

# [***Putin looms over a third successive US election***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BCW-TMG1-DY7V-G00H-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; "Russia, Russia, Russia."

[*Ex-President Donald Trump's*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/president-donald-trump-45) scathing catchphrase for a torrent of investigations during his administration also serves as an apt catch-all for the current meltdown over Moscow roiling US ***politics***.

The United States might have beaten the Kremlin in the Cold War and ever since regarded Moscow as a mere irritant - albeit one with nuclear arms - and have been desperate to concentrate on the showdown with its new superpower rival, China.

But Russia and its leader, whom [*President Joe Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) described as a [*"crazy S.O.B."*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/21/politics/biden-putin-crazy-sob/index.html) at a Wednesday fundraiser, won't go away.

[*President Vladimir Putin*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/20/politics/us-division-putin-russia-analysis/index.html) has trained the malevolence of his intelligence agencies, his military power, global diplomacy and obstructive statecraft into a multi-front assault on American power in the United States and abroad.

He has carved out baleful influence at the center of US ***politics*** in an extraordinary display of an adversary penetrating and exploiting American political divides. The ex-KGB lieutenant colonel, who conceived a grievance after watching the Soviet Union dissolve from his outpost in East Germany, has sparked chaos in a single-minded effort to discredit and weaken the United States. Successive US presidents have underestimated Russia, misread its historic humiliations and struggled to work out how to change Putin's course and contain his threat.

Western observers often point out that Putin's leadership has been a disaster for Russia. As oligarchs plundered natural resources, Russians were hammered by international sanctions, democracy was crushed and thousands of soldiers perished in his wars.

But Putin has been remarkably resilient following earlier signs that [*his invasion of Ukraine*](https://www.cnn.com/world/europe/ukraine) - nearly two years ago - was a disaster and could even bring him down. There are now signs that Russia's reconstituting of its armed forces and willingness to absorb horrendous losses are turning the tide of the war and raising the prospect of a victory that would turn Putin into a far greater danger.

The Russian leader's leveraging of power and successful forays into US ***politics*** are, meanwhile, threatening to cause a schism between the US and European NATO allies that could put the post-World War II security architecture at risk.

All the ways Putin is playing in US ***politics***

Putin is advancing Russian interests against the US on multiple fronts.

Yet another US election appears to be falling prey to Russian interference, after prosecutors [*accused*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/20/politics/biden-former-fbi-informant-russian-intelligence/index.html) long-time FBI informant Alexander Smirnov of "actively peddling new lies that could impact US elections." In 2016, US intelligence agencies assessed that Moscow meddled in the election to help Trump.Smirnov, who was last week charged with making up false evidence over Biden family corruption in Ukraine, told investigators after his arrest that the material came from Russian intelligence, a court filing from prosecutors said Tuesday. The development suggests yet another attempt by Russia to hurt one of Trump's electoral opponents.House Republicans once held up Smirnov's evidence as the center piece of their evidence-challenged bid to impeach Biden. Now that it's been discredited, they are insisting it didn't matter. But Putin can't lose. The GOP is seeking to further discredit the FBI - the agency responsible for hunting Russian spies. Even if the credibility of Republican impeachment plans has been shattered, Russia may already have benefited by fomenting more discord and divisions in Washington. "I think it's another brilliant success as a part of Russian intelligence in meddling in our elections," Douglas London, a former CIA counterintelligence chief for south and southwest Asia, said on CNN on Tuesday.Even the death of Russian opposition hero Alexey Navalny in a penal colony last week opened bitter new divides in US ***politics***. It has refocused attention on Trump's odd refusal to ever criticize Putin. And Trump's comparison of Navalny's persecution to his own legal plight is not just grotesque - it's doing the kind of damage to the reputation and integrity of US political and judicial institutions that Putin relishes.The result is that Russia will again be at the epicenter of a US election campaign certain to deepen the national political estrangement as Biden lambasts Trump over his relationship to Putin. "It's shameful. It's weak. It's dangerous. It's un-American," Biden said last week.Whatever happens next, Russia will be central to Biden's legacy. The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led the US president to invigorate NATO and to send billions of dollars of arms and ammunition to help President Volodymyr Zelensky stave off his country's elimination from the map. Biden is also shepherding two new members, Sweden and Finland, into the alliance, further weakening Russia's strategic position.In the most unfathomable recent transformation, the Republican Party - which lionized President Ronald Reagan, who beseeched ex-Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to "tear down this wall" in Berlin - is now enabling Russian expansionism. The refusal of House Republicans to pass a new $60 billion aid package for Ukraine is leading to battlefield gains for Moscow's forces. And Trump, the front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination, is vowing to quickly end the war if he's elected to another term - which would likely mean rewarding Putin's illegal invasion and snatching of territory that has become the biggest land conflict in Europe since the end of World War II.Trump's warning that he'd invite Russia to invade NATO allies that didn't reach defense spending targets, meanwhile, rattled the Western alliance and cast doubt on its bedrock mutual defense mantra. If Trump wins a second term and pulls out of NATO, he'd hand Putin Russia's greatest strategic victory since the Cold War.Russia's capacity to create fear and recriminations in Washington was laid bare again last week, when House Intelligence Chairman Mike Turner sparked alarm by revealing a supposed plan by Moscow to [*develop a nuclear space weapon*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/16/politics/russia-nuclear-space-weapon-intelligence?cid=ios_app) that could potentially cripple vast numbers of commercial and government satellites.On Wednesday, it emerged that yet another American citizen is being imprisoned in Russia. Moscow typically seeks to use captives as bargaining chips for Russian criminals and intelligence operatives held overseas. [*Ksenia Karelina*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/20/europe/russia-arrest-us-dual-citizen-intl/index.html), a US-Russian dual citizen, was arrested on charges of treason for allegedly donating just $51 to a Ukrainian charity, her California employer told CNN. Other Americans jailed in Russia include Paul Whelan - a former US Marine, who has been held for more than five years and denies espionage charges - and Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, who was detained last year on espionage charges he and his employer vehemently contest. Their ordeals represent a convenient way for Putin to dial up political pressure on Biden whenever he pleases.Geopolitically, Russia is increasingly finding common interests and military synergies with other US adversaries like China, North Korea and Iran. The cooperation is well short of the formal alliance that Washington has long feared. But this united front of autocracies is dedicated to challenging US global power. Putin recently formalized his warming ties with North Korean tyrant Kim Jong Un by presenting him with a new limousine.

Biden once tried to save US-Russia relations

Biden is just the latest president to be confronted by a national security migraine because of Putin.

Yet it wasn't always this way. Early in his tenure, Putin sought cooperation. He was one of the first world leaders to call President George W. Bush after the September 11 attacks in 2001. Bush famously once looked into Putin's eyes and said he got "a sense of his soul" - one of the many catastrophic misjudgments of the Russian leader by presidents in the 21st century. President Barack Obama attempted a "reset" of relations with Moscow. But after a period as prime minister, Putin returned to the presidency and became increasingly hostile toward the West. The Russian leader was particularly incensed by the US-led operation to topple Libyan leader [*Moammar Gadhafi*](https://www.cnn.com/2013/09/26/world/africa/moammar-gadhafi-fast-facts/index.html) in 2011. Obama's critics now say he did too little to respond to Putin's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and paved the way for Russia's full invasion two years ago.

Trump came to office haunted by allegations that his team colluded with Russia's effort to damage 2016 Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. A probe by special counsel Robert Mueller did not find evidence of conspiring between the Trump campaign and Russia. But the special counsel did detail multiple contacts between the two and wrote that the Trump campaign believed it would benefit from information stolen and released by the Russians. Whether Russia helped Trump win is impossible to say. But the subsequent fallout forever soured the new president on US intelligence agencies that he regarded as a hostile "Deep State" and led him to torch their credibility among his millions of supporters. This whipping up of domestic antagonism and the damage to US institutions plays into Russia's goals. And the spectacle of Trump, as president at a Helsinki summit, siding with Putin and trashing US intelligence agencies over their claims of election interference remains one of the most staggering moments in the history of US-Russia relations.

When Biden took over, he made a high-stakes bid to reduce the poison from relations with Moscow, meeting Putin in Geneva in an echo of old Cold War summitry. Approaching the talks with deep skepticism, Biden sought to halt Russian cybersecurity attacks and to reopen nuclear disarmament negotiations while trying to ease the risks of an accidental war.

"We'll find out within the next six months to a year whether or not we actually have a strategic dialogue that matters," Biden said after the meeting in June 2021.

It was not much more than six months later that he got his answer, when Putin invaded Ukraine, a sovereign, democratic neighbor, which led to what has effectively become a proxy war between Biden and a Kremlin leader who has said he sees the conflict as part of a wider clash with the United States and the West.

Putin's efforts to weaken US power have only escalated since.

Russia's use of espionage agencies to inject propaganda and discord in US ***politics*** through social media and more directly by intelligence agencies was described by Mueller in his final report as an effort "designed to provoke and amplify political and social discord in the United States."

Ironically, those efforts use two of America's great innovations - its open, adversarial, democratic political system and the computer technology that empowered the internet - in an attempt to bring it down.

And as recent days have shown, the Russian leader can always rely on one priceless resource - the reflex of American politicians to turn on one another in a way that makes his threat even stronger.

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