

Kremlin Officials Wishing for a Trump Victory — While Claiming Otherwise

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Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin. **Lukas Coch / EPA / TASS**

Russia's leadership is following the U.S. presidential campaign in private with excitement and interest — and are rooting for their favorite candidate, Donald Trump, to win, three government and presidential administration officials, three Foreign Ministry officials, former officials and two sources from Russia's business elite told The Moscow Times.

Officials in the Kremlin, the government and the Russian establishment hope that Trump — whose 2016 election victory was tainted with allegations of Russian meddling — will unseat President Joe Biden, one of Ukraine's staunchest backers during Russia's full-scale invasion of the country.

All of The Moscow Times' sources agreed to speak on condition of anonymity, citing concern for their careers for speaking publicly about private political matters.

Last week's debate — especially Biden's [faltering performance](#) — has given Russian hawks and pragmatists alike a reason to feel optimistic, The Moscow Times' sources said.

At the same time, the Kremlin is receiving private warnings from Russian consultants — and public warnings from experts — that Trump's potential return to the presidency could lead to even more unexpected trouble for Moscow.

“The Kremlin is cheering for Trump and is happy about the outcome of the debate,” a person close to the presidential administration leadership told The Moscow Times.

Several Russian government officials voiced similar sympathies.

"Moscow sees favorable prospects in the scenario of Trump and a new Republican administration coming to the White House," a government official told The Moscow Times.

"There are expectations of some sort for Trump. And many think he is likely to win so far," a Russian businessman who has ties to senior Kremlin and government officials told The Moscow Times.

Many officials said they were keen to watch the latest debate as it happened.

"I had insomnia, so I managed to watch it live," said a former Russian government official.

Others watched it the next day out of curiosity, the ex-official learned from his former colleagues.

"I hardly know anyone like me who likes to stay up at 4 a.m.," he said. “But many watched it on YouTube later.”

The Kremlin said that President Vladimir Putin did not watch the Biden-Trump debate, and that it would check out what each candidate said at a later date.

"This is an internal U.S. matter. We have a lot of issues that are really important for our country. These are the issues that the president is dealing with," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov [told](#) reporters. “I don't think that you can expect the Russian president to set his alarm, wake up at dawn and watch the debate in the United States.”

Moscow is making a concerted effort to downplay the significance of the U.S. election in officials' public statements, one current Foreign Ministry official said.

"In our public statements, we aim to emphasize that the U.S. elections are not important to Russia. Our task is to downplay the importance of the U.S. elections," the official said.

But behind closed doors, the Kremlin, the Foreign Ministry, and Russia's intelligence agencies are closely analyzing the election.

"Officials and diplomats are monitoring both the debates themselves and the reaction to them in the U.S. and elsewhere," Boris Bondarev, a former member of Russia's delegation to the UN in Geneva who quit in protest of the invasion of Ukraine, told The Moscow Times.

“In general, the open transparent politics in the U.S. compared to Russia gives a huge amount

of information," he added.

When speaking about the upcoming U.S. election, Putin has stressed that Moscow has no preference for who wins and is ready to work with whoever U.S. voters choose.

In 2016, Trump's victory over Hillary Clinton triggered an investigation into alleged Russian interference aimed at swaying the vote in Trump's favor.

Eight years later, in February 2024, Putin [said](#) that he believed Russia could benefit from a Biden victory.

"When Putin said he supported Biden, he was not joking," a former senior Kremlin official told The Moscow Times. "He was trying to deliberately damage the current U.S. president, realizing how this kind of 'support' would be perceived in the States, especially in the current climate."

Russian state and pro-Kremlin media have also relished in the details of the recent debate, criticizing the age and quality of both contenders' performances as well as the U.S. electoral system in general.

The main news programs and political shows at the end of last week, hosted by leading pro-war propagandists Vladimir Solovyov and Dmitry Kiselyov, [devoted](#) considerable time to discussing the U.S. presidential debate.

While both candidates were criticized, it was Biden who received the lion's share.

"Biden expectedly misspoke multiple times and stammered. Democrats have already called his performance a failure," the state-run RIA Novosti news agency wrote.

"Propaganda tries to use every opportunity to assert itself publicly — at the expense of American elections in general and the Democratic Party's troubles in particular," the Foreign Ministry official said.

Putin has always placed a high value on comfort with his counterparts during his presidency. But the longer he has been in the Kremlin and the older he gets, this element has become increasingly important to him, according to three current and two former Russian diplomats who have personally traveled with Putin as part of a delegation.

"Psychologically, it will be easier to build communication with Trump than with Biden. Biden has already said a lot of things about Putin — that he is a murderer, a war criminal, etc.," the current Russian diplomat said.

"After all this, it is difficult to take a modest first step toward dialogue. Trump doesn't have these limitations in this sense," he said.

However, there are other aspects beyond the comfort of face-to-face communication, experts say.

Trump's main advantage for Moscow is his openness to negotiations with Russia and to compromise, and his greater willingness than Biden to make bold decisions when seeking a

settlement, said Dmitry Suslov, deputy director of the Center for Comprehensive European and International Studies at Moscow's Higher School of Economics.

The disadvantage of a Trump presidency for Moscow, according to Suslov, is that the Republican candidate shows a high tolerance for the risks of escalation and a greater willingness to go for forceful solutions — a recipe for potential disaster in the war in Ukraine.

"In the conditions of hybrid warfare, a counterpart that is less willing to escalate, such as Biden, is more reliable," Suslov told *The Moscow Times*.

Trump's appeal to the Kremlin lies in his "poorly concealed sympathy for dictators in general and Putin in particular," ex-diplomat Bondarev said.

In addition, because of his view of politics as business and his apparent disregard for geopolitics, Trump does not see Russia as economic competition like he does with China.

"Trump will be interested in rapprochement with Moscow and detaching it from Beijing. It will be possible to bargain for a lot of different bonuses," Bondarev said.

At the same time, the Kremlin also sees how it could benefit from a Biden victory, according to Bondarev.

"[Since] Biden is clearly not in good condition and this weakens his position, and therefore increased aid to Ukraine and any real escalation on the part of the U.S. becomes less likely, given the experience," Bondarev said.

Though some experts were skeptical that Trump's return would benefit the Russian government, a former high-ranking Kremlin official told *The Moscow Times* "Trump's comeback promises a lot of opportunities for the Kremlin. But maybe not as much as the Kremlin would hope to get."

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