NORTH AMERICA 26.02.2020 | Michelle Goldberg

Putin would hate President Bernie Sanders

The Russian autocrat may support Sanders, but Sanders definitely doesn't support him

On Friday, The Washington Post reported that US officials had briefed Bernie Sanders that Russia was trying to boost his fortunes in the Democratic primary fight, as it did in 2016. It's not hard to imagine Vladimir Putin's motives.

Russia aims to cause chaos and division in liberal democracies, and so has often supported both far-right and far-left figures; there's a reason the state-run Russian propaganda network RT hosted the American Green Party's 2016 presidential debate.

Further, Russia's investment in Donald Trump has paid off handsomely and the country's leaders evidently believe, just as many American pundits do, that Sanders would be Trump's weakest opponent. 'If Sanders wins the Democratic nomination, then Trump wins the White House,' a former adviser to ex-Russian President Dmitri Medvedev told GQ's Julia Ioffe.

But Russia doesn't have any special insight into how American elections are going to play out, and right now, some polls show Sanders winning both the primary and the general. Like a lot of nervous liberals, I worry that these numbers won't hold up. But if they do and Sanders becomes president, Putin may live to regret what his country did to build support for him.

Sanders is the opposite of Trump

Unlike Trump, Sanders would not be a stooge for Russia. Almost any Democratic president would represent a victory over the authoritarian kleptocracy Putin has sought to export all over the world. But Sanders has gone further than several of his rivals in defining his foreign policy in opposition to plundering autocrats.

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This is important to keep in mind, because when it comes to Russia, a lot of people have sought to draw invidious comparisons between Trump and Sanders. The anti-Trump conservative Evan McMullin tweeted, 'Bernie Sanders is the Democrats' Donald Trump. Kremlin-backed. Moscow sympathizing.'

The Trump administration is even pretending, outrageously, that Russia prefers Sanders to the president. In a demagogic appearance on ABC News this weekend, Trump's national security adviser claimed that Russia had an interest in seeing Sanders prevail in 2020: 'Well, there are these reports that they want Bernie Sanders to get elected president. That's no surprise. He honeymooned in Moscow.'

Against an international authoritarian axis

It's certainly true that at times Sanders has been embarrassingly credulous about communist regimes. But Russia hasn't been communist in decades, and it is Trump, not Sanders, who fawns over Putin and other despots, including Stalinist madman Kim Jong-un. Sanders, by contrast, believes that American foreign policy should be oriented around expanding democracy in the face of what he called 'a new authoritarian axis.'

'There is currently a struggle of enormous consequence taking place in the United States and throughout the world,' Sanders said in a 2018 speech. 'In it we see two competing visions. On one hand, we see a growing worldwide movement toward authoritarianism, oligarchy and kleptocracy. On the other side, we see a movement toward strengthening democracy, egalitarianism and economic, social, racial and environmental justice.'

Sanders isn't a militarist, but he's no isolationist, either. 'If he was in office, and he actually pursued that foreign policy, that would be much to the detriment of Vladimir Putin,' said Max Bergmann, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress and an Elizabeth Warren supporter who considers himself a Russia hawk.

Building a multiracial social democracy is one of the great political

It's ironic: Throughout his career, Sanders has repeatedly excoriated American foreign policy, refusing to accede to the myth of America's fundamental innocence. But in a race with

challenges of our time.

Trump, he would represent American exceptionalism. 'As the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth, we have got to help lead the struggle to defend and expand a rules-based international order in which law, not might, makes right,' he said in 2017.

With a Sanders win, Putin wouldn't be pleased for long

Putin, of course, is bent on subverting the rules-based international order. By most accounts, he's less interested in cultivating faith in his own system than in destroying belief in alternatives. He aims to paint liberal democracy as nothing but an empty slogan papering over zero-sum contests for power.

In this project, Trump couldn't better serve Putin's interests if he were a conscious Russian asset. Under Trump, the US has abandoned the pretence of backing democracy and human rights, meaning there are no longer any great powers that even pretend to put morality at the centre of foreign affairs. The horror of this era isn't just the emergence of an axis of authoritarianism, but the fact that there are so few allies to counter it.

If Sanders was elected president, that could change. His unlikely ascendance would be a blow against the corrosive cynicism in which authoritarianism thrives. America would be the country where young people of all races powered a campaign that proved stronger than plutocracy, stronger than nationalist demagogy, stronger than any of the tools that men like Putin have used to bring liberalism to its knees. To young idealists around the world, America would look — dare I say it — great again.

Building a multiracial social democracy is one of the great political challenges of our time. Few nations on earth have figured out how to create, in heterogenous populations, the solidarity needed to sustain a robust public sphere. Putin has exploited this difficulty, stoking tribal fears in countries with changing demographics to make liberalism look like a form of social dissolution.

If enough Americans unite across racial lines to replace Trump with a Jewish socialist, it might mean that our country is figuring out how to transcend the illiberalism of our age. I still find it difficult to believe that Sanders can pull it off. But if he does, Putin won't be pleased for long.



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