

Vladimir Putin praises Donald Trump as 'bright and talented'

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Moscow: In Vladimir Putin's view, Donald Trump is "bright and talented." But as much as those words sound overtly like praise, there are some murky nuances.

The most unequivocally favorable part of the comments the Russian leader made Thursday to a scrum of reporters after his annual year-end news conference was about the Republican presidential aspirant's claims that he wants to improve relations with Russia.

"He says that he wants to move to another, closer level of relations. Can we really not welcome that? Of course we welcome that," Putin said.

Trump hasn't given details about he would go about achieving that, relying instead on his fireproof self-regard.

"I think that I would probably get along with him very well," Trump said in an October interview with CBS.

Putin "does not like Obama at all. He doesn't respect Obama at all. And I'm sure that Obama doesn't like him very much," Trump had said.

Russia-U.S. relations have hit a particularly low point during the Obama administration, with the Kremlin persistently alleging that Washington's pressure on Moscow over human rights and the sanctions imposed over Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine are a cover for fomenting unrest aimed at driving Putin out of office.

"I suppose (Putin) sympathizes with Trump without knowing him well in person, but he is following him closely, what he does and says, just because he is not a kind of usual Western politician," said Alexander Baunov, an analyst at the Moscow Carnegie Center.

While the Obama administration regarded Russia's airstrikes in Syria gingerly, Trump was a full-throated supporter— even if Moscow has appeared to be more interested in helping prop up Syrian President Bashar Assad than fighting militants from the Islamic State group in the country.

"If Putin wants to go and knock the hell out of ISIS, I am all for it, 100 percent, and I can't understand how anybody would be against it," he said during a Republican presidential debate.

Putin assessed Trump as "the absolute leader in the American presidential race," suggesting his comments could be an early attempt to curry favor with a man he may have to deal with.

Does Putin think Trump is intelligent?

On that count, the Russian word he used not only means "bright" in terms of intelligence, but also "vivid" and even "gaudy."

"It's not our affair to determine his worthiness, that's a matter for the American voters," Putin said.

He also hedged on Trump's penchant for blunt language that provokes both devotion and revulsion.

"His turn of phrase, which he uses to raise his popularity," is a domestic U.S. political matter, Putin said.

Trump said in a statement that he was honored by the comments.

"It is always a great honor to be so nicely complimented by a man so highly respected within his own country and beyond," he said. "I have always felt that Russia and the United States should be able to work well with each other towards defeating terrorism and restoring world peace, not to mention trade and all of the other benefits derived from mutual respect."

Putin himself is not opposed to being blunt or vulgar to make a point, at one point vowing to wipe out Chechen rebels even if they had to be shot "in the outhouse," and another time suggesting a reporter who questioned his Chechen policy should get circumcised.

Putin and Trump also share a love of the limelight, although Putin's public appearances generally have an element of control and calculation at odds with Trump's apparent hair-trigger outbursts.

The Russian president is famed for public stunts, including swimming in a frigid river and riding a horse bare-chested, that emphasize his athleticism — a more-convincing strategy than a superlatives-dripping letter from a physician that Trump issued this month.

Trump has repeatedly cited the fact that two appeared — in separate segments — on the same episode of "60 Minutes" as evidence of their bond.

"I got to know him very well because we were both on '60 Minutes,' we were stable mates, and we did very well that night," he said in the fourth GOP debate, touting the show's ratings.

- AP