

# **What is the psychological profile of Vladimir Putin?**

*Mona Sabalones Gonzalez*

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## **What is the Hubris Syndrome?**

The Hubris Syndrome is a mental illness that psychiatrist Lord David Owens says tends to occur among people in power, particularly politicians. It may impair the behaviour and decision-making of afflicted politicians, Owens says. He adds that the hubris syndrome is oftentimes acquired when the person holds a very powerful position with few to no restraints.

The dictionary defines "hubris" as "excessive pride, self-confidence, or arrogance." "Syndrome" is defined as "a group of symptoms that together are characteristic of a specific disorder, disease, or the like." Owens says that people with this syndrome probably had other mental illnesses before they acquired power and developed the hubris syndrome. All of these mental illnesses may overlap upon attaining great power. The following are mental illnesses that tend to overlap with the hubris syndrome.

### **Mental illnesses that overlap with the Hubris Syndrome**

- Narcissistic personality disorder. This refers to an inflated sense of self-importance, a craving for admiration, and a lack compassion for others. The leader wears a mask of ultra-confidence, but in reality suffers from low self-esteem and keen vulnerability to even the slightest criticism.
- Antisocial personality disorder. A mental condition of a person with a pattern of manipulating, using, or encroaching on the rights of others. Oftentimes this behaviour is criminal.
- Histrionic personality disorder. The American Psychiatric Association says HPD is manifest by a pattern of excessive attention-seeking emotions, usually beginning in early adulthood, including inappropriately seductive behaviour, and an excessive need for approval.

- Bipolar (manic-depressive) disorder. In its manic phase, grandiosity is a symptom of bipolar disorder. One feels superior, and “larger-than-life”.

When a person who has some or all of the above characteristics comes into a position of power, he or she is vulnerable to the hubris syndrome. At a certain level, hubris can lead to a shift in the leader’s behaviour, rendering him or her unable to be fully functional on the powerful job he or she holds.

### **Symptoms of the Hubris Syndrome**

- World view. The leader considers the world to be a place for self-glorification, and he uses power to achieve this.
- Messianic mission. The leader shows messianic zeal and personal praise in his or her speech, and may merge his or her identity with that of the nation or the organization he or she represents.
- Accountability. The leader feels he or she is only accountable to a higher court, such as the court of history, or the court of God. He or she also believes that this higher court will vindicate the leader.
- Manner of speech. The leader may speak in third person, or use “we” in conversation, just as the royals do.
- Contempt for others. Ordinarily one feels anger toward an equal. But the leader with hubris syndrome often feels contempt, which is reserved for people he or she believes is his or her inferior, especially when the person criticizes or tries to advise the leader. People with the hubris syndrome know that they are important and powerful, and they thrive in this and may even elevate it to grandiose proportions.
- Image is all. This leader tends to do things or actions mainly to enhance his or her personal image. In fact, concern for outward appearance and presentation is disproportionate in terms of priorities.
- Impetuosity. People with hubris syndrome can be very charming, persuasive, inspiring, and bold. But if they are also impetuous, i.e. they refuse to listen to or take advice, all of the above is useless. If this person has achieved a position of power and acquired the hubris syndrome, he will negate the good qualities he or she has and may behave recklessly and impulsively.
- Thin skin. This person cannot withstand public scrutiny, back stabbing, and attacks by opponents. He or she will need a form of self-exultation and may do this by adopting a grand feeling of mission and importance.

- Loses touch with reality. The leader is no longer in touch with the real world. He or she will permit moral rectitude to preclude practicality, regardless of cost or outcome. This often results in the leader's progressive isolation.
- Unaffected by bad outcomes. The leader is not affected by his or her failures and bad outcomes. Instead, he or she always sees his or her outcomes as successful.
- Exaggerated pride. The person feels overwhelmingly self-confident, bordering on self-omnipotence, and belief in what he or she can achieve. He may abuse his power to the point of damaging the lives of others. He may decide that this is an occupational hazard that comes with power and leadership.
- Extreme hubristic behaviour. This occurs when a cluster of symptoms are triggered off by power. This is why hubris syndrome is considered an acquired condition. It only comes to light when the person comes to possess great power and overwhelming success for a period of years, with minimal to no constraints.
- Hubris Syndrome/personality change. The change may occur after a trauma, due to a psychiatric illness, as a result of chronic pain, or due to an unspecified type of incident.
- Incompetence. The result is incompetence. The person often does not pay attention to details and finds it hard to make rational decisions. Some may say he or she has "lost it" or become "mad". The behaviour change has actually occurred due to the hubris syndrome.
- Deflects illness. The leader will not want to admit illness, seeing it as a sign of weakness. For this reason, he or she cannot be treated or medicated, even if he or she may experience anxiety, neuroticism, and impulsivity.
- Drugs. The leader may take drugs, usually unsupervised by a doctor. For this reason, the drug becomes more dangerous because there is no prescription in terms of dosage, and it may be taken in combination with other substances.



## Scale of Hubris Syndrome

There is a scale on the hubris syndrome. On one side it can be a good, productive thing. But on the extreme end it is very bad. Sometimes the hubris syndrome is transient, oftentimes it is not. External events influence how intense a leader's hubris is, and when it will begin. It is usually acquired over time, and if the leader has kept his powerful office for a very long period of time unchecked, hubris can be at its worst. Examples of leaders in history who had hubris are:

- Josef Stalin. Although he had hubris, he came to learn from his mistakes.
- Adolf Hitler. He had extreme hubris which, during defeat, led him deeper into a fantasy world. Hitler became more autocratic with his generals. Eventually, he and his wife Eva Braun committed suicide together.
- Benito Mussolini. He had both bipolar disorder and hubris.
- Mao Tse Tung. He also had both hubris and bipolar disorder.

## Vladimir Putin's Childhood

Vladimir Putin has done a good job of hiding his secrets well, to the point that no one really knows who the real Vladimir Putin is. Throughout his 12 years in Russian politics, no new information about his background has come to light. There are a few early biographies, but they too provide very little information about him. Putin can make himself seem to be anything to anyone.

Avidan Milevsky Ph.D., wrote in Psychology Today what is known and confirmed about Putin's childhood. Milevsky said, "Putin is dealing with a complex childhood dynamic." Born on October 7th 1952 in Leningrad, Russia, Putin's father, also named Vladimir, worked for the Soviet Navy and later, during World War II, for the NKVD, the infamous law enforcement agency of the Soviet Union. His mother, Maria, worked in a factory and sometimes did janitorial work.



## **Vladimir Putin Was Raised as an Only Child**

Before Vladimir's birth, his parents had lost two children. One, Albert, died in infancy. The other, Viktor, age one, died during the diphtheria plague, in the midst of the German 872-day siege of Leningrad in World War II. Viktor's body was laid in a mass grave.

Vladimir's mother was traumatized by the siege, and almost died from starvation.

Putin visits the mass grave in St. Petersburg, but his official biography from the Kremlin website does not mention his siblings. The repression of this part of his early family narrative implies that he has struggled internally with these memories.

Born to parents with previous children, Vladimir was raised an only child. Typically, parents of only children are overprotective. But Putin's parents, more than parenting one child, had also lost two others. Milevsky says it is likely that Putin was highly overprotected growing up. His mother disliked judo, his favorite sport. Milevsky calls this the "classic response from an overprotective parent."

Only children experience difficulty developing social relationships, and tend to be loners. They prefer to work alone. Putin was a recluse. Milevsky notes, "Put together the unspoken, tragic loss of his two siblings, being an only child, and his overprotective parents and we may have some glimpse into the complicated psyche of this recluse, with an inflated ego, and something to prove."

### **Influences on Putin's world view**

- A Marxist-Leninist world. In this world Putin learned to view anything that was a product of capitalism and bourgeois oppression with contempt.
- USSR culture. This culture believed that the ends justified the means. This made it easy for Putin to rip apart an international treaty made with the Ukraine, guaranteeing the latter its independence in return for giving up its nuclear weapons.
- Superiority complex. Putin succeeded Boris Yeltsin as president in 2000, and was re-elected in 2004. In 2008 he was appointed Prime Minister, and

became president again in 2012. He treated his cabinet with such contempt that during a meeting in 2006, German Chancellor Angela Merkel advised him to treat his cabinet with more respect.

- Western contempt. Putin also holds in contempt all Western leadership including Cameron and Obama. We have yet to see how the relationship with Trump will work out.
- Invasion. Putin invaded oil-rich Crimea and swiftly abrogated the country. This generated nationalist fervour, which Putin needed, as Russia's economy was decaying amid corruption and an aging workforce.
- Oneness with Russia. Milevsky predicts that Putin will remain in power until 2024 or beyond. He says Putin likely believes that Russia is doomed without him.
- Overall superiority. Putin likely feels contempt for political leaders who might succeed him, for the Ukrainians who thwart him, and for German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who tried to advise him.
- Out of touch with reality. Merkel once told Obama that Putin lives "in another world".
- Contempt is the core of his psychology. Ian H. Robertson, Ph.D. wrote in the article, "The Danger That Lurks Inside Vladimir Putin's Brain", published in *Psychology Today*, that 15 years of power has resulted in contempt playing an important role in Putin's psychology. He adds, "Absolute power for long periods makes you blind to risk, highly egocentric, narcissistic, and utterly devoid of self-awareness."
- Fear. Putin is also driven by fear that loss of power makes him and his regime vulnerable to prosecution.
- Ideology. The ideology that drives him, as mentioned in his biography, is, "I consider it to be my sacred duty to unify the people of Russia, to rally citizens around clear aims and tasks, and to remember every day and every minute that we have one Motherland, one people and one future."

### **How to handle a leader who has a Hubris Syndrome**

In the political context, Vladimir Putin is very powerful. He feels personally humiliated that the USSR fell apart, and he is driven by contempt for the weak, decadent West. He feels personal and national superiority to western powers. Psychologically speaking, appeasement will only fuel Putin's contempt. When he shows contempt for international law and treaties, strong, early action is

needed. It may pose an economic burden, but it would be less than the long-term consequence of the cost of appeasement.

In sum, the best way to deal with a person who has hubris syndrome is to remove the person from power, if you can. Otherwise, you must have checks and balances that will keep the person within the realms of reality. That way, there is either less time for the person to do much harm (if he or she is removed from office), or you can control the degree of harm he or she creates.