

Republican Party US

Even in war with Ukraine, some US conservatives share Trump's embrace of 'genius' Putin

The Republican party's hawkish stance toward Russia no longer holds with some nativist and populist figures



Donald Trump, Tucker Carlson and Mike Pompeo. Leading US conservatives have appeared to embrace Russia's leader Vladimir Putin even as he poses a dire challenge to the west © FT montage/AFP/Getty Images/Bloomberg

Lauren Fedor in Washington 13 HOURS AGO

As Vladimir Putin ordered Russian troops into eastern Ukraine this week, former US president Donald Trump weighed in on a conservative podcast recorded at his gilded Mar-a-Lago resort.

“This is genius,” the former president said in response to the now-infamous televised speech in which Putin made clear his intent to move on his neighbour and unleash war in Europe.

“How smart is that?” Trump added. “Here’s a guy who’s very savvy.”

Those remarks were consistent with the former president’s well-established admiration for the authoritarian Russian leader. More surprising is how other leading US conservatives have also appeared to embrace Putin even as he poses a dire challenge to the west.

Tucker Carlson, the Fox News personality with the cable news channel’s biggest following, has for months used his primetime television show to espouse support for Russia and dismiss Ukraine, regularly singling out specific US senators who had called for pre-emptive sanctions in an effort to deter Russian aggression.

In a rambling monologue in one episode this week, Carlson questioned why Americans should dislike Putin at all, saying: “It may be worth asking yourself, since

it is getting pretty serious: what is this really about? Why do I hate Putin so much?”

“Has Putin ever called me a racist? Has he threatened to get me fired for disagreeing with him? Has he shipped every middle-class job in my town to Russia?”

Mike Pompeo, Trump’s one-time secretary of state who, like the former president, is purportedly weighing a run for the White House as soon as 2024, has also praised Putin in recent media appearances, calling Russia’s leader a “very talented statesman” with “lots of gifts”.

Clips of Carlson and Pompeo have become a fixture on Russian state television in recent days, with pro-Kremlin forces pointing to them as evidence that powerful people in the US are sympathetic to Putin’s campaign.

But back home, the comments have sparked outrage among many Republicans and exposed tensions in a party riven between an establishment long defined by its hawkish stance toward Russia and a nativist faction that sees things to admire in a leader who portrays himself as a champion of traditional values.

“Who would have thought that people who claim to be patriots would take the side of a Russian autocrat over that of our own country?” said Whit Ayres, a veteran Republican party pollster.

Liz Cheney, the Republican congresswoman who voted to impeach Trump over his role in the January 6 2021 attack on the US Capitol, said the former president’s “adulation of Putin” was helping America’s enemies. “Trump’s interests don’t seem to align with the interests of the United States of America,” she said.

Doug Heye, a former spokesperson for the Republican National Committee and another Trump critic, saw an extreme version of partisanship at work in the embrace of Putin.

“We have taken the ‘enemy-of-the-enemy is my friend’ to very illogical extremes,” Heye said. “We have often said: What unites as Americans is more than what divides us. We are coming to a point where that might not be true.”

Throughout the Cold War and until recently, the Republican party appeared to be solidly in the Cheney camp. In the 2012 presidential election, then Republican candidate Mitt Romney famously described Russia as America’s “number-one geopolitical foe”. A 2013 Gallup poll showed only 39 per cent of Republicans had a favourable opinion of Russia, compared with 48 per cent of Democrats.

But by 2016, the tables had turned, with a larger share of Republicans reporting a favourable view of Russia, compared to Democrats.

That trend continued during Trump's four years in the White House — something observers attribute to some mix of fatigue with the US' international engagements, the nativist appeal of the former president's "America First" policy agenda and his frequent and public fawning over Putin.

"There was a general climate of exhaustion from our international responsibilities, but that was very much compounded by Trump preaching to Republicans for four years as president that the [George W] Bush [John] McCain foreign policy was all a terrible mistake, and Putin is nothing to worry about," said Bill Kristol, a neoconservative writer who worked in the Ronald Reagan and George HW Bush administrations and is now a prominent Trump critic. "That had a big effect."

Russia and Putin are sure to be talking points at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference in Orlando, Florida, where Trump will be headline speaker on Saturday — a reflection of his enduring popularity.

Some Republican congressional candidates appear to be following his lead in the current crisis. JD Vance, the *Hillbilly Elegy* author who is vying for the Republican nomination for Senate in Ohio, echoed Trump's rhetoric in a recent podcast interview, saying: "I gotta be honest with you, I don't really care what happens to Ukraine one way or another."

But, even if they were not as strident as Cheney in calling out the former president by name, dozens of GOP lawmakers were quick to distance themselves from Trump's comments this week — and make clear their distaste for Putin.

"Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine is reckless and evil," said Kevin McCarthy, the top Republican in the House of Representatives who ousted Cheney from GOP leadership and has regularly curried favour from Trump. "Putin must be held accountable for his actions."

Tom Cotton, a Republican senator from Arkansas who is usually a strong Trump ally, struck a similar note, saying: "Vladimir Putin's unprovoked, naked war of aggression must face the most severe consequences."

Kristol, for one, is wondering how firm those views are. "With Trump going in the pro-Putin direction, how many Republicans will firmly articulate the opposite point of view? Will they stick to it?" he asked. "That is what we all need to watch over the next

days and weeks.”

Charlie Sykes, who edits *The Bulwark* conservative newsletter, agreed. “You sense that at least elected Republicans are not willing to go with Tucker Carlson or Donald Trump,” he said. “But what is their record in standing up to them over the long term?”

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