



## Opinion: Putin's former admirers are thinking twice

Opinion by Frida Ghitis

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Former Soviet republics no longer support Putin. Hear why

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**Editor's Note:** [Frida Ghitis](#), ([@fridaghitis](#)) a former CNN producer and correspondent, is a world affairs columnist. She is a weekly opinion contributor to CNN, a contributing columnist to The Washington Post and a columnist for World Politics Review. The views expressed in

this commentary are her own. View more [opinion](#) on CNN.

**(CNN)** — Russian President Vladimir Putin’s so-far-disastrous invasion of Ukraine is turning the former idol of the far right into a toxic figure among many who used to be his greatest admirers.



Frida Ghitis

For years, as Western democracies became more polarized, the extreme right started to see the Russian strongman as a role model. After all, Putin claimed to be motivated by a passion for safeguarding ultra-conservative values, even as he trained much of his venom against the United States.

But now, Putin’s brutal onslaught of a neighboring country has exposed a side of the Russian dictator that many had managed to ignore until now.

The daily images of bombed out schools, hospitals, playgrounds and apartment buildings, and the determined, so-far-largely-successful pushback by Ukraine, has prompted many – though not all – former fans to reconsider their admiration.

Leaders of the extreme right, seeing the transformation in popular opinion, have pivoted sharply. After championing a Russian leader who was already dictatorial and ruthless, they now seek to benefit from the economic havoc triggered by Putin’s war, while distancing themselves from a man who is now seen not only as a moral pariah by many of their followers, but also as a catastrophically ineffective leader.

Those lured by the reframed rhetoric should be warned. In many cases, extremists are just changing wardrobe. They’ve known who Putin was all along.

## A toxic figure

Across the West, Putin has now become one of the world’s most despised figures. A Pew survey of 18 countries found positive views of the Russian leader at an incredible 10% or less.

At the United Nations, Putin is more isolated every day. The UN General Assembly Wednesday voted to reject his annexation of Ukrainian territory by a margin of 143 to five, with 35 abstentions. That’s an even greater margin than previous UN resolutions condemning Russia’s actions, also overwhelmingly approved.



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When Italians went to the polls last month, the candidates of the far right were quick to distance themselves from their former hero.

Giorgia Meloni, leader of the post-fascist Brothers of Italy and now slated to become prime minister, dispensed with her formerly warm words toward Putin and vowed to continue sending weapons to help Ukraine. Likewise, Matteo Salvini, who once called Putin “the best statesman on Earth” and used to sport a shirt with Putin’s face on it, now insists he supports Ukraine.

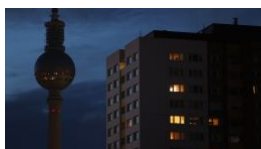
The source of their reconsideration may be found in a separate Pew poll that revealed favorable opinions of Putin and Russia among far-right members have collapsed since Russia invaded Ukraine. Among Salvini’s Lega backers, confidence in Putin to do the right thing regarding world affairs collapsed, from 62% last year to 10% now.

## Balancing act

Across Europe, supporters of far-right parties are turning their back not only on Putin but also on Russia. Their leaders are anxiously looking for ways to navigate the rapids.

Consider France’s Marine Le Pen, whose warm encounters with Putin have come back to haunt her. The Putin we see today, she pleads, is “not the one” she met when she visited Moscow as a presidential candidate advocating stronger ties with Russia. Only a year ago, most supporters of her own National Rally (RN) had a positive view of Russia. That number is just 21% now.

Pro-Russia positions are so poisonous that the RN’s acting president, Jordan Bardella, threatened to sue anyone who suggests there are financial ties between the party and Russia. (Le Pen’s presidential campaign was partly financed by a mysterious multimillion dollar loan from Russia in 2014. Le Pen said French banks refused to give her a loan.)



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Instead of focusing on the war, some far-right parties now hold demonstrations criticizing the high cost of living made worse by Western sanctions against Russia. On

the surface it's a populist position, all about helping the people at home. Beneath the slogans, however, there's a message that helps Putin by attacking economic sanctions and raising pressure on politicians to ease up on support for Ukraine.

That's the case in Germany, where some in the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party have openly expressed support for Russia, but the leadership has tried to tone it down while mobilizing opposition to Berlin's policies – on the grounds that it creates hardships for Germans.

## Across the Atlantic

It's a balancing act that's being tried in the US, sometimes with embarrassing results.

A couple of weeks ago, CPAC, the conservative political action group, tweeted a cringeworthy message that framed the conflict along Putin's preferred lines, calling on Democrats to "end the gift-giving to Ukraine" and focus on the US. The group soon deleted the post, apologetically, with claims that it didn't go through proper vetting.

But it's no secret that the far right in the United States has been as enthralled with Putin as its Western European friends.

At the far-right America First Political Action Conference (AFPAC) in February, days after Russian started bombing Ukraine, AFPAC founder and notorious White nationalist Nick Fuentes bellowed, "Can we get a round of applause for Russia!"



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At the same, at the CPAC conference, former President Donald Trump, long a Putin admirer, was already under fire. As Putin inched toward war, declaring portions of Ukraine, "independent," Trump sided with Putin, calling his approach to Ukraine "genius," explaining, "Here's a guy who's very savvy...I know him very well."

Trump held his ground, repeating his praise of the Russian dictator and claiming, "Putin is playing Biden like a drum, and it's not pretty to watch." (Trump hasn't been praising Putin as much lately. More often using the war to praise himself.)

Over the months, Putin's "genius" and "savvy" have come under question as the invasion has not only faltered, but has caused him to lose support in unexpected places.

Even the leaders of former Soviet Republics, including autocratic ones Putin protected

in the past, are letting him down. Only one, the Belarussian dictator Alexander Lukashenko, has stood with the Kremlin.

In the US – where 73% of the people want continued support for Ukraine even after Putin threatened to use nuclear weapons – a few prominent far-right figures still defend him.

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Fox News' Tucker Carlson is such a useful voice for Putin propaganda that clips from his nightly show are a mainstay in Russian state-controlled television. The spectacle caused a host at an even more right-wing network, Newsmax, to lambast him. Eric Bolling referred to Carlson as an “alleged American” for defending “our archenemy Russia and the sociopath Putin...”

Openly supporting Putin has turned out to be the a more complicated strategy than the far right expected. In fact, their history of backing a man whose tyrannical leanings were visible long ago remains cautionary evidence of the core ideology of many of Putin's former – and current – supporters.

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