

# THE MOSCOW PROJECT



## Putin's Payout: 10 Ways Trump has Supported Putin's Foreign Policy Agenda

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## Overview

The general details of the Russian government's support for US President Donald Trump in the 2016 election are clear. Russia conducted a [massive disinformation campaign](#) targeting American voters; [hacked](#) Trump's opponents' email and strategically released the information; and used American [fronts](#) to funnel money into the American political system to [support](#) Trump's campaign.

Russian President Vladimir Putin took a risk by launching this campaign. By 2016, the global community had [diplomatically sidelined](#) him for his actions in Crimea and Donbass; Russia's economy had [stalled](#) amid declining oil prices; and Putin himself faced pressure from his inner circle, [themselves facing pressure from](#) US sanctions. Russia and Putin were both vulnerable to an escalation of outside pressure. Given this position, provoking potential retaliatory measures from America and the international community could have put Putin in an increasingly perilous position – but Putin's risk-taking succeeded beyond any expectation.

Since the [beginning](#) of Trump's administration, the White House has demonstrated a clear and consistent [pattern of behavior](#) toward Russia by not only calling for better relations with the Kremlin but also actively advancing Russia's foreign policy objectives.

There is no clear geopolitical or policy rationale for Trump's behavior, which often comes at the cost of longstanding American foreign policy interests. As political scientist Ian Bremmer recently [assessed](#), "No serious foreign policy analyst I know (nor any ex-Trump- Admin official) has a good explanation for why Trump is so singularly enamored with Russian President Vladimir Putin."

Nor is there a political rationale. Amid Special Counsel Robert Mueller's probe and charges of collusion, it would almost certainly benefit Trump to distance himself from Putin and dispel rumors that he is beholden to his Russian counterpart. Instead, at [every opportunity](#), Trump has embraced Putin and adopted positions that only raise additional suspicion about Trump's motives and rationale.

Putin's return on investment from Trump's presidency has been significant.

**Here are ten ways that Putin has received his payout:**

- 1) **Putin's Goal:** Weaken and divide the transatlantic alliance.  
**Putin's Payout:** Trump undermines US relationships with European allies and calls the US's commitment to NATO into question.
- 2) **Putin's Goal:** Degrade the European Union and foster pro-Russian political movements.  
**Putin's Payout:** Trump attacks the EU and actively supports anti-EU, Kremlin-backed parties.
- 3) **Putin's Goal:** Disrupt American leadership of the global economic order.  
**Putin's Payout:** Trump is eagerly pushing for an all-out trade war with Europe.
- 4) **Putin's Goal:** Build global resentment and distrust towards the US and stoke anti-American sentiment.  
**Putin's Payout:** America's closest allies are explicitly suspicious and distrusting of the US because of Trump's rhetoric and actions.
- 5) **Putin's Goal:** Relieve economic and domestic political pressure from US sanctions on Russia.  
**Putin's Payout:** Trump tries to roll back, impede, and blunt the impact of sanctions at every step.
- 6) **Putin's Goal:** Legitimize his regime in the eyes of the world.  
**Putin's Payout:** Trump repeatedly praises and defends Putin, lending the weight of the US presidency providing validation towards Putin's cause.
- 7) **Putin's Goal:** Revive Russia's status as a great power and gain international recognition for its illegal seizure of Crimea.  
**Putin's Payout:** Trump publicly says that Crimea is part of Russia and calls for Russia to be welcomed back into the international community with no concessions.
- 8) **Putin's Goal:** Continue to sow discord in Western democracies and avoid repercussions for interfering in US and European elections.  
**Putin's Payout:** Trump dismisses Russian interference and has done nothing to prevent future meddling, putting him at odds with his own intelligence community.
- 9) **Putin's Goal:** Soften America's adversarial stance toward Russia.  
**Putin's Payout:** Trump is shifting the Republican Party's generations-long hawkish views on Russia.
- 10) **Putin's Goal:** Destabilize the US from within.  
**Putin's Payout:** Trump attacks US institutions while driving divisive politics and eroding democratic norms.

The pattern is clear: Putin has received—and continues to receive—a good payout on his investment.

**1) Putin's Goal: Weaken and divide the transatlantic alliance.** Putin views NATO and the broader transatlantic relationship as Russia's main strategic adversaries. In 2017, the Trump administration released a [National Security Strategy](#) outlining this goal, asserting, "Russia aims to weaken US influence in the world and divide us from our allies and partners. Russia views the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union (EU) as threats."

**Putin's Payout: Trump undermines US relationships with European allies and calls the US's commitment to NATO into question.**

- **Trump refused to recommit to NATO's Article 5 at the opening of the organization's new headquarters.** During his first summit with other NATO leaders, Trump [refused](#) to reaffirm America's commitment to Article 5 of the Atlantic Treaty, which holds that an attack on one NATO member is an attack on all and serves as the foundation of the transatlantic security alliance. Article 5, which has only been invoked once (in the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks), is [widely considered](#) one of the treaty's most important tenets. It was subsequently [reported](#) that Trump's national security team had written language explicitly reaffirming Article 5, only for Trump to later [reportedly](#) remove the section without informing his national security staff. Trump later [walked back](#) his position, eventually committing to Article 5.
- **The Trump White House considered moving US forces away from Russia's borders.** Upon coming into office, a senior Trump appointee to the National Security Council, Kevin Harrington, proposed [withdrawing US military forces from Eastern Europe](#). He reportedly [framed the proposal](#) specifically as an overture to Vladimir Putin as part of a strategy to "refram[e] our interests within the context of a new relationship with Russia."
- **Trump often presents NATO as a protection racket.** In [an interview](#) with *The New York Times*, Trump laid out his belief that the US should only defend NATO allies who have "fulfilled their obligations to us." As the former US Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul has [explained](#), this framing misses the entire point of the alliance: "This framing of alliance relationships as protection-racket contracts misses the strategic value of allies to the United States. We want allies to keep the peace, fight alongside us in times of war and defend our common values—long-term strategic objectives that stretch well beyond any debate about national military budgets."

**2) Putin's Goal: Degrade the European Union and foster pro-Russian political movements.** A stable and unified Europe, one that values human rights and liberal democracy, greatly constrains and undermines Russia. The success of a vibrant liberal and democratic EU provides a direct contrast to Putin's corrupt regime. More tangibly, EU sanctions strangle Russia economically, and European unity hinders Russia's efforts to bully its neighbors and build alliances with EU members. A divided Europe, on the other hand, would enable Russia to threaten and pressure former Soviet satellite states and expand its influence in Europe.

**Putin's Payout: Trump attacks the EU and actively supports anti-EU, Kremlin-backed parties.**

- **Trump continually disparages the EU.** Trump has repeatedly spoken negatively about the EU, recently falsely [claiming](#) that “the European Union, of course, was set up to take advantage of the United States.”
- **Trump openly supported the Brexit campaign.** Trump called Brexit “smart” and promised to move quickly on a trade deal with the UK after the referendum. Russia also [interfered](#) in the historic British referendum, initiating a complex operation in support of the anti-EU Leave campaign.
- **Trump supported National Front leader Marine Le Pen in the 2017 French presidential election.** During the election, Trump offered [support](#) for Le Pen, stating in an interview that Le Pen is “strongest on borders, and she’s the strongest on what’s been going on in France.” Le Pen and her far-right National Front party ran on a platform promising to [remove](#) France from the EU. She has a [strong](#) pro-Putin stance and has received active [support](#) from the Kremlin in the form of both money and a Russian cyber-campaign [targeting](#) Le Pen’s opponent.
- **Trump has heaped praise on Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban.** Trump has said nothing but [glowing things](#) about Orban, who leads an illiberal, xenophobic, and anti-Semitic movement in Hungary. Orban also [endorsed](#) Trump in the 2016 election.
- **Trump began his first European trip by going to Poland, which is currently rolling back democratic institutions and pulling away from the rest of the EU.** On his initial visit to Europe for the NATO summit as president, Trump first visited Poland. Many [interpreted](#) this as a snub to the EU, whose relationship with the conservative and increasingly autocratic Polish government has become more strained. While in Warsaw, Trump also [gave](#) a right-wing nationalist [speech](#) during which he attacked American leaders, undermined his own intelligence services, and remained silent on controversial actions by the right-wing Polish government.
- **Trump’s new Ambassador in Berlin announced he is explicitly supporting right-wing movements.** In a breach of protocol, Trump-appointed ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell [gave an interview](#) to Breitbart news where he said “I absolutely want to empower other conservatives throughout Europe,” including right-wing [pro-Russian](#) Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz.
- **Trump bluntly asked France to leave the EU.** In April 2018, Trump [reportedly](#) asked French President Emmanuel Macron, “Why don’t you leave the EU?” and suggested that the US could offer France a better trade deal. This [directly contradicts](#) the US’s stated policy.

## Case Study: Germany

**Putin's Goal: Degrade German Chancellor Angela Merkel's influence as the leading voice in the EU.** As the head of the largest economy and most powerful country in the EU, Merkel is the foremost custodian of the liberal west. Furthermore, Merkel and Putin have long had a contentious relationship rooted in personal distrust and opposing world views.

**Putin's Payout: Trump is destroying America's relationship with Germany, and personally attacking Chancellor Merkel.**

- **Trump has repeatedly been rude to Merkel in public, high-profile situations.** In March 2017, Trump [refused](#) to shake hands with Merkel during her visit to the White House. As CNN [described the encounter](#), "The tense moment between the American and German leaders comes after Trump repeatedly bashed Merkel on the campaign trail and accused her of 'ruining Germany,' citing the nation's policies allowing refugees into the nation."
- **Trump demeaned Merkel during the G7 Summit.** In front of other world leaders, Trump also [reportedly](#) threw Starburst on the table in front of Merkel during the 2018 G7 summit and said "Here, Angela. Don't say I never give you anything."
- **Trump has attacked Germany on trade.** Trump has publicly [complained](#) about the number of German cars on the American market. He also [accused](#) Merkel of being "so protectionist" about German trade policies, and US Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross has [announced](#) plans to "launch an investigation into whether automobile imports are hurting US national security."
- **Trump has criticized Germany on issues related to migration and crime.** Trump [tweeted](#) on June 18, 2018, "The people of Germany are turning against their leadership as migration is rocking the already tenuous Berlin coalition. Crime in Germany is way up. Big mistake made all over Europe in allowing millions of people in who have so strongly and violently changed their culture!"
- **The Pentagon is now exploring moving troops from Germany.** *The Washington Post* recently reported that the Department of Defense is [currently analyzing](#) the cost and impact of withdrawing or transferring American troops stationed in Germany.

**3) Putin's Goal: Disrupt American leadership and dominance of the global economic order.** Putin resents the structure of the global economic order and America's central role in international finance. In addition to the obvious economic and geopolitical benefits to the US, America is also [able use its unique position to leverage](#) access to its capital markets, which makes tools such as economic sanctions so impactful. Putin seeks to disrupt this system and weaken America's hand.

**Putin's Payout: Trump is eagerly pushing for an all-out trade war with Europe.**

- **Trump has [imposed tariffs](#) on steel and aluminum imports.** In what can only be interpreted as an effort to disrupt the economic strength of a united Europe, the tariffs began a rapidly escalating trade war with US allies after months of economic threats against Western Europe.
- **Trump has [publicly threatened](#) to impose tariffs on European cars.** The EU has [responded](#) with targeted sanctions on American goods, including Harley-Davidson Inc. motorcycles, bourbon, and around 200 additional categories, including corn, cigarettes, cosmetics, and steel.
- **Trump [ended](#) negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP).** This was a trade partnership focused on [decreasing](#) barriers to trade between the US and EU countries. After he was elected, Trump [froze](#) the talks and lashed out at the EU for their "[very unfair](#)" trade policies.
- **Trump [threatened](#) the EU with sanctions after pulling out of the Iran deal.** Not only has the Trump administration created a divide with European leaders by violating the nuclear agreement with Iran, considered one of the EU's greatest foreign policy accomplishments, the Trump administration also [threatened to impose sanctions](#) on European companies that do business in Iran under the conditions of the agreement.
- **Trump wants to leave the World Trade Organization.** [Trump has](#) "repeatedly told top White House officials he wants to withdraw the United States from the World Trade Organization," which he believes was "designed by the rest of the world to screw the United States."

**4) Putin's Goal: Build global resentment and distrust towards the US and stoke anti-Americanism.**

Putin sees the US as Russia's geopolitical foe. Therefore, undermining the US's reputation abroad advances Russia's interests. As the US and its allies have become increasingly critical of each other, longstanding partnerships based on shared values have been strained. This leaves Russia poised to create new, more transactional alliances with other Western nations.

**Putin's Payout: America's closest allies are explicitly suspicious and distrusting of the US because of Trump's rhetoric and actions.**

- **Both Germany and Canada have implied that American global leadership is over.** The day after the May 2017 NATO summit in Brussels, Merkel told a crowd in Germany that it could no longer rely on the transatlantic relationship, [saying](#), "The times in which we could rely fully on others—they are somewhat over. This is what I experienced in the last few days. We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands." Trump's decision to impose tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminum prompted Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau [to label](#) it "a turning point in the Canada-US relationship." Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland also gave a speech

where she thanked the United States for its long stewardship of the international system during the post-war era, implicitly [suggesting](#) that this leadership is now over.

- **Germany is developing an “America strategy” to cope with changes in its relationship with the US.** [Last year](#), the German Foreign Office reportedly began working on the first-ever America strategy, with the goal of producing a strategic document along the lines what Germany traditionally develops with respect to its adversaries like Russia.
- **Trump refused to endorse the joint statement issued at the end of the 2018 G7 summit in Canada.** After Trudeau publicly [stated](#) that Canada would have no choice but to retaliate against US tariffs, Trump [tweeted](#), “Based on Justin [Trudeau]’s false statements at his news conference, and the fact that Canada is charging massive tariffs to our U.S. farmers, workers and companies, I have instructed our U.S. Reps not to endorse the Communique as we look at Tariffs on automobiles flooding the U.S. Market!”
- **Tensions with France have risen.** After Trump refused to sign the G7 communiqué, President Macron’s office said in an [official statement](#) that “international cooperation cannot depend on fits of anger or little words,” pledging to stand behind the final G7 communiqué.
- **Anti-Americanism is increasing.** Trump’s presidency has impacted America’s influence in Western Europe, as international confidence in the president [fell from 64%](#) during former US President Barack Obama’s final years to 22% at the beginning of Trump’s term. Out of more than 35 countries polled, only Russia and Israel [showed higher confidence](#) in the presidency under Trump. Current polling numbers on international opinions of the US resemble those during 2008, when opposition to the Iraq War [strained](#) transatlantic relationships.
- **European leaders are reaching out to Russia.** Meanwhile, European leaders have pivoted their focus to Russia, with European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker [calling to](#) “re-establish” contact with Russia. French President Macron also [met with Putin](#) in May 2018.

##### **5) Putin’s Goal: Relieve economic and domestic political pressure from US sanctions on Russia.**

American and European sanctions against Russia have [seriously damaged](#) the Russian economy and have personally impacted the Russian officials on whom Putin’s support depends. Putin’s 2015 national security strategy explicitly [stated](#) the goal of creating a “favourable external environment that would allow Russia’s economy to grow steadily and become more competitive;” sanctions repeal would be a necessary step towards achieving this goal.

##### **Putin’s Payout: Trump tries to roll back, impede, and blunt the impact of sanctions at every step.**

- **Trump immediately tried to repeal Obama-era sanctions.** Upon entering the White House, [Trump officials tasked](#) the State Department with developing a plan to lift existing sanctions against Russia, return diplomatic compounds from which the Obama administration had expelled Russian diplomats in retaliation for the Kremlin’s interference in the 2016 election, and implement additional steps to placate Moscow.
  - These efforts alarmed State Department officials, who [immediately began lobbying](#) congressional leaders to pass legislation to block the move.
  - State Department Sanctions Coordinator Ambassador Dan Fried [reportedly](#) grew so concerned that he contacted allies on Capitol Hill to urge them to quickly pass legislation that would “codify” Obama-era sanctions, making it difficult for Trump to lift them.
- **Trump vigorously opposed Congressional sanctions legislation.** Congress did not share Trump’s eagerness to lift sanctions, and soon [put forward](#) the Countering America’s Adversaries Through



Sanctions Act (CAATSA), bipartisan legislation that enacted additional [sanctions](#) against Russia in response to Russia's meddling in the 2016 election. The Trump administration forcefully [lobbied against](#) the bill.

- After CAATSA [passed in both houses](#) with overwhelming majorities, Trump issued a [signing statement](#) opposing the bill, calling it “seriously flawed” and suggesting that sections of the legislation are unconstitutional.
- Trump has continued to resist the new sanctions on Russia. In April 2018, US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley [stated](#) that the administration would shortly announce sanctions against Russia in response to Russian actions in Syria. The White House immediately walked these comments back, [stating](#) that Trump had not signed off on any new Russia sanctions, and would not without any new triggering event.
- **Trump failed to properly implement sanctions legislation.** The Trump administration [delayed](#) sanctions implementation and missed a key implementation deadline, which it ultimately only met after intervention by congressional leaders. The Trump administration also made a mockery of an important report on Russian oligarchs [required](#) by CAATSA, originally [intended](#) to map out a network of Russian oligarchs and regime insiders.
  - Those placed on this list could face significant sanctions, including having their visas banned and US-based assets frozen. Despite serious work by career officials to develop the required list, the administration instead released a list that [was](#) simply copied from the *Forbes* ranking of the wealthiest Russians and Russian government websites. The lack of methodology combined with the broad scope of inclusion essentially made the list pointless: a list where everyone is included means no one is included.
  - CAATSA also [required](#) the Treasury Department to write a report outlining the impact of additional sanctions on Russian sovereign debt and derivatives. The goal was to preempt future attempts to meddle in the 2016 election by outlining a “[nuclear option](#)” that would severely damage the Russian economy. Instead, the administration [released a report](#) concluding that imposing such sanctions would be too dangerous, thereby reassuring rather than deterring Russia.
- **The sanctions that were eventually announced were extremely limited.** The administration [sanctioned](#) five entities and nineteen individuals in March 2018 for their interference in the 2016 election, but because most of these individuals and entities were already under sanctions and/or had been previously been [indicted](#) by the Special Counsel, this round of sanctions was [meaningless](#). Early in April 2018, the Treasury Department finally issued new [sanctions](#) against seven Russian oligarchs and twelve companies they own or control, as well as seventeen Russian government officials. While the sanctions against these individuals were forceful, this round of sanctions was clearly incomplete. Although the administration [hinted](#) that more were to come, they have thus far failed to implement more sanctions directly targeting those responsible for the 2016 election interference or directly impacting Russia's energy or defense sector.
- **Trump has continued to advocate for Putin's views on US sanctions.** Following a meeting with Putin in Vietnam on the sidelines of the 2017 APEC conference, [Trump said](#), “People don't realize Russia has been very, very heavily sanctioned. They were sanctioned at a very high level, and that took place very recently. It's now time to get back to healing a world that is shattered and broken. Those are very important things. And I feel that having Russia in a friendly posture, as opposed to always fighting with them, is an asset to the world and an asset to our country,

not a liability.” This occurred while Trump was facing criticism at home for not implementing the sanctions legislation.

**6) Putin’s Goal: Legitimize his regime in the eyes of the world.** Russia's reputation on the world stage has [plummeted](#) in recent years. From the state-sponsored [doping scandal](#) during the Sochi Olympics, to the illegal annexation of Crimea from Ukraine and the resulting conflict, to Russia’s horrific human rights record, the rest of the world, and especially Western countries, have come to [view](#) Russia in a harsh light. Putin is now seeking to legitimize himself and his regime, in order to [preserve his sphere of influence](#) both domestically and internationally.

**Putin’s Payout: Trump repeatedly praises and defends Putin, lending the weight of the US presidency providing validation towards Putin’s cause.**

- **Trump praises Putin incessantly.** Trump has repeatedly praised Putin, [saying](#) Putin is “a leader” and [talking about](#) how he gets along well with Putin. Trump’s efforts to legitimize Putin extend beyond superficial compliments to substantive support, often contradicting the interests of the US and the advice of Trump’s own national security staff.
- **Trump has defended and validated Russia’s malign activity, equating it with American behavior.** When conservative Fox News commentator Bill O’Reilly [questioned](#) Trump about his respect for Putin in February 2017, noting that Putin is a “killer,” Trump [replied](#), “There are a lot of killers. We have a lot of killers. Well, you think our country is so innocent?” When [questioned](#) about criticism over Putin’s often brutal methods of dealing with his opposition in 2015, Trump mirrored Putin’s own accusation against the US, asserting that America “does plenty of killing also.”
- **Trump validated Putin’s fraudulent election by congratulating him.** In March 2018, Putin was [reelected](#) to his fourth term as president of Russia (his fifth term as the leader of Russia, including one term as Prime Minister). Like most elections under Putin’s rule, the 2018 election was not conducted [in accordance with international standards](#). Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny [was formally barred](#) from competing in the election and there were widespread allegations of [voter fraud](#) and election [violations](#).
  - Two days after the election, Trump spoke with Putin. In his briefing materials for the call, Trump’s national security staff explicitly [warned](#) him not to congratulate Putin on his victory because of its fraudulent and corrupt nature, even going as far as to reportedly write “DO NOT CONGRATULATE” in capital letters in his briefing material. Trump ignored the warning and offered Putin his [congratulations](#), following it up with discussions of a future meeting between the two leaders. Trump then [announced](#) to the world via Twitter that he had congratulated Putin.
- **Trump prioritizes Russia over US allies.** In May 2017, prior to the NATO summit, Trump met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and then-Russian Ambassador to the US Sergey Kislyak in the Oval Office. Trump reportedly told Lavrov and Kislyak that he had fired then-FBI Director James Comey, who he [called](#) a “nut job,” and told his guests that he “faced great pressure because of Russia. That’s taken off.” During the meeting, Trump also reportedly [leaked](#) highly classified information [from Israel](#) to his guests.

- Israel had not authorized the US to share the intelligence, which pertained to a Syrian bomb-making effort and was obtained, in part, through a cyber operation. As one [unnamed US official](#) put it, Trump “revealed more information to the Russian ambassador than we have shared with our own allies.” As a result of this, Israel [changed](#) its intelligence sharing protocols with America.
- No US press were allowed to attend the meeting. The only news outlet present was TASS, a [Russian state-owned agency](#). This was an inexplicable breach of protocol that allowed Russia to control the public’s access to the images and content of the meeting.

**7) Putin’s Goal: Revive Russia’s status as a great power and gain international recognition for its illegal seizure of Crimea.** Western leaders denounced Putin’s illegal 2014 [annexation](#) of Crimea, implementing sanctions that crippled Russia’s economy and expelling Russia from the G8. Putin has great incentive to push for international recognition of Crimea as Russian territory. This would serve to further legitimize his regime and his claim that he seeks to [reunite](#) territory that he and his supporters argue belong to Russia. Russia’s [2015 national security strategy](#) explicitly stated that one of the country’s goals is to “[consolidate] the Russian Federation’s position as a centre of influence in today’s world.” Russia has always been [obsessed with geopolitics](#) as they have struggled to become a world power; their “perennial quest for a strong state” is ever-present as Putin continually seeks to expand Russian influence west by maintaining and regaining control over former Warsaw Pact countries.

**Putin’s Payout: Trump publicly says that Crimea is part of Russia and calls for Russia to be welcomed back into the international community with no concessions.**

- **Trump called Crimea part of Russia.** Trump’s rhetoric on Crimea has been [shockingly similar](#) to Putin’s. At the June 2018 G7 summit in Canada, Trump [reportedly](#) told other G7 leaders that “Crimea is Russian because everyone who lives there speaks Russian.” In a public press conference, Trump, rather than blaming the Russian government for invading Crimea, [blamed Obama](#) for his perceived inability to prevent the Russian invasion. He made [similar comments](#) during the 2016 campaign.
- **Trump suggested that Russia be [readmitted](#) to the G7.** At the 2018 summit of international powers, Trump argued for Russia’s reinstatement, [saying](#), “we should have Russia at the negotiating table.” Trump claimed that allowing Russia to rejoin the organization would profit not just Russia but also the US, all G7 countries, and the world at large, eliciting [heavy resistance](#) from both US allies and lawmakers.
- **Trump attended a meeting with Putin with a list of concessions, and no other American was in the room.** Ahead of the 2017 G20 summit, Trump [instructed](#) his team to come up with possible concessions to offer at his first bilateral meeting with Putin. The plan to have a formal meeting with Putin, let alone to offer concessions, was met with [strong resistance](#) by State Department and NSC officials who feared it would signal acceptance of Russia’s interference in the 2016 election and the annexation of Crimea. Trump and Putin also held a second meeting during the G20, which was initially not disclosed, and [neither](#) his National Security Advisor Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster nor the Senior Director for Europe and Eurasia Fiona Hill, who has been a Putin critic, were present. Only the [Kremlin’s interpreter](#) was present for the meeting, which means that no other US official has a record of what occurred.

**8) Putin's Goal: Continue to sow discord in Western democracies and avoid repercussions for interfering in American and European elections.** In January 2017, the US intelligence community released [an assessment](#) concluding that "Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the US presidential election." Despite this unprecedented attack by a foreign adversary, the Trump administration has actively undercut the tools that America would use to respond to the attacks and defend against future ones.

**Putin's Payout: Trump dismisses Russian interference and has done nothing to prevent future meddling, putting him at odds with his own intelligence community.**

- **Trump believes Putin over his own intelligence community.** Trump has repeatedly called into question the conclusion of US intelligence community, even [explicitly saying](#) he believes Putin when he says no election interference occurred.
- **Trump hinders America's ability to combat Russian disinformation.** Despite the fact that the 2017 US [national security strategy](#) explicitly warned about Russian use of media "to undermine the legitimacy of democracies," the Trump administration has consistently undermined the US government's main tool for combatting Russian disinformation, the State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC).
  - GEC was [specifically](#) "tasked with countering Moscow's disinformation campaign." However, as of March 2018, none of the analysts spoke Russian, and a hiring freeze prevented GEC from hiring additional computer experts necessary to combat Russian disinformation campaigns. Although the State Department recently [announced](#) plans to hire Russian experts for GEC and to exempt it from the hiring freeze, there is still no [permanent head](#) of the center.
- **Trump has diminished America's cyber defenses and even proposed cyber cooperation with Russia.** While Russia deployed multiple cyber weapons against the US in the 2016 election, the Trump administration has limited the government's ability coordinate a coherent policy.
  - The State Department tried to [shutter](#) the office of the Office of Cybersecurity Coordinator until Congress intervened.
  - Former National Security Agency head Admiral Mike Rogers [stated](#) he had not been granted the authority by the White House to counter Russian cyber operations "where they originate."
  - Trump even [discussed](#) forming a "Cyber Security unit" with Putin when they met at the Hamburg G20 summit in July 2017.
- **Trump gutted the sanctions-coordination team.** The American government's primary tool to respond to Russian meddling has been applying sanctions, yet Trump has gutted the team responsible for implementing that policy.
  - In October 2017, the administration [shuttered](#) the State Department's sanctions office, eliminating the Coordinator for Sanctions Policy. The office was previously led by Ambassador Daniel Fried, one of the most senior and well-respected career foreign-service officers at the State Department and a former Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia.
  - Now the responsibilities of this office once led by a veteran diplomat with a five-person team have been moved to a [single](#) mid-level staff member who works on the topic part time.

**9) Putin's Goal: Soften America's adversarial stance on Russia.** For the past 70 years, the Republican Party was the party of Russia hawks, advocating a hard line against the Soviet Union and Russia on issues ranging from nuclear posture, human rights, missile defense, and NATO enlargement. These positions were not just vestiges of the Cold War era. In 2012, Mitt Romney, then the Republican Party's nominee for president, [famously asserted](#) that Russia was "without question our number one geopolitical foe."

**Putin's Payout: Trump is shifting the Republican Party's generations-long hawkish views on Russia.**

- **Trump shifted the 2016 RNC platform to Russia's benefit.** After Republican leaders spent years denouncing Obama's stance against America's "number one geopolitical foe," the Trump campaign edited the party's platform to be more conciliatory toward the Kremlin. Initially, a draft of the RNC platform [called for](#) "providing lethal defensive weapons" to Ukraine to combat Russian incursions. Trump adviser J.D. Gordon [intervened](#) on behalf of the [Trump campaign](#) to soften the [final language](#) and call for "providing appropriate assistance" to Ukraine.
  - Beginning in 2014, Republican lawmakers [vocally criticized](#) the Obama administration's refusal to provide lethal arms to Ukraine.
  - Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham [stated](#) that Putin's invasion of Ukraine "[demanded] more than additional empty rhetoric and threats of lowest-common-denominator sanctions."
  - Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell [blamed](#) Obama's "passive" foreign policy for creating an environment in which Putin knew he would not face any consequences for his acts of aggression.
  - Former House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Rogers [said](#) at the time, "Putin is playing chess and I think we are playing marbles."
  - With a three-word change, Trump successfully rolled back a crucial GOP criticism of Obama, radically shifting the RNC's platform from an aggressive stance towards Russia to a curiously weaker one.
- **Congressional Republicans embrace stronger ties between the US and Russia.** On July 3 and 4, 2018, a delegation of eight Republican lawmakers [traveled to Moscow](#) to meet with representatives of the Russian government, [including](#) Kislyak and multiple individuals under [US sanction](#). From Moscow, members of the congressional delegation [advocated](#) for better relations between the two countries.
- **Trump's constant campaigning on behalf of Russia appears to have had a lasting effect on the Republican electorate.** Recent polling has shown that these shifting views run deeper than anecdotal evidence.
  - According to a 2017 Gallup poll, Republicans' views on Putin [jumped](#) by a dramatic twenty points from 2015 to 2017, from a 12% favorable rating to 32%.
  - Polling from YouGov [shows](#) that Republicans who viewed Putin unfavorably "shrank from 51 percent in July 2014 to just 14 percent in December 2016."
  - According to *Politico*, fewer Republicans than Democrats [consider](#) Russia "a major national security risk."
  - A May 2017 poll [showed](#) that 49 percent of Republicans consider Russia an ally, despite clear evidence that Russia interfered in the 2016 election.

**10) Putin's Goal: Destabilize the US from within.** Russia seeks to sow political, cultural, and social divisions inside America, which the Kremlin views as a way to distract and weaken its adversaries. This is not a new strategy; Russia has [historically sought](#) to undermine rivals by stoking preexisting internal divisions.

**Putin's Payout: Trump attacks US institutions while driving divisive politics and eroding democratic norms.**

- **Trump has decried the press as the “enemy of the people.”** Since taking office, Trump has taken an incredibly [hostile stance](#) toward the press, denouncing journalists as “the enemy of the American people” and popularizing the term “fake news” to demean credible institutions like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and CNN. This is the same [type of language](#) that is used by [dictators](#) around the world.
- **Trump has publicly defended neo-Nazis and repeatedly used racially-charged rhetoric.** Following the August 2017 white nationalists’ march in Charlottesville that resulted in the death of one counter-protester, [Trump said](#) the white nationalists included some “very fine people,” compared the removal of Confederate monuments those of Founding Fathers, and said that the counter-protesters deserve an equal amount of blame for the violence. He has [repeatedly decried](#) African-American athletes who protest against police brutality during the performance of the National Anthem, disinviting members of the champion [Golden State Warriors](#) and [Philadelphia Eagles](#) over the subject. In November 2017, Trump [retweeted](#) three propaganda videos from a British hate group which falsely claimed to depict Muslim migrants attacking white citizens. When asked to defend the retweets, Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders [argued](#) that the veracity of the videos didn’t matter so long as the videos promoted Trump’s agenda.
- **Trump has actively instituted discriminatory policies.** The administration’s first major policy initiative was to deliver on the campaign [promise of a “Muslim ban,”](#) blocking entry into the US from several Muslim-majority countries. Trump has also [advocated](#) creating a database of Muslim citizens in the US. Finally, the Trump administration has [implemented](#) a “zero-tolerance” policy toward migrants from Central and South America, which resulted in thousands of children being separated from their parents at the southern border.
- **Trump has advanced conspiracy theories that undermine the democratic process.** Trump has repeatedly [asserted](#), with no evidence, that he only appeared to lose the popular vote in the 2016 election because millions of people voted illegally. He empaneled a commission to “investigate” his baseless allegations, only to [disband the group](#) in January 2018 when it proved unable to find significant evidence of voter fraud.
- **Trump has rejected and violated democratic norms and principles.** Trump’s political life has largely been defined as a deviation from the established norms and rules of democracy. After entering politics by repeatedly [advancing](#) the racist “birther” conspiracy alleging that Obama was not an American citizen, Trump spent his campaign repeatedly [advocating](#) for the investigation and imprisonment of his political opponent Hillary Clinton, which he has [continued to do](#) since becoming president. He has also claimed that he can [pardon himself](#) and anyone for any reason, thus declaring his power to be above the law; that the job of the Attorney General is [to protect the president](#); and that [he can](#) make immigration decisions with “no judges or court cases.”

- **Trump has lobbed political attacks against the Justice Department, intelligence agencies, and law-enforcement officers.** From advancing conspiracy theories about a [deep state](#) out to undermine his presidency, to [rejecting the findings](#) of the intelligence community's assessment of Russian interference, to his [attacking the FBI for its investigation into his associates](#), Trump has been feeding a narrative of distrust in American institutions.

## Even the Administration's "Strong" Actions on Russia Do Not Hold Up

Trump's defenders often point to two data points to argue that Trump has taken a strong stance against Russia: the decision to [provide lethal aid to Ukraine](#) and the White House's [condemnation](#) of Russia for the lethal nerve agent attack against Sergei Skripal by expelling 60 Russian diplomats and closing the Russian consulate in Seattle. However, upon closer scrutiny, it's clear that these actions amount to little more than posturing by the Trump administration. The few tangible consequences that did affect Russia appear to be the result of national security officials pushing through decisions.

### Lethal Aid to Ukraine

The Trump administration did eventually [approve](#) providing lethal aid to Ukraine. However, the context of the decision is important to keep in mind. The debate over lethal assistance during the Obama administration was largely over how Russia would interpret such assistance. When President Obama decided against providing lethal assistance, he did so [out of concern](#) that Russia would interpret such a move as a hostile, escalatory act, which could provoke Russia to intensify its military activities. Under Trump, however, Putin had every reason to interpret the White House's decision as neither hostile nor escalatory, given Trump's overall pro-Russian stance.

Furthermore, providing lethal assistance lost much of its military significance by the time the Trump administration made the decision. In 2014-2015, when the front lines of the conflict were constantly changing and there were fears that Russia would expand its invasion to other parts of Ukraine, a weapon like the anti-tank Javelin missile could have done significant damage to the Russian tanks that spearheaded Russia's counter-offensive against Ukrainian forces. By late 2017, the defensive lines had been established. While fighting is still fierce and ongoing, the conflict is considerably more stable and may be settling into another "frozen conflict" on Russia's periphery. The current low-intensity combat is [not defined](#) by battles involving heavy weaponry like tanks. The structure of the arms deal was also not as beneficial as it could have been. The weapons [reportedly](#) were not delivered on the line of conflict. Instead, they were to be stored in training centers in western Ukraine away from the combat and would be monitored by American soldiers, thus reducing access and [effectiveness](#). Finally, reporting in *The New York Times* [suggests](#) that the Ukrainian government ceased cooperating with Mueller's investigative team shortly after the Trump administration approved the sale of lethal weapons, [raising the possibility](#) that the decision was part of a quid-pro-quo arrangement to reduce the legal pressure on the president.

### Response to the Skripal Poisoning

In March 2018, Russia poisoned Sergei Skripal, a [former Russian spy](#) living in the United Kingdom. British authorities later determined that the chemical nerve agent used in the poisoning originated in Russia. This attack was described by British Prime Minister Theresa May [as an "unlawful use of force"](#) on British soil. Although then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was quick to follow in May's footsteps in denouncing Russia's involvement in the poisoning, the Trump White House initially [stayed](#) quiet, avoiding naming Russia as the likely perpetrator of the attack. When Trump finally spoke on the matter, he [initially](#)

wavered on Russia's involvement, saying "it sounds to me like they believe it was Russia," and adding, "if we agree with them [the UK], we will condemn Russia or whoever it may be." Trump's rhetoric here undermined the transatlantic alliance by calling Britain's assertion into doubt and refusing to immediately back them up in condemning Russian actions. Eventually, White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders did release a [statement](#) naming Russia as the perpetrator.

By then, however, the global reaction had grown from statements to action: More than 20 countries [expelled](#) over 100 Russian diplomats as a result of the poisoning. As part of this international response, the Trump administration expelled 60 Russian diplomats and closed the Russian consulate in Seattle. These actions were overseen by the then-National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster the same week the president announced McMaster would be leaving (the administration also announced the most significant election-tampering sanctions to date on McMaster's last week in office). This decision appeared to contradict Trump's reported demand that the US "match [the] numbers [of expelled diplomats]" of its European allies. "We're not taking the lead," Trump insisted, "We're matching." When the US did finally announce its expulsion of 60 officials, Trump was [reportedly furious](#) that France and Germany were each only expelling four Russian diplomats and that the US appeared to be more forward-leaning in its response than its European partners.

## Conclusion

Since the very beginning, the Trump White House has demonstrated a clear and consistent pattern of behavior towards Russia, helping to fulfill many of Russian President Vladimir Putin's most important foreign policy objectives.

Trump's decisions have repeatedly benefitted Russian foreign policy goals often at the cost of his own country's priorities or the priorities of traditional US allies. This is despite the fact that Russia conducted an unprecedented political assault on America, an assault that is ongoing and continues to target American elections.

**This raises the question: Whose interests is Trump serving?**

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