

The Washington Post

Trump moves praise for Putin closer to the mainstream of the GOP

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September 9, 2016

After Donald Trump proclaimed this week that Russian President Vladimir Putin was a “stronger leader” than President Obama, many Republicans quickly condemned or distanced themselves from the remarks.

But by Friday it became clear that a significant number of Republicans agreed with him. Not for the first time, Trump has pulled an idea from the political fringes into the mainstream. His praise of Putin in particular — and a “strongman” style in general — has alienated some of the party’s most experienced foreign-policy hands while stoking no visible backlash from its voters.

When confronted with Trump’s remarks, Indiana Gov. Mike Pence — Trump’s running mate and once a harsh critic of the Russian president while in Congress — said it was “inarguable” that Putin had been a stronger leader than Obama. Rep. Marsha Blackburn (Tenn.), an outspoken Trump backer on Capitol Hill, said the candidate “may be playing it very smart” by feeding Putin’s ego.

And Hugh Hewitt, a conservative radio host who helped moderate several primary debates, went on MSNBC and Twitter on Friday to **label Putin** an “evil man” who had nonetheless “served his country’s national interest better” than the sitting U.S. president had served his. The atmosphere is a far cry from four years ago, when Republicans rallied around GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney after he declared Russia to be the United States’ “number one geopolitical foe” and called Putin a thug.

“I am actually very grateful to him for formulating his position in a straightforward manner,” Putin responded then from Moscow.

Max Boot, a conservative policy analyst, former Romney national security adviser and author who plans to vote for Hillary Clinton, said that “there’s no precedent for what Trump is saying.”

“George McGovern was not running around saying, ‘What a wonderful guy Ho Chi Minh is!’ ” Boot said. “It’s never been the view of one of the leaders of our two dominant parties that an anti-American foreign leader was preferable to our president.”

Trump, who has spoken about business dealings in Russia but remained opaque on what they are, is not the only American politician who has noted Putin's political skill. Since Russia's 2014 conquest of the Crimean Peninsula, mainstream foreign-policy conservatives have described Putin as an opportunist taking advantage of the Obama administration's weakness.

"The reason Putin went into Crimea and eastern Ukraine is that he saw President Obama wouldn't take action," Sen. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said in a recent interview with pro-Trump radio host Laura Ingraham. "What Trump is saying, that we need to negotiate with him from a position of strength, is absolutely true."

Yet Trump goes further than many Republicans. In his telling, Putin — a "strong leader" — epitomizes how any serious president should position his country in the world. Knowingly or not, Trump builds on years of wistful, sometimes ironic praise of Putin as a swaggering, bare-chested autocrat.

"Bare-chested Putin gallops his horses, poses with his tigers, and shoots his guns," wrote National Review's Victor Davis Hanson in a 2014 column. "Barack Obama, in his increasingly metrosexual golf get-ups and his prissy poses on the nation's tony golf courses, wants to stay cool while playing a leisure sport."

Since then, Putin has become a more active adversary — and more popular among Republican voters. In a 2014 Quinnipiac survey, when asked whether each president had "strong leadership qualities," more Republicans applied that sentiment to Putin (57 percent) than Obama (49 percent). At the time, an Economist-YouGov poll found Republicans viewing Putin more negatively than positively by a 66-point margin. This year, when YouGov posed the question again, the negative margin had dwindled to 27 points.

Trump's praise of Putin appears to have played a role in the shift.

"Of all the damage Trump can do to the American conservative movement, making it pro-Putin rather than pro-freedom could be the most serious," Weekly Standard editor and avowed Trump foe Bill Kristol tweeted Friday morning.

An example of what Kristol fears came later Friday at a Washington news conference meant to introduce reporters to leaders of the "alt right," the white nationalist movement that has rallied around Trump's candidacy. National Policy Institute head Richard Spencer said that Russia is "the sole white power in the world" and that Putin defends its interests in a way Americans should be ready to understand.

Trump's relationship with Putin and his warm views toward Russia, which can be traced back to the 1980s when the country was still part of the Soviet Union, have flared repeatedly throughout his campaign, and a number of current and former aides have had business dealings with Moscow or its allies.

"Certainly, in that system, he's been a leader, far more than our president has been a leader," Trump said of Putin at a forum sponsored by NBC on Wednesday night.

Then on Thursday, Trump criticized U.S. foreign policy and the U.S. press corps during an interview on RT America, a network funded by the Russian government.

Clinton, who has attracted growing support from Republican foreign-policy names disgusted with Trump, slammed the GOP nominee Friday for his “unseemly identification with and praise of the Russian president, including on Russian television.”

“It’s not a serious presidential campaign,” Clinton said at a news conference. “And it is beyond one’s imagination to have a candidate for president praising a Russian autocrat like Vladimir Putin and throwing his lot in with him.”

But while Democrats see an opportunity, they are also hamstrung by their past and their present. When Romney labeled Russia the nation’s No. 1 enemy, Obama and his reelection campaign mocked him as reliving the Cold War. When Democrats spot a Russian hand in damaging hacks of party emails, they are pilloried by some conservatives and pro-transparency voices who see a politically advantageous flip-flop.

Many establishment-aligned Republicans are baffled by what has happened.

“I don’t get all the Putin love here,” former Florida governor Jeb Bush told reporters this week in Fort Wayne, Ind., where he was giving a speech about leadership. “He’s a dictator. He’s a forceful leader because he can do whatever he wants. That doesn’t make him an effective leader or someone to praise.”

Gene Healy, the vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute and the author of “**The Cult of the Presidency**,” was hopeful that Republican affinity for strongmen would subside after the election.

“It’s not just the Putin crush: There’s something warped about a guy who gets giddy about how efficiently Kim Jong Un knocked off his rivals, like he’s admiring a scene from ‘**Scarface**,’” Healy said, referring to earlier remarks by Trump. “But I can’t say that I’ve noticed renewed longing for strong leaders from the right. Just the opposite: Mainstream conservatives are hoping the Trump candidacy is the ‘rock bottom’ Americans need to hit before we can finally admit we have a problem, like the junkie who has a grim epiphany after raiding his mother’s purse.”