

The Tucker Carlson Effect: Tracking Changing Attitudes Toward Russia Among Conservative Americans

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Abstract: This memo examines how conservative attitudes toward Russia have evolved in the United States from 2000 to the present. Through an analysis of political rhetoric, media coverage, and public opinion data, we trace key inflection points and factors contributing to these shifts, including the 2016 US presidential election, ideological and strategic alignment between Trump and Putin, America first isolationism, and Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine. We find that conservative views on Russia have undergone significant changes, transitioning from viewing Russia as a geopolitical threat in the early 2000s to a more favorable stance during the Trump presidency, followed by a fracture between traditionalist and pro-Trump wings of the Republican Party after 2020. The memo concludes by discussing the domestic and foreign policy implications of these attitudinal shifts.

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1. Background

On February 26, 2024, former Fox news anchor Tucker Carlson traveled to Moscow to interview Russian President Vladimir Putin. This high-profile event underscored more favorable attitudes toward Russia within the Republican party, particularly among pro-Trump conservatives. The trend, driven by factors such as ideological alignment, skepticism of the liberal international order, and domestic political polarization, has fractured the Republican consensus on Russia and exacerbated divides within the party. As conservative attitudes continue to evolve, questions about the future of U.S. foreign policy and the domestic implications of this shift have arisen.

Few countries have captured the political imagination and attention of American policymakers, elected officials, and citizens as potently as Russia. The Cold War was the defining geopolitical relationship of the 20th century, marked by a nuclear arms race, alternating spheres of geostrategic influence, and near misses with open military conflict. When Russia emerged from the rubble of the Soviet Union in 1991, U.S. leaders eagerly supported Russian attempts to build democratic institutions and a free-market capitalist system, and the U.S. sought to integrate Russia into the liberal international order.

However, subsequent challenges of Russia's transition in the 1990s, including the rise of oligarchic capitalism and a tightening grip on civil society, strained relations with the U.S. and fueled mutual disillusionment. After Vladimir Putin ascended to the Russian presidency in 2000, tensions escalated over NATO expansion, the Iraq War, and color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, which Putin viewed as Western-backed efforts to undermine Russian influence in what he and other Russian leaders consider their country's "traditional sphere of influence." In what follows, we contextualize the relatively recent shift by the Republican party toward a pro-Russia stance in three key domains: foreign policy, media narratives, and voter attitudes.

a. Establishment Foreign Policy Positions Vis-à-vis Russia

Republican foreign policy attitudes toward Russia have historically emphasized three intersecting viewpoints. The first is **internationalism**, marked by a desire to cooperate with Russia on areas of shared concern. Despite mounting tensions after 1997, during which Russia opposed the U.S.-led NATO intervention in Kosovo, President George W. Bush and Putin found common ground in the fight against global terrorism after 9/11, leading to increased intelligence sharing and cooperation in Afghanistan. A generation before, Bush's father (President George H.W. Bush) did not engage in the triumphalism or bluster of his predecessors, responding to major foreign policy successes with quietude and restraint, careful to not humiliate the leadership and population of a waning superpower. In the Autumn of 1989, Bush reassured Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev that he would not "jump up and down" on the Berlin Wall and take advantage of upheaval in Eastern Europe to harm the USSR (Wilson 2015, 172). At subsequent press conferences, Bush worked to "drain the moment of import and impact," prioritizing stability above the West's ideological and symbolic victory, despite accusations of timidity from the American media (Haass 2009, 44).

The second strand of Republican establishment thinking frames the U.S.-Russia relationship along **ideological dimensions** – that is, a struggle between liberal democracy and (communist) autocracy. More specifically, conservatives have historically viewed the world through the lens of a fundamental conflict between American values of democracy, freedom, and capitalism on one side, and Russian authoritarianism, repression, and communism on the other. President Ronald Reagan's moralistic characterization of the Soviet Union as the “evil empire” exemplified this ideological framing. Reagan’s foreign policy sought to confront and undermine the Soviet system through a combination of military buildup, economic pressure, and support for anti-communist movements around the world. This ideological stance persisted in Republican critiques of Russia's democratic backsliding and human rights abuses under the early days of Vladimir Putin’s regime after he assumed the presidency in 2000.

The third establishment viewpoint among Republican policymakers is characterized by **realism**, emphasizing the geopolitical dimensions of the U.S.-Russia relationship, and focusing on issues of power, security, and national interest. Realists understand state interests as defined by power, distinct from their motivations and ideologies (Morgenthau 1948). In this vein, during the Cold War, Republicans traditionally saw the Soviet Union as a major power with a sphere of influence that could threaten U.S. power and status. Realist thinking informed strategies of containment and deterrence, aimed at preventing Soviet expansionism and maintaining the balance of power. In the immediate post-Cold War era, Republican realists pushed for the strengthening of NATO's military presence in Eastern Europe while also seeking to avoid direct escalation with Russia.

b. Mainstream Media Narratives toward Russia

Modern US media typically characterizes Russia in one of three ways: first, as a neo-Soviet autocracy; second, as an uncivilized “other”; and third, as a weak and decaying empire. First, since 1991, American media outlets have returned to the moral binary between the “superior values of Western ‘freedom’ and those of **a backward and ‘autocratic’ Russia**” (Tsygankov 2017, 20). Mainstream news clippings from 2010 emphasize Putin’s KGB background and the ways a “closed” Russian society differs from the “wide open” and democratic American counterpart:

With former *KGB* officer Vladimir Putin in charge, Russia has become *increasingly closed* in many ways. Historical archives that after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 welcomed scholars from all nations have *re-shut their doors*. Television has fallen *back under government control*. International organizations have been pushed out of Russia, and independent nonprofit groups in Russia have been squeezed, harassed, and threatened. *Russia is essentially a one-party state, as it was 20 years ago*. The United States by contrast is *wide open*. (*Washington Post* 2010, emphasis is our own)

Further, an editorial from the Wall Street Journal in 2007 emphasized how “Mr.

Putin's Russia bears little resemblance to the thriving democracy that reformers hoped prosperity would bring” (Cullison, White, and Crawford 2007). Together, this framing reinforces the idea of Russia as an authoritarian regime that stands in opposition to American values of democracy and freedom.

The second major media framing device otherizes Russia by describing it as operating **outside the “civilized” world** (Repina et al. 2018). Insofar as news outlets project myths, stereotypes, and metaphors, they both shape and reflect citizens’ attitudes toward other cultures (Zheltukhina et al. 2017). For American media outlets, Russia exists as an entity distinct from mainstream political terminology, its leaders defined as much by their “otherness” as by dominant cultural stereotypes. As U.S. journalist Paul Starobin writes, “Vladimir Putin is not a democrat. Nor is he a czar like Alexander III, a paranoid like Stalin, or a religious nationalist like Dostoyevsky. But he is a little of all these—which is just what Russians seem to want” (Starobin 2005, para. 1). In the early days of his presidency, the New York Times described Putin as a “mystery man” (Gwertzman 2000, para. 1). Together, the use of these metaphors and this imagery emphasize Russia's otherness as a backward, irrational, and inscrutable actor.

Finally, after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, U.S. media emphasized the social disorder and **chaos running rampant** in Russian society. The Wall Street Journal described the Russian government’s failures to manage the economy as protestors took to the streets (1997), while the New York Times framed the IMF bailout as “rescuing Russia” (Gordon and Sanger 1998). On the day of Putin’s election, an article in the Washington Post argued “the disintegration and chaos of the new Russia extend far beyond Chechnya... Putin's tough talk cannot disguise a fundamental reality: A power vacuum already exists in Russia today, and he is now at the center of it” (Hoffman 2000, para. 3).

Regarding all three narratives — Russia as a backwards autocracy, Russia as an “uncivilized other,” and Russia as a chaotic, failed state — conservative news outlets were largely consistent with mainstream media. If anything, these news outlets were more critical of Russia and more skeptical of its domestic decisions. After the 2003 assassination of Russian liberal politician Sergei Yushenkov, Fox News quoted Russian politicians and lawmakers who blamed Yushenkov’s death on government security forces and called the assassination a “strike against the democratic movement as a whole” (2003). Some months later, Ariel Cohen of the Heritage Foundation wrote that the Putin administration must “clean house” when it was revealed Russia had been selling weapons to Saddam Hussein (2003).

c. Traditional Voter Perceptions and Attitudes

Foreign policy is centered in at least one presidential debate every election cycle in the United States. In conjunction with the 24-hour news cycle and constant global reporting on major media networks, one may assume that foreign policy issues are significant deciding factors for voters. Social science research indicates that is generally not the case for most voters. However, foreign policy may have a larger impact on voters when the Democratic and Republican parties have two strong opposing views and when a foreign policy issue is generally a large part of the

‘national conversation’ (Rakich 2020, para. 2). It can be argued that as the world moves towards globalization and citizens are able to access news surrounding global happenings within minutes via digital networks, issues surrounding foreign policy will become increasingly relevant to national media discourse and thus, voters.

Though voters’ views are rarely perfectly aligned with their political party affiliation in the United States, there are generalizations that we can make. The emergence of Russia as the successor to the Soviet Union marked the beginning of a new relationship between the Republican Party and its members’ perceptions of Russia. Under Republican leadership, U.S. foreign policy shifted from viewing the Soviet Union as evil toward a perspective where Russia, its successor state, could develop into an ally that was in need of investment, aid, and advice to solidify its place in the global liberal order and become a partner on global issues.

The conservative establishment and its supporters in the United States held a more unfavorable view of post-Soviet Russia and fears lingered among leading Republicans whose perspectives were forged in the long cold war struggle against communism that had dominated the post war era. Over a few decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, however, a notable shift seemed to occur such that an increasing number of Republicans viewed Russia and especially Putin far more favorably than they once had (Kirchick 2017, para. 14). This shift has played out not only in the form of culture wars enhanced by social media networks but also by an emergence of rising leaders in the Republican party — namely President Donald Trump. We discuss potential causes of the change in perspective among Republicans from overwhelmingly negative, to increasingly, and sometimes emphatically, sympathetic to Vladimir Putin’s rule of Russia in section 3 of this memo.

2. Methodology

To assess the evolution of conservative attitudes toward Russia, we conducted a qualitative analysis of statements by prominent Republican politicians and media coverage from 2000–2024. This research was supplemented by quantitative data from major public opinion polls of Republican voters over the same period.

To understand the shift in political thought toward Russia while the reins of American leadership cycled, we constructed a timeline of notable quotes made by conservative leaders and noted the common attitudes which defined US-Russia relations entering each presidential administration. We extracted trends in sentiment and conducted research to reveal underlying motivations behind the attitudes expressed by conservative leaders and interplay across the aisle.

We conducted a review of conservative media coverage of Russia-related topics from 2000-2023. We selected a representative sample of influential conservative outlets from a range of ideological intensities (e.g., Fox News, Breitbart, The Daily Caller) and searched for articles using relevant keywords on Google and various internet archives. Editorials and op-eds from key conservative figures and news personalities were also included. Future research should include a more comprehensive article collection procedure, for instance by deploying a web-scraping protocol.

To accurately track the attitudes of Republican voters in the United States over time, we compiled a collection of data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center. We used data that began in November 2013 and continued through January 2024, separated into three time periods. The first period encapsulates the Obama presidency, from November 2013 until February 2015. The second period is the Trump presidency, which covers the spring of 2018 until 2020. The final period follows the Russian invasion of Ukraine and includes data from March 2022 until January 2024. The polling our analysis relies on asked participants whether they thought of Russia as an adversary, whether they held unfavorable views of Russia and Putin, how important they thought happenings in Russia/Ukraine were to U.S. interests, whether they supported sending arms and military supplies to the Ukrainian government, their confidence in Putin to do the “right thing,” and attitudes toward the Muller Investigation in late 2017. Though polling data measuring Republican attitudes towards matters surrounding Russia is plentiful, for consistency we used only data from the Pew Research Center.

Finally, we identified key events surrounding Russia to which conservative Americans may have a strong reaction as well as domestic cultural and political shifts that would cause a shift in voter attitudes. Examples of such events include the annexation of Crimea in 2014, reports of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 among others.

3. Findings

a. Reset, Revert, Repeat

Our research on conservative politicians’ attitudes toward Putin and his regime revealed a trend that persisted during the Bush and Obama administrations: Reset, Revert, and Repeat. However, Trump broke this trend and unveiled a new Conservative orthodoxy which defined his administration’s approach and the GOP’s thereafter.

First, Bush and Obama both emphasized a kind of “reset policy” at the start of their administrations. In the face of a declinist viewpoint – one which posited the disintegration of Russia’s domestic control and international influence – dominating academia following the fall of the Soviet Union, George Bush famously said of Putin in 2001, “I looked the man in the eye. I found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy... I was able to get a sense of his soul” (2001, para. 49). Bush infused hope into the relationship and searched for opportunities for the two superpowers to work together, including denuclearization, post-9/11 counterterrorism, and energy market stabilization. Similarly, in 2009, Obama urged for a “reset in relations” between the United States and Russia (Harding and Weaver 2009). Again, there was hope for the relationship, with the two countries cooperating on Afghanistan, the New START Treaty for nuclear arms reduction, and Russia’s introduction into the World Trade Organization. In effect, the Bush and Obama administrations were able to fully shift blame for poor relations at the start of their terms onto their predecessors. With new leadership on American soil, there was once again the hope for a working bilateral relationship.

Second, after the Bush and Obama resets, U.S.-Russia relations reverted to tumult slowly at first and definitively after Putin's policies crossed a perceived line drawn in the sand of imperialist expansion, particularly when it came to Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia. After all, were the first reset successful, a second would not have been needed. Under Bush, Putin's war in Chechnya and NATO's eastward expansion created significant fault lines in the relationship before it definitively collapsed with the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. Emblematic of the collapse in relations and much to the disapproval of Putin, Senator John McCain remarked, "Today, we are all Georgians" (*The New Republic* 2008). A similar downward slope occurred under Obama. Proxy conflict in Syria and Libya in 2011 and Putin's 2012 return to the presidency created tension following the Obama reset, and once again, there was a definitive collapse in 2014 with Putin's annexation of Crimea. The Republican Speaker of the House John Boehner remarked, "It's time to stand up to Putin. At what point do you say enough is enough? We are at that point" (Mccalmon 2014). Throughout the Obama administration, conservative politicians capitalized on Russian aggression to criticize Obama's policies alongside Putin's actions. Across both administrations, we see reflected in conservative attitudes that relations were already declining before Russia invaded a neighbor and pushed relations beyond the point of no return. As such, Bush and Obama both finished their administrations with U.S.-Russia relations devastatingly poor, necessitating a reset with the next president.

Trump followed the trend at first and vowed a reset of his own, but relations did not fully collapse during his administration as they did in the presidencies of his predecessors. Trump entered his administration prioritizing a healthy relationship with Russia, saying it's "very important that we get along." Like Bush, Trump developed a personal relationship with Putin, marked by what resembled friendship. While Bush also famously "looked into [Putin's] eyes and saw his soul," Trump did not mediate this warm personal relationship with hardline political boundaries. For instance, while most presidents lambasted Putin for his denial toward Western criticism, Trump remarked "President Putin was extremely strong and powerful in his denial today" in 2018 with regards to election interference. Statements like these became emblematic of the GOP's attitude toward Putin during the Trump Administration: despite sanctions and many strategic clashes, the GOP and its spokespeople seemed to stick up for Putin. From a political perspective regarding the claims of election interference, this makes sense: the GOP benefitted from clearing Putin's name.

This trend has continued after Trump left office. An insightful case study into this matter is the GOP's statements on aid toward Ukraine. GOP leaders have put forward a variety of reasons, some even seemingly contradictory, for opposing aid to Ukraine. Senator Tommy Tuberville has cited the concern over blank checks, indicating unease with unchecked financial assistance. Representative Matt Gaetz has invoked foreign policy realism as a rationale, implying a need to prioritize U.S. interests. Senator Ron Johnson believes Putin will win, suggesting that aid will not actually be necessary in the war. On the other hand, Senator Thom Tillis has stated Putin will lose, implying that the aid will be futile as the defeat of Russia is inevitable. Senator Eric Schmitt's reason is party "directionalism," indicating an opposition that might be rooted in internal political

strategy rather than the specifics of the Ukrainian situation. Regardless of the reasons, the end result is the same: these GOP leaders are hesitant to stand against Putin and they employ myriad reasons to justify their trepidation. This dynamic shows that the attitude toward Putin which Trump created has persisted beyond his presidency. However, these also seems to be an ideological component to this Republican opposition, in that some conservatives have romanticized Putin as a defender of “traditional values” against progressive Western cultural shifts. Figures like Representative Marjorie Taylor-Greene and Tucker Carlson have portrayed Russia under Putin as a bulwark against feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, secularism, and other ideas opposed by the socially conservative wing. While flawed, this perception of Putin aligning with them on cultural issues may also be shaping the GOP’s stance, in addition to Trump’s legacy of admiring Putin. The end result is emblematic of the GOP’s shift toward the Trump Party worldview.

b. Media

As described in the section one, conservative media largely operated in-step with mainstream narratives toward Russia. But beginning in 2016, conservative media coverage grew increasingly favorable toward Russia, especially among pro-Trump outlets. Finally, narratives have fractured starting in 2020, although strong anti-Ukraine consensus has emerged.

Before 2016, conservative media framed Russia as a geopolitical threat and chastised the Obama administration for being “misguided” and overly indulgent toward Russia in pursuing its Reset policy. For example, in 2014, Breitbart News criticized Obama as having been “outmaneuvered” by Putin and arguing “American ‘flexibility’ and weakness led to an overcharged Russian foreign policy” (Pollak 2014). In a later article, Mary Chastain of Breitbart News drew direct comparisons between Putin and Stalin, emphasizing how Putin praised the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in World War II (2015). Finally, Ben Shapiro, also of Breitbart News, argued that America was losing the new Cold War (2014), while other commentators argued “Putin thinks the West is as weak as jelly. And the tragedy is he's right” (Hastings 2014).

During the Trump administration, conservative media began to cover Russia more favorably. Putin morphed from an illiberal autocrat into a bastion of conservative, White Christian nationalism. As Ann Coulter wrote, “In 20 years, Russia will be the only country that is recognizably European” (2017). Trump’s efforts to cozy up to Putin were no longer seen as “weak”; instead, one Fox news opinion headline reads: “Outrage over Trump, Putin Helsinki meeting – Did we expect president to call Putin a liar on global TV?” (Peek 2018).

Conservative media also downplayed Russian election interference as a “witch hunt” against Trump. Headlines read, “The Russia Collusion Hoax Meets An Unbelievable End” (Nunes 2019), “Robert Mueller Caught Contradicting His Report in Testimony to Congress” (Pollak 2019), and “The left can't let go of the Russia collusion hoax (although China is our real enemy)” (Carlson 2019). These narratives sought to paint the narrative of Russian interference as a baseless

conspiracy theory designed to undermine the legitimacy of the Trump presidency, indirectly shoring up Putin's own legitimacy too.

Since 2020, a split has emerged among the pro-Trump and anti-Trump wings of the Republican party, a split that has manifested itself in media coverage as well. More established conservative media sites like Fox news and the Washington Examiner began to cautiously criticize Putin: "Is Russia's Putin a devout Christian or has he weaponized religion to advance his personal ambitions?" (Koffler 2024b) and "Putin threatens 'destruction of civilization' as Germany feels Ukraine war jitters" (Gehrke 2024). Conversely, Tucker Carlson argued, Americans have been trained to hate Putin, and will suffer because of it" (2022), while Rebekkah of Fox news called Putin a "crazy S.O.B." who would prefer Biden as president over Trump (2024a).

At the same time, consensus has largely emerged around opposing U.S. involvement in Ukraine. Headlines like "Ukrainian Double-Dealing Made Clear as U.S. Considers Billions More in Aid" (Devlin 2024) and "Two Years And \$113 Billion Later, D.C.'s 'America Last' Crew Has No Plan For Ending The Russia-Ukraine War" (Fleetwood 2024) reflect these sentiments. In this way, conservative media outlets have argued that the U.S. has no vital interests at stake in Ukraine and that the risks of confrontation with Russia outweigh any potential benefits of intervention.

c. As Revealed by Polling

Polling data from the Pew Research Center reveals that generally, attitudes of Republican voters regarding Russia and Putin do not shift dramatically unless there is a major political event. As seen in Figure 1, in the middle of the Obama era (November 2013), 24 percent of Republicans said they viewed Russia as an adversary. That number jumped to 42 percent in March 2014 following the Russian invasion and annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula, but then dropped to 33 percent in July 2014 as the news cycle changed. After four years of President Trump in the Oval Office (2017–2021), 32 percent of Republicans said they held very unfavorable views of Russia, which is not a large shift from the Obama era.

There was, however, a significant shift in Republican attitudes following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In March 2022, 67 percent of Republicans said they held a very unfavorable view of Russia, compared to 72 percent of Democrats. This trend continued a year later in March 2023, during which 61 percent of Republicans said they held a very unfavorable view of Russia, while 66 percent of Democrats held the same view.

Evidently, the largest shifts in Republican sentiment towards Russia occurred during major political events, such as the 2014 invasion of Crimea and the more recent invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This demonstrates that the shift in Republican attitudes toward Russia cannot necessarily be measured across the board through polling data. Instead, it indicates that the shifts in attitudes stem from a divide within the conservative party, where traditional "Reaganesque" Republicans are at odds with the growing "Trump wing" of the conservative party, at least when it comes to their perspectives on Russia as an adversary to the United States.

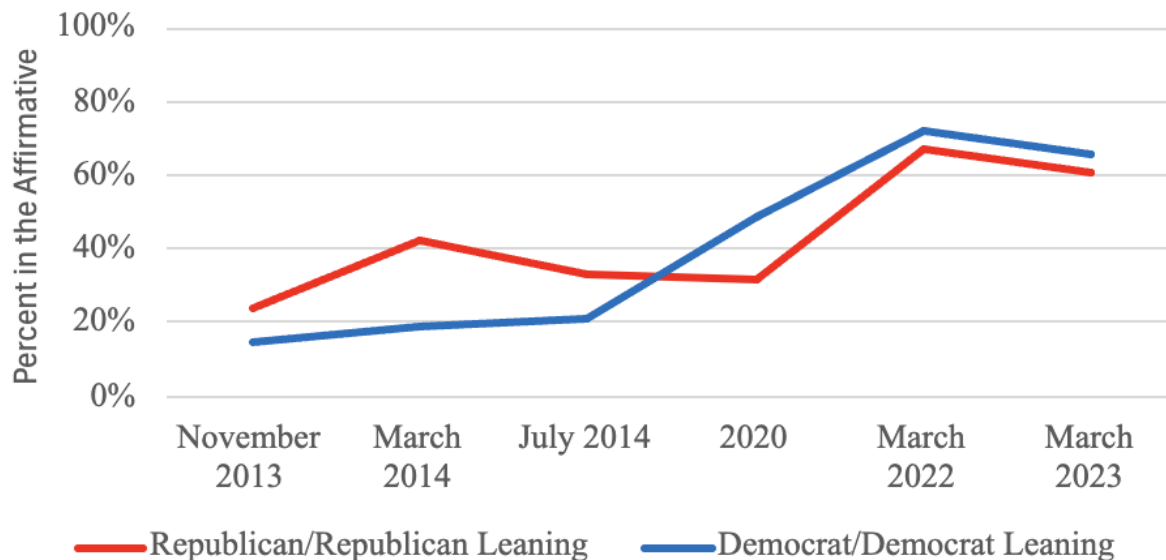
Polling of Republican Attitudes

The Obama Presidency			The Trump Presidency			The Biden Presidency & Post-2022 Invasion of Ukraine		
Premise/Statement	Date	% of Republicans in the Affirmative	Premise/Statement	Date	% of Republicans in the Affirmative	Premise/Statement	Date	% of Republicans in the Affirmative
View Russia as an Adversary	Nov 2013	24	Express Confidence in Putin to do the Right Thing 'in World Affairs'	Spring 2018	28 (incl. Republican leaning)	Very Unfavorable View of Russia	March 2022	67
View Russia as an Adversary	March 2014	42	Improper Contacts Definitely or Probably Occurred (Mueller Investigation)	Nov/Dec 2017	26	Do Not have Confidence in Putin Regarding 'World Affairs'	March 2022	92
View Russia as an Adversary	July 2014	33	Express Confidence in Putin	Spring 2019	31	Very Unfavorable View of Russia	March 2023	61
Russia/Ukraine Situation is Very Important to U.S. Interests	April 2014	40	Very Unfavorable View of Russia	2020	32	See Russia-Ukraine War as Important to U.S. National Interests	Jan 2024	69
Support U.S. Sending Arms/Military Supplies to Ukrainian Govt.	Feb 2015	51						
Highly Negative Views of Putin	Feb 2015	76						

*All Data Courtesy of the Pew Research Center **Stanford | SURF** Stanford U.S.-Russia Forum

(Figure 1) Republican attitudes as they relate to Russia from 2013-2024.

Viewing Russia Very Unfavorably & as an Adversary



(Figure 2) Republican and Democrat in the affirmative when asked about viewing Russia 'very unfavorably' and as an 'adversary' from 2013-2024.

d. Alignment of values

The perceived alignment of values between Putin's Russia and the conservative, White, religious wing of the Republican party has played a significant role in shaping the shift in conservative attitudes toward Russia during the Trump era. This alignment manifests in several key areas, including the defense of traditional social values, the promotion of Christian nationalism, and the rejection of liberal globalism.

One of the primary factors driving this alignment is the shared opposition to progressive social values, particularly regarding LGBTQ+ rights, minority rights more generally, immigration, the role of women in society, the status of non-white segments of the population and that of non-Christians. Putin has positioned himself as a defender of traditional family values and has implemented policies that restrict the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals in Russia, for instance labeling the international gay rights movement as "extremist" (MacFarquhar 2023). This stance resonates with many conservative Americans who view the advancement of LGBTQ+ rights as a threat to their religious beliefs and traditional way of life. As conservative commentator Pat Buchanan argued, "In the culture war for the future of mankind, Putin is planting Russia's flag firmly on the side of traditional Christianity" (2014)

Moreover, Putin's embrace of Christian nationalism and his close relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church appeal to many conservative Americans who believe that the United States should be an explicitly Christian nation. Putin has frequently invoked religious imagery and rhetoric to bolster his political legitimacy, presenting himself as a defender of Christian values against the secular liberalism of the West. This narrative aligns with the views of many conservative Americans who see the decline of religion in public life as a threat to the moral fabric of society.

Finally, Putin's criticism of liberal globalism and his emphasis on national sovereignty resonate with the America First ideology promoted by Trump and his supporters. Putin has repeatedly challenged the liberal international order and has advocated for a multipolar world in which nations prioritize their own interests over global cooperation. This vision appeals to conservative Americans who believe that international institutions and agreements, such as the United Nations and global climate accords, infringe upon American sovereignty and undermine national interests.

e. Opportunism for Putin

While the alignment of values between Putin's Russia and the American conservative movement has created a favorable environment for closer ties and a foreign policy that is more friendly to his regime than Republicans have favored historically, it is important to recognize the strategic opportunism that underlies Putin's approach. Putin has actively sought to capitalize on existing divisions within American society and has worked to amplify polarization for his own geopolitical benefit.

For example, in 2012, the Russian president took an opportunity to gain Republican support in the United States — capitalizing on their strong dislike of Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton.

Following Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, mass protests in the Russian Federation ensued, and Putin pointed the finger at Clinton and the State Department, accusing them of inciting and fueling the unrest. In this sense, Putin was able to take an 'enemy of my enemy is my friend' approach by appealing to American conservatives who would take any opportunity to fault Clinton and the Democratic establishment and gain new support within the party.

Another clear example of this opportunism is Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. According to the U.S. intelligence community, Russia engaged in a coordinated campaign to influence the election in favor of Donald Trump, using a combination of cyber-attacks, disinformation, and social media manipulation. By exploiting existing political and social divisions within the United States, Russia sought to undermine public faith in the democratic process and weaken the legitimacy of the American political system.

Putin's embrace of figures like Tucker Carlson (and the latter's embrace of Putin) and other conservative media personalities also reflects a calculated effort to shape American public opinion in ways that serve Russian interests. By providing a platform for these figures and amplifying their messages, Putin seeks to normalize pro-Russian narratives within conservative media and Republican politics and to build a base of political support for policies that align with Russian objectives. For instance, Russian media has given Rep. Marjorie Taylor-Greene positive coverage in light of her push to end aid to Ukraine.

Moreover, Putin has sought to exploit Trump's America First ideology and skepticism of international alliances that have taken root within the same conservative wing of the Republican Party. The narrow Republican majority in Congress has delayed additional military aid to Ukraine by 5 months — a delay that reportedly cost thousands of Ukrainian lives and millions in property damage. It was precisely this pro-Putin conservative faction that obstructed the crucial aid delivery. In this context, the shift in conservative attitudes toward Russia can be seen as a successful outcome of Putin's opportunistic approach. By professing similarly traditional, Christian, conservative values, exploiting domestic polarization, and shaping public discourse through media personalities (what the KGB would have called "useful idiots" in the Soviet period) like Tucker Carlson, Putin has been able to build a base of political support within the United States that serves Russian interests. This support has made it more difficult for American policymakers to take a hard line against Russian aggression and has created opportunities for Russia to advance its geopolitical objectives with less resistance from the United States.

4. Student Contributions

All ideas were discussed, debated, and developed as a team. Peter took the lead on Republican political positions, Dana focused on voter attitudes, and Michael wrote the sections about media attitudes. We are grateful for the feedback, comments, and suggestions from Professor Stoner, Zhanna Nemtsova, and participants in the 2024 Stanford U.S.-Russia Forum.

5. Conclusion

a. Limitations

While this memo provides a comprehensive overview of the evolution of conservative attitudes toward Russia, it is important to acknowledge some limitations. First, the analysis primarily focuses on the national level, examining the views of prominent Republican politicians, major conservative media outlets, and aggregate public opinion data. As such, it may not fully capture regional variations or the attitudes of specific subgroups within the conservative movement.

Second, the memo relies heavily on qualitative analysis of political rhetoric and media coverage, which can be subject to interpretation and selection bias. While efforts were made to include a representative sample of viewpoints, the analysis does not comprehensively cover all relevant sources or quantify their relative influence based on factors like reach and readership, which limits our ability to make robust assessments about the overall conservative media ecosystem surrounding Russia and Ukraine.

Finally, the examination of public opinion data is limited by the availability and scope of existing surveys. While the Pew Research Center is a reliable source, additional data from other polling organizations could provide a more nuanced understanding of conservative attitudes over time.

b. Policy Implications

The findings of this memo have implications for U.S. foreign policy and domestic politics. The shift in conservative attitudes regarding Russia compared to the Cold War (and vis-à-vis Democrats), particularly during the Trump era, has created challenges for American policymakers seeking to maintain a consistent and coherent approach to relations with Moscow. The polarization of views within the Republican Party has made it more difficult to build bipartisan consensus on issues such as sanctions, arms control, and support for NATO allies. In light of a potential Trump victory in 2024, this may further muddy U.S. foreign policy stances and alliances.

Moreover, the alignment of values between Putin's Russia and the conservative wing of the Republican Party has created opportunities for Russian influence operations and interference in American domestic affairs. The spread of pro-Russian narratives within conservative media and the exploitation of existing political and social divisions by Russian actors pose ongoing threats to the integrity of American democratic processes.

To address these challenges, policymakers will need to develop strategies for countering Russian disinformation and influence operations, while also working to rebuild a bipartisan consensus on the importance of defending American interests and values in the face of Russian aggression. This may require increased efforts to educate the public about the nature of the Russian threat, as well as targeted measures to bolster the resilience of American democratic institutions.

c. Future Research

This memo highlights several avenues for further research on the relationship between conservative attitudes and U.S.-Russia relations. One promising area is the use of computational methods, such as web-scraping and natural language processing, to quantify and analyze the prevalence of pro-Russian narratives in conservative media over time. By collecting and analyzing a larger corpus of articles, social media posts, and other online content, researchers could gain a more granular understanding of how specific narratives and frames have evolved and spread within the conservative media ecosystem. Moreover, future research should weigh sources by metrics such as circulation or viewership numbers to better understand the impact of these changing viewpoints.

Another area for future research is the role of social media in shaping and amplifying conservative attitudes toward Russia. Platforms like X and Facebook have become key channels for the spread of news, opinion, and disinformation related to the U.S.-Russia relationship. By analyzing patterns of content sharing and user interactions, researchers could gain insights into how pro-Russian narratives propagate within conservative online communities and how they intersect with other political and cultural debates.

Finally, comparative research examining the relationship between conservative movements and attitudes toward Russia in other countries could provide valuable context for understanding the American case. By exploring how factors such as historical memory, political ideology, and media landscapes shape conservative views of Russia in other Western democracies, researchers could identify common patterns and divergences that illuminate the broader dynamics of this relationship.

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