economy collapsed. No wonder that the key terms of this period, "democracy" and "reform", had very poor connotations in the broadest circles of the population.

Together with the Governor of Central Finland, I had the opportunity to visit Russia several times during those years. The country was disintegrating and people were fighting for survival. The mayor of Vyborg, for example, when asked where his budget was focussed, replied that he had none because there was no tax revenue. Provincial governors declared sporting events in which athletes from other provinces took part to be "international competitions". They already considered their jurisdiction to be independent and sovereign. These governors were mostly former communist party secretaries supported by the old apparatus and in no way democratically elected. But when Putin then appointed senior officials to hold the country together, the Western media said he was "destroying democracy".

From the very beginning, Vladimir Putin's aim as president was to restore the state's ability to function and improve people's standard of living, which he certainly succeeded in doing. But what is the ideal state for Putin? Probably not the nation state, which is not possible in a multi-ethnic empire like Russia. Putin's state is above all about a functioning state power, about the power of the state exercised by the executive. The Russian state does not exist through the people, but above them and also outside them (Thomas Fasbender). Russia has never been a Western-style democracy and is unlikely to become one in the future.

In this sense, Putin has restored state power in the regions, vis-à-vis the media and the super-rich oligarchs. In the West, there were complaints that the approach chosen did not correspond to the principles of the separation of powers and the principles of Westminster democracy. That is true, but the Russian political system functioned differently for 1000 years, both under the tsars and under the communists. And the

West also allied itself with these regimes when it was important. When the brutal dictator Josef Stalin died in March 1953, he was "Uncle Joe" in the Western media and the French parliament even held a minute's silence for him. So why this hatred of Vladimir Putin now?

There is no doubt that the American sense of mission, which became dominant again after the victory in the Cold War and the breakthrough of the neoconservatives, always needs an enemy. Putin lent himself to this because he opposed the USA's sole claim to leadership and endeavoured to restore Russia's status as a great power. The hatred of various circles in the USA, which was perhaps already a given, was in any case intensified by the fact that "Russiagate" played a central role in the 2016 election campaign. According to many Democrats, Russia's interference in the election campaign played a key role in Donald Trump's defeat of his opponent Hillary Clinton. Although the special investigator Robert Mueller appointed for this purpose was unable to confirm these allegations, Donald Trump could not shake off the suspicion that he had a particularly close relationship with Putin. In the highly polarised domestic political scene in the USA, this meant that the rejection of one person carried over to opposition to the other.

This hostility was fully expressed when President Joe Biden called Putin a "killer" and called for Russia to be defeated in the proxy war in Ukraine. For the longest time, it was frowned upon in the West to even speak of peace negotiations in the Ukraine war. When Donald Trump nevertheless attempted to do so and ultimately succeeded, he was once again accused of favouring Vladimir Putin. Furthermore, the total demonisation of the Russian president has made it possible to turn the European peace project on its head and put the European Union in a state of war. The declared aim is now to spend 5% of the EU's GDP on armaments. The justification for this is that Putin must be stopped from conquering Poland, the Baltic states and indeed the whole of Europe. The security interests actually cited by Russia in the Ukraine war are never mentioned. These are focussed on not installing NATO missiles in Ukraine and not further suppressing the Russian language group in the country. When President Kennedy demanded the immediate withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba under threat of nuclear war, no one, quite rightly, labelled him a warmonger. Now Vladimir Putin has been successfully portrayed as a danger to all of humanity.

The question is whether the Western elites who have pursued this policy have done themselves any favours in the long term. Russia has been driven into the arms of China, the "Global South" has helped Russia to survive the sanctions imposed on the country and Europe is becoming more and more isolated. If the word "reason of state" contains the term "reason", perhaps there will once again be a time when diplomacy resorts to it and overcomes hatred.

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