TYRANT LEAD

Vladimir Putin appears to be firmly in control of his country, able to bend it to his will and send it and its people in any direction of his choosing, all the while responding to no one. Does Putin have anything to teach business leaders?

by John Taylor and Adrian Furnham

RSHIP:

PUTIN AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF POWER

Can we learn anything useful from bullies, dictators, and tyrants to inform business leadership? Does the study of good and bad political leaders help inform our understanding of leadership in the commercial realm?

Powerful leaders are often admired, even by those who disagree with their policies. Prime Minister Thatcher is still venerated by many in her party and remembered with respect by others. She was, and still is, a leader remembered all over the world, mostly with respect, if not affection.

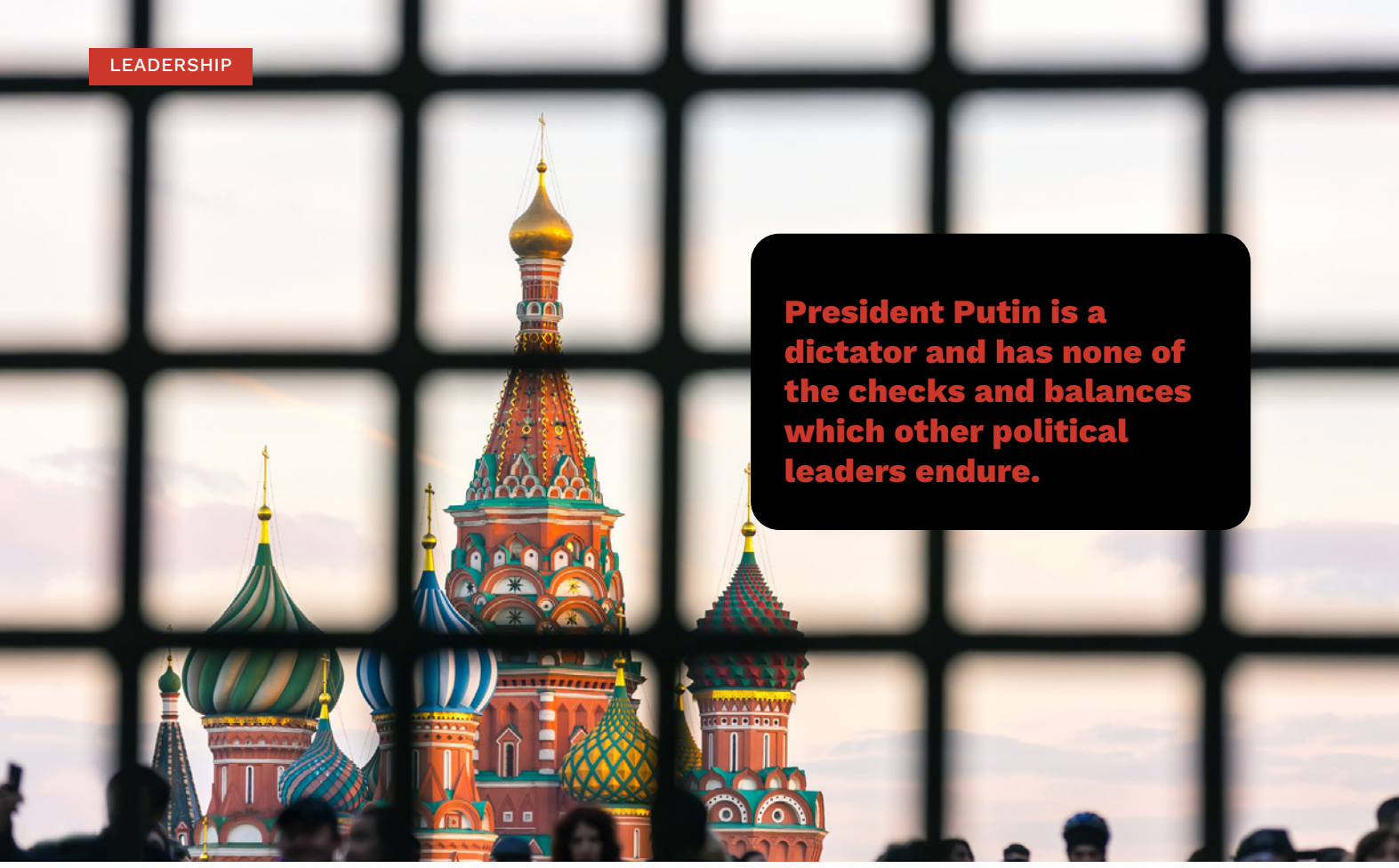
President Putin has written himself into the history books. The consequences of his leadership will be more significant than any leader in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of this century. He enjoys strong popular support in his country and there are many heads of government who offer their backing. Academics, journalists, and government advisors are occupied by trying to forecast what Russia will do next.

There is, however, a significant difference between President Putin and the likes of Mrs Thatcher and other powerful leaders such as Churchill, de Gaulle, and Mandela. President Putin is a dictator and has none of the checks and balances which other political leaders endure.

This means that decisions are not subject to scrutiny by peers (a cabinet or politburo) or, as happens in genuinely democratic nations, by the public in elections with a functioning opposition. Putin is at the top of a tall and narrow pyramid of power. There are organisations like this!

Of the leaders mentioned here, Thatcher resigned having lost the confidence of her party, Churchill was defeated at an election and on re-election resigned in ill health, de Gaulle resigned after losing a referendum, and Mandela declined a second presidential term.

But it was not always like that in the Soviet Union. When Leonid Brezhnev was the leader (general secretary of the Communist party and chairman of the praesidium of the Soviet Union, to give him his full title), he had to work with a politburo



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which contained many powerful people, such as Yuri Andropov (head of the KGB), Andrei Gromyko (foreign minister), and Mikhail Suslov (head of the International Department of the CPSU).

President Putin has no such constraints. He has surrounded himself with sycophants, eliminated the opposition, accumulated hard power to his own office, and is effectively the ideologue of Russia. Does this never happen in business?

Most western analysts, academic, journalistic and political pundits, analyse Russia and its leadership as if the decision-making process is based on a rationality which is recognisable in our liberal and functioning political systems.

Sometimes it may be, but we contend in this article that, given Putin's extraordinary power, we need also to look at his psychological profile to understand and forecast his decisions. We argue that it is important to understand the psychology of Putin, given his power, his aims, and his threat to the peace of the world.

A dictator has absolute power. They are not called to account for their acts and are allowed to do whatever they want, including restricting citizens' freedoms and liberties, the freedom of expression and religious liberty.

Is this very different in some private companies? Are some owner/founders essentially dictators in the political sense

THE SIX DIMENSIONS

There are six dimensions which influence the behaviours and decisions of people. The first of these relates to *cultural background.* Putin is proud of his Russian heritage, and many of his speeches and written work have significant references to the greatness of Russia. Most politicians like to proclaim their patriotism; Putin takes it to an imperial level.

There are some significant aspects of Russian culture which are apparent in Putin's personality.

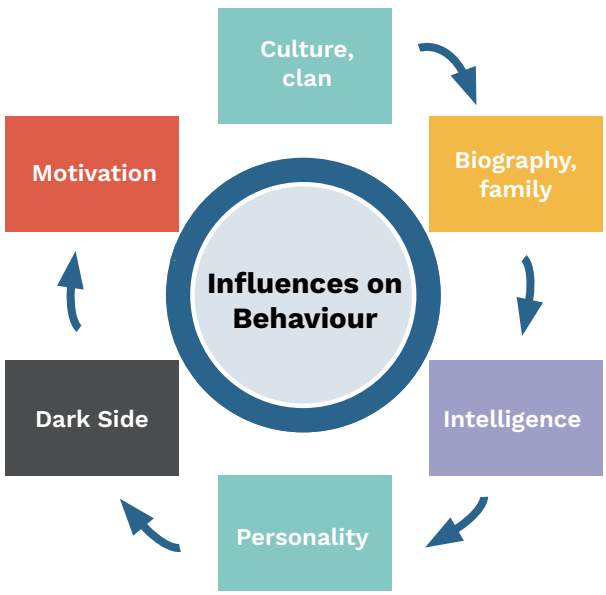
Russia is the largest country in the world and is highly centralised. There is a huge discrepancy between the less and the more powerful people. Status symbols are important, and Putin loses no opportunity to demonstrate his power status. The layout of the room for the security council meeting in February 2022 demonstrates this well.

Russia is a country with a pragmatic mindset. Truth depends very much on situation, context, and time.

Analysts are frequently mystified by Putin's current actions, destroying the Russian economy and apparently strengthening NATO and the EU against him. Putin and many Russians will look to the long term. They will be willing to take a short-term hit for glory in the future. Putin is certainly playing the long game, believing that NATO and its liberal and democratic friends will falter and weaken. He clearly longs to re-establish Russia as ***a,*** if not ***the,*** superpower

President George Bush, 2001, on Putin: "I looked the man [Putin] in the eye. I was able to get a sense of his soul."

Colin Powell, US Secretary of State, commenting on Bush's observation: "I look in his eyes and see the KGB."



The second dimension is about upbringing and ***early experiences in life.*** We need to understand the forces that moulded and shaped him.

Putin's father was badly wounded in the war and suffered great pain from his injured legs. His mother, Maria, also nearly died. By the time the siege was lifted, she was no longer able to walk on her own. Many describe Putin's birth in 1952 as a miracle.

The Putin family lived on the top floor of a five-storey block in Leningrad. Their flat was a single room with a shared toilet and a stove in the corridor which passed as a kitchen. This, however, was the experience of many people in Russia at that time. His parents doted on him and made many sacrifices for him.

In his youth, Putin was involved in many fistfights. He is small in stature and was bullied but he learned to fight back and strike first. He also had a fierce temper, to the extent that he was excluded from joining the Young Pioneers, part of the communist party's grooming process.

He worked hard to gain entry to Leningrad University in 1970. He kept to himself at university, staying out of the community and the Komsomol, and mostly out of trouble, though there are reports of some fisticuffs. Aged 22, Putin was approached by the KGB in his last year of university and started his training in Leningrad in 1975.

His 16 years in the KGB did make a significant impression on him. He was a half-colonel by the time he resigned but his career does not appear to have been enormously successful.

His time in East Germany working with the Stasi will have been instructive. He will have learnt from their methods of monitoring the population, the importance of keeping information on people, and how to use that information to his personal advantage.

He will also have learnt much from his time there about how to develop instrumental relationships, and how to use information to "control" people. In Russian, the word kontrol' means "to monitor" or "to check", as well as the English meaning, which is to be in charge. It also encompasses the importance of when and how to release information and what should not be released and, finally, manipulation through the use of information and the careful control of its release.

Putin's intellectual ability in his early years was never described as anything more than "modest".

Putin's ***intellectual ability*** (the third dimension in our model) in his early years was never described as anything more than "modest". He did, however, have determination and, believing he needed to go to a prestigious institute to get into the KGB, he applied to Leningrad University.

He has a reputation as a hard worker and he seems to have kept himself to himself at Leningrad and worked hard at his exams. He is, we believe, "bright enough" but he is not an intellect, and his judgements are questionable.

The fourth dimension is about ***personality.*** Using the five-personality trait classification, we assess Putin as having the following personality traits:

1. **Not strongly introvert or extrovert.** Essentially an *ambivert.* Enjoys the company of others but also values privacy.
2. **Borderline neurotic.** He is not empathetic and can be anxious and bad tempered. He complains and is not trusting.
3. **Tough, hard-headed, sceptical, proud, and competitive.** Tends to express anger directly. There is little or no evidence of warmth, empathy, or kindness
4. **Closed, down-to-earth, practical, traditional, and pretty much set in his ways.** There is little sense of curiosity, openness, or imagination.
5. **Conscientious, well organised,** has high standards, and always strives to achieve goals.

But what of the dark side of his personality – evidence of ***personality disorders***? We believe there are indicators of paranoia, sadism, and sociopathy.

There is clearly evidence of Paranoid Personality Disorder (PPD). This is a pervasive distrust and suspiciousness of others, such that their motives are interpreted as malevolent. Consider the following characteristics:

Paranoids avoid the limelight and keep their own council.

Putin does not court big events. He does the minimum needed for a leader, unlike a narcissist. Public speeches are carefully orchestrated and edited videos are provided. But, for the most part, Putin only appears when it is necessary to do so as president. He is famously secretive. He is also very guarded about his private life, his daughters, lovers, former wife, etc.

Paranoids are motivated by needs for power and control.

Since he came to presidential power in 2000, Putin has accumulated all power around himself. He presides over one of the highest and narrowest pyramids of power in the world and in Russian history. In addition, he has eliminated all others with power, particularly oligarchs.

Paranoids take ideas very seriously.

This is because the core of paranoia is a complex and comprehensive delusional system that is impossible to challenge with data or logic. He takes his intellectual inspiration from right-wing, populist, and Russian nationalistic writers and broadcasters who are frequently quoted and appear on the state-controlled TV.

They often believe they are the chosen one who can save their people.

Putin does everything he can to diminish the status of those around him, leaving him as the only possible leader. Famously at the National Security Council meeting at the end of February 2022, he positioned himself many metres from his cabinet and chose to embarrass the head of his intelligence service (the SVR). At the same time, he doesn't change his team. Putin also does not admit mistakes.

Paranoids attract followers through vision (make Russia great again).

He is critical of some aspects of the old Soviet Union, citing the granting of independence to countries such as Ukraine as a major mistake. He reaches back to imperial Russia under the tsars to promote the "greater Russia". Putin is less about money and more about the big Russian world mission. Money is almost a religion in itself in Russia.

Paranoids respect others who are strong.

Putin has not developed many relationships with international politicians. He had a friendship of sorts with the Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi. Both he and President Trump were "strong" but unpredictable. He shows no sign of respecting leaders such as Macron or Merkel, who have sought compromise. Macron is made to wait and has to sit at a great distance; Merkel, well known for her dog phobia, had to endure a roaming large, black dog during their meetings.

When paranoids are frustrated, they plot revenge.

Putin has consistently chosen brutality and military strength in response to perceived attacks on Russia or his own position of power.

Paranoids want to win.

Putin's fortunes in Ukraine so far have been mixed. At present (spring 2023), Russia is fighting a bloody battle in the Donbas but making little progress, if any. He may be able to claim some kind of victory, but it will hardly be convincing.

Paranoids are very insightful about other people.

They tend to be surrounded by a small number of long-term "trusted" advisors. Putin has few trusted advisors, and those that do exist come mainly from his KGB/Leningrad days. The bunker mindset has solidified and is being reinforced by others. His team are not allowed to disagree with him.

Paranoids can only be controlled by the threat of superior force.

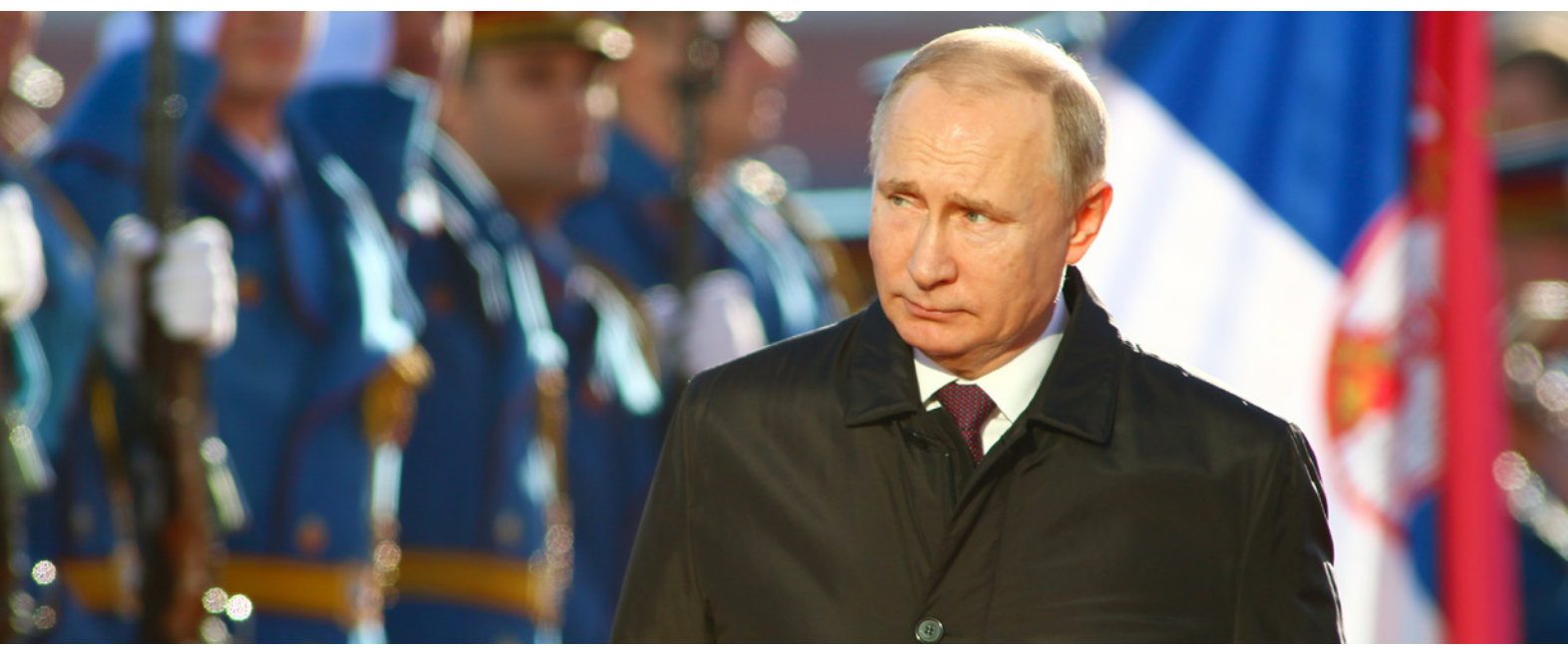
The war in Ukraine is still being played out. The consequences of perceived weakness are, however, clear. We have seen Putin's ruthless nature not just in laying waste to vast areas of Ukraine, he has also been brutal in Chechnya, Georgia, and with individuals. He needs victory and that is not guaranteed. His reaction to potential defeat will not be to retreat. He will want victory and will take revenge.

AND MORE DISORDERS

Psychologists use the term "co-morbidity" to indicate that a person may be suffering from more than one disorder/malady at the same time.

Sadistic people like Putin use physical or mental cruelty in relationships to establish dominance. They like to humiliate and demean people in the presence of others. They operate through intimidation or terror to get others to comply and they have a fascination with violence, weapons, and torture/injury.

He also appears somewhat ***antisocial/psychopathic,*** being callous, manipulative, and free of conscience. Such individuals see others as merely to be exploited and, therefore, have problems maintaining commitments and are unconcerned about violating expectations. Many are self-confident to the point of feeling invulnerable and have an air of daring and sang froid that others often find attractive and even irresistible.



They are highly rewarding to deal with, but unpredictable. They can be impulsive, reckless, faithless, remorseless, and exploitative. They have problems with telling the truth. President Putin has demonstrated many of these facets.

He is also ***hubristic* or *narcissistic*.** He is surprisingly vane, particularly about his physical prowess. Putin's combination of paranoid, sadistic, and antisocial dark side personality is unusual (Hitler is the closest previous example we have). It means that Putin will be ready to authorise violent and extreme actions to further his beliefs and causes. The question is how far is he willing to go? We judge that he is some way from admitting defeat and pulling back his forces.

Motivation is the sixth and final dimension which influences people's behaviour. There are many motivations which drive people. We believe President Putin is driven by the following.

Power and influence – These people like to be thought of as leader-like; they are assertive, competitive and ambitious for success. They enjoy being influential and wielding power. Think Thatcher and Trump: the thrill, the goal is to have as much power as possible to do things.

Putin has held on to power for 20 years. He has changed the constitution and acquired increasingly autocratic powers to ensure that he now runs Russia unchallenged and for as long as he wishes.

Recognition and vanity – For people with this profile, the positive attention of others spurs them on and makes them work harder. It helps their self-esteem and satisfies a desire or need to feel valued. For them, fame, visibility, and publicity are important.

At the extremes, these tip over into exhibitionism and narcissism. The quiet approval of their peers does not suffice; they are peacocks and want constant adulation, acknowledgment, praise, and prizes, often outside their immediate work environment. Without them, they can become angry and disruptive.

There are some indicators of narcissism in Putin. He wants to be taken seriously on the international stage, but he has disqualified himself from that position by his actions in Ukraine. The dangers of increasing anger are therefore more profound now.

CONCLUSION

There is little disputing that President Putin is a dictator who has few of the checks and balances to mould or restrain his decisions. We have argued in this article that Putin's decision-making is more likely influenced by his personality and, in particular, the disorders which we believe he suffers: paranoid, anti-social, and sadistic.

Analysts would be wise, in our view, to look more closely at the consequences of his psychology than the traditional political and military factors which normally influence our leaders.

The question is what is the relevance of all this to business? One answer lies in the analysis of leaders and the top team. Using our six-factor model, it is possible to draw up a much richer profile of people than is often got through head-hunters and typical psychometric analysis.

There are enough CEOs in jail as well as generally disgraced to indicate that many organisations are not aware of how to spot potential tyrants and dictators. Money and time spent doing careful profile analysis is rarely wasted.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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