

The Putin-Biden Summit: What the Suits Said

The secret language of presidential fashion choices.

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Mikhail Metzel / TASS

While reporters and pundits were analyzing the Biden-Putin summit to glean meaning from their body language and words, I was checking out their clothes. As a fashion editor and style consultant — sometimes for politicians — I wanted to know what the suits were saying to each other.

As it turned out: they said a lot.

Biden chose a suit of a complex dark blue, called ink or blueberry, made of fabric with a noticeable sheen that made it appear either black or blue in photographs. With it he wore a snow-white shirt and a bright blue tie, also made of a shiny fabric. His look was finished by a white handkerchief in his breast pocket, an American flag pin, and black shoes that were, as

you might expect, buffed to a shine. At the press conference, Biden donned his famous aviators.

Vladimir Putin arrived in a dark gray, almost black, suit made of matte fabric. His shirt was pale in color, but not white, and he wore a bland tie of intermediate shade — somewhere between eggplant and red wine. As far as lapel pins and handkerchiefs go, the President of Russia does not wear them.

So, what were the suits saying?

Most importantly, Vladimir Putin abandoned the aggressive image of a macho "master of everything" that he used to telegraph with his clothing. He used to wear the high color contrast of black suit and bright white shirt complemented by a striking scarlet tie — what Barack Obama called in his memoirs "projecting an almost satirical image of masculine vigor."

Over the past several months the contrasting colors in Putin's wardrobe have been muted and his image is less aggressive. While there is certainly no corresponding thaw in domestic policies, at the summit with Biden Putin's suit was not meant to raise tension but lower it.

The splendor of Biden's shiny, glossy appearance was in striking contrast to Putin's restraint. Biden's shine signaled that he was dressed for a celebration, but Putin's matte, low-contrast wardrobe choices telegraphed that this was just another working meeting.

But maybe there's a simpler explanation. In Russia, it is not cool for a man to pay too much attention to his appearance. The complex color of Biden's suit, the pocket handkerchief and sense of style are perceived in Russia skeptically or even negatively. This is especially true of Putin's base, who are conservative, not rich, and indifferent to fashion. If their leader looked like a cover boy for GQ (or like Joe Biden), they probably wouldn't have accepted it. But this low-key Putin is "one of us" — even in a Loro Piana suit that they couldn't afford. He is, after all, the president.

As for what the people in the suits said to each other — we'll have to wait and see.

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