

# [***Anti-Ukraine rhetoric has saturated right-wing media. Now it is helping to deliver actual war victories to Putin***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BCR-0P91-JBSS-S2VS-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

New York (CNN) &#8212; Editor's Note: A version of this article first appeared in the "Reliable Sources" newsletter. [*Sign up for the daily digest chronicling the evolving media landscape here.*](https://www.cnn.com/newsletters/reliable-sources?source=nl-acq_article)

Vladimir Putin's information war in U.S. media paid off this weekend with a key victory halfway around the world.

Some 5,000 miles away from a paralyzed Washington, Ukraine was forced to surrender the city of Avdiivka to Russian forces, handing Putin one of his most monumental triumphs in months. As The NYT's Julian E. Barnes, Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Eric Schmitt [*noted*](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/20/us/politics/ukraine-prisoners-avdiivka-russia.html), it is a "sign of the battlefield impact of the failure of the U.S. Congress, so far, to approve more military assistance as dwindling supplies of artillery shells make it even harder to hold the line." CNN's Nick Paton Walsh [*added*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/19/europe/ukraine-russia-war-avdiivka-defeat-intl/index.html?utm_term=1708481033475f14d37f99405&utm_source=cnn_Reliable+Sources+-+Feb.+19%2C+2024&utm_medium=email&bt_ee=qQnZSR8nnvvRP9j2PnkKdlJm3aDJYmgm4aG53fxu1pyobPONXZnxd0N%2FJxYu5iRs&bt_ts=1708481033478), "It is a pivotal moment, where both Russian advances and Western atrophy threaten to transform the biggest land war in Europe since the 1940s."

That atrophy has taken form in Congress where U.S. funding to continue aid for Ukraine has stalled, threatening even more devastating defeats for the Eastern European nation as it struggles to defend its borders from the brutal Russian invasion launched by Putin two years ago this week.

But it's not clear whether an aid package with real teeth will be approved by Congress, with the House under GOP control. House Speaker Mike Johnson [*has already indicated*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/19/politics/johnson-ukraine-aid-critical-decision/index.html?utm_term=1708481033475f14d37f99405&utm_source=cnn_Reliable+Sources+-+Feb.+19%2C+2024&utm_medium=email&bt_ee=qQnZSR8nnvvRP9j2PnkKdlJm3aDJYmgm4aG53fxu1pyobPONXZnxd0N%2FJxYu5iRs&bt_ts=1708481033478) that the $60 billion in funding passed by the Senate can't clear the lower chamber. And he has privately told Republicans there is "no rush" to tackle the issue.

As a Republican, Johnson is in a tough spot, politically speaking. While the Republican Party was once vehemently hawkish toward Russia, viewing the post-Soviet country as its chief adversary on the international stage, it has softened considerably in recent years and much of the party actively opposes sending additional dollars to Ukraine to continue fighting Russia.

It was little more than a decade ago when Mitt Romney, then the party's standard-bearer, famously declared Russia to be "our number one geopolitical foe." In the years since, the party has dramatically changed its tune on Russia. A CNN poll conducted last summer [*found that*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/04/politics/cnn-poll-ukraine/index.html?utm_term=1708481033475f14d37f99405&utm_source=cnn_Reliable+Sources+-+Feb.+19%2C+2024&utm_medium=email&bt_ee=qQnZSR8nnvvRP9j2PnkKdlJm3aDJYmgm4aG53fxu1pyobPONXZnxd0N%2FJxYu5iRs&bt_ts=1708481033478) a staggering 71% of Republicans do not support additional aid to thwart Putin's war on Ukraine.

Much of the GOP's softening toward Russia is owed to a near-total reversal in rhetoric from right-wing media personalities and outlets, prompted in large part by Donald Trump's ascension to power in GOP ***politics***. While the biggest players in right-wing media once fervently championed the foreign policy doctrines of the neo-conservatives, they now follow in the footsteps of Trump and vehemently reject the views once held by the George W. Bush administration.

This transition is perhaps best exemplified by Tucker Carlson. The former Fox News host was once [*sharply critical of Putin*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/style/media/2024/02/07/tucker-carlson-putin-msnbc/), characterizing him in no uncertain terms as a cruel "dictator." But in recent years, Carlson has reversed his stance, flooding the right-wing information space - which he once reigned as king over - with pro-Putin rhetoric that effectively amounts to Russian propaganda. Carlson's stance was put on display in stark fashion recently when he traveled to Moscow to conduct a widely denounced [*softball chat with Putin*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/08/media/vladimir-putin-tucker-carlson-interview-reliable-sources/index.html?utm_term=1708481033475f14d37f99405&utm_source=cnn_Reliable+Sources+-+Feb.+19%2C+2024&utm_medium=email&bt_ee=qQnZSR8nnvvRP9j2PnkKdlJm3aDJYmgm4aG53fxu1pyobPONXZnxd0N%2FJxYu5iRs&bt_ts=1708481033478) and then proceeded to record a series of propaganda videos touting Russia's supposed greatness.

While figures like Carlson have promoted Russia and Putin, they have simultaneously trashed Ukraine and its leader Volodymyr Zelensky, promoting conspiracy theories that the country interfered in the 2016 election and was hiding biological weapons labs. Carlson, for example, has [*likened Zelensky to vermin*](https://www.businessinsider.com/tucker-carlson-calls-zelenskyy-rat-like-antisemitic-trope-2023-6) and vigorously spoken out against U.S. support for Ukraine. Right-wing commentators like Carlson have questioned why taxpayer dollars are being spent to help Ukraine defend its borders when the U.S. struggles to secure its own southern border (though a recent bipartisan bill intended to tackle both issues was rejected by hardline Republicans.)

The rhetoric has had a considerable impact on the views of the party, which is now being reflected by its elected leaders. A straight line can effectively be drawn between the commentary and the failure of the House GOP to pass funding providing Kyiv with critical funding and weaponry to counter Putin's aggression.

"The GOP's shift away from support for Ukraine shows how in the Republican Party, everything flows downstream from the obsessions and priorities of right-wing propagandists," Matt Gertz, a senior fellow at the progressive watchdog Media Matters, told me Tuesday. "Tucker Carlson and his ilk wanted to back Putin's invasion, their relentless lies won over the party's base, and ultimately its elected officials have adopted their position."

"We've seen this same pattern time and again: Fox News and the like take basic concepts like 'it's a good idea to get vaccinated against the coronavirus' and 'the January 6 insurrection was bad' and turn them on their heads - and Republican elites inevitably follow," Gertz added. "Governing based on what gets ratings for B.S. artists is no way to run a country."

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