



Looking Outward

Dan Glode
Columnist

Putin deserves no admiration

"It is always a great honor to be so nicely complimented by a man so highly respected within his country and beyond...I tell you what I think in terms of his leadership, he (Putin) is getting an 'A'."
— Donald Trump

Let me get my bias out of the way early: I think Donald Trump is a narcissistic, belligerent, bellicose bigot and bully. I think he is extremely dangerous and has done a tremendous amount of harm to this country already. I could go on with negatives, but space does not permit.

I have a laundry list of things about him that disgust me, but when I heard him utter the above statement I was practically apoplectic

with rage. To call Putin someone who gets an A-rating as a leader is not only nonsensical, it also shows a complete misunderstanding of Russia today and the effect Vladimir Putin has had on that country.

I had the privilege of working in Russia from 2004 to 2008 and lived in Moscow much of that time. It was a wonderful experience. I was working for the American Bar Association's Central European and Eurasian Law Initiative Program (CEELI). The ABA had several projects going in Central and Eastern Europe since the fall of the Soviet Union. (They have now gone worldwide.)

The projects were numerous and varied, but could loosely be called democracy-building and civil society-strengthening programs. We worked on such things as assisting lawyers on how to conduct jury trials (a new thing there), helping law enforcement with human trafficking cases, gender program assistance, opening a legal aid office, assisting in training on presenting cases to the European Court of Human Rights, building bar associations, etc.

For the most part it seemed we were eagerly received and welcomed. Change, positive change was in the air. It was very slow, as the Russian bureaucracies were difficult

and stifling at times but we did make some headway.

I went there at the beginning of Putin's second term. Like here, there was a two-term limit of four years for president. He was president from 2000-2008, then skipped a term and a place-keeper, Dmitry Medvedev, came in for a term and then Putin ran again. He changed the term to six years so he can serve until 2024 if he wishes. He will get little opposition since the United Russia Party — pro-Putin — dominates the Duma.

In effect, he is an authoritarian ruler with few controls. The checks and balances which existed under their new constitution have since been modified to the point where they virtually no longer exist. Human Rights Watch notes many restrictive new laws that make democracy difficult, including the harassment of NGOs (non-governmental organizations like the ABA), new restrictions on the freedom of assembly, terming NGOs "foreign agents," intimidating and imprisoning political opposition, foreign agent laws, treason laws and many other things have turned Russia from what was considered a hybrid democracy into an authoritarian regime.

I watched the erosion begin, slowly at first and then

speed up. There are 85 federal subjects (with sub-categories), which are kind of like our states. They had elected governors when I arrived; they were appointed by the president (Putin) when I left. The Russian Supreme Court had lifetime terms when I arrived; then they were subjected to term limits and were appointed by the president when I left. There was a fair amount of free press when I arrived. The television and broadcast media became government run by the time I left. There were some peaceful protests when I got there, but it became very difficult to assemble and protest by the time I left.

One of the saddest things I witnessed was the out-migration of young, idealistic Russians to other places.

It became a very unsafe place for journalists. Anna Politkovskaja, a journalist, was murdered in her apartment when I was there. She was writing a story about corruption in the Russian Army. In fact, Russia was second to only Iraq in being the most dangerous country for journalists, and there was a war going on in Iraq at the time.

It also was, and is, a very unsafe place for political opponents. Take, for example, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the CEO of Yukos Oil, who was mounting a political

campaign against Putin. He was convicted (quickly, I might add) of fraud and sent to prison in Siberia. More recently Boris Nemtsov was shot and killed in front of the Kremlin, one of the most guarded places on the planet. He was a courageous political opponent to Putin. Sometimes in these cases someone is prosecuted, but no one seems to determine who hires them.

So let me see, Donald, the person you give a leadership "A" has violated almost every human right there is. He has killed his opposition, squelched free speech, assembly and the press, limited any form of political opposition, controls the media, terrified foreigners and pretty much eliminated democracy in Russia. Some say he has amassed a \$70 billion fortune overseas. He is one of the most corrupt leaders in a world full of corrupt leaders and he has virtual control over the entire country.

I am afraid, Donald, we admire different kinds of leaders. Your problem is you were born at the wrong time. There was a place for you in 1930s Europe.

Dan Glode is a Sisters resident and former attorney and district attorney for Lincoln County. The opinion expressed above is not necessarily that of the American Bar Association.

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