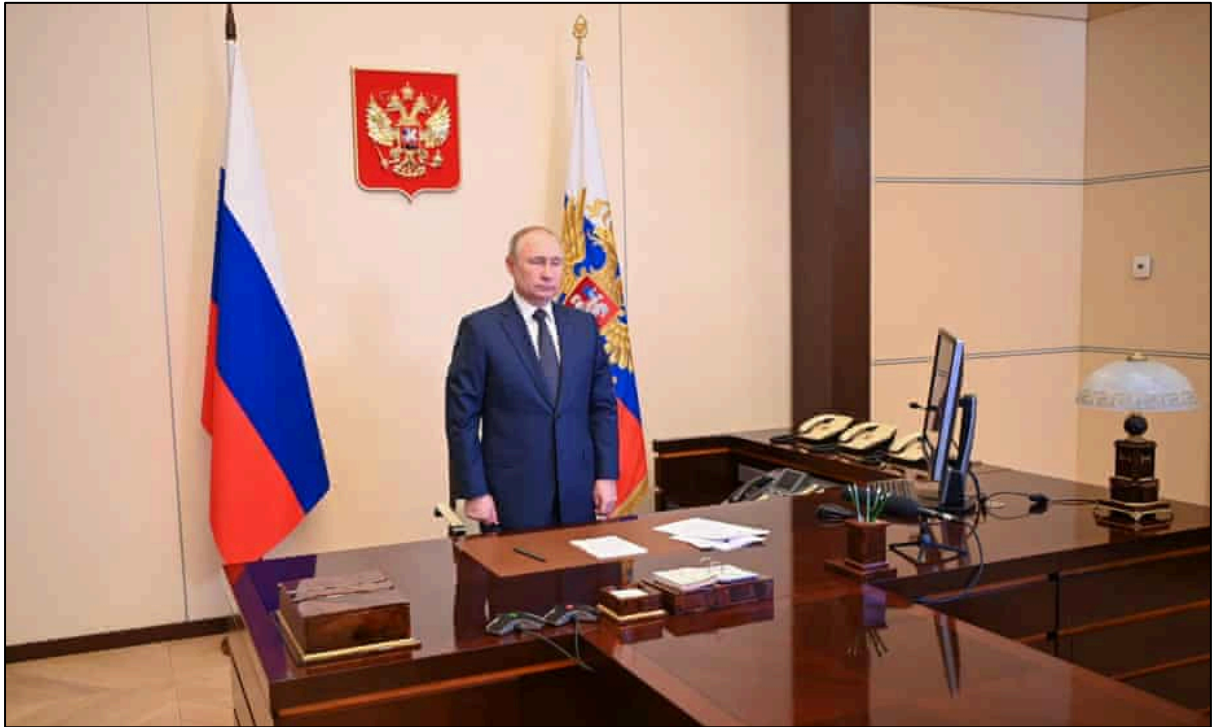


## **‘Key to white survival’: how Putin has morphed into a far-right savior**

*The Russian president’s ‘strong man’ image and disdain for liberals has turned him into a hero for white nationalists*



*Putin is now seen as the upholder of traditional Christianity.*

**Sergio Olmos**  
Sat 5 Mar 2022

“Can we get a round of applause for Russia?” asked Nick Fuentes, on stage last week at a white nationalist event. Amid a roar of applause for the Russian president, just days after he invaded Ukraine, many attendees responded by shouting: “Putin! Putin!”

It would be easy to dismiss the America First Political Action Conference (AFPAC) in Orlando, Florida, as a radical fringe. But speeches by two Republican members of Congress – one in person, the other via video – guaranteed national attention and controversy.

The backlash showed how the war in Ukraine has exposed the American far right’s affinity with Putin. That affinity is complicated by the tortured relationship between Russia and former president Donald Trump, whose rise Moscow supported with a covert operation to undermine US democracy.

Fuentes, a notorious antisemite, created AFPAC to coincide with the more mainstream Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), where Trump was the headline speaker last Saturday.

At AFPAC, Fuentes introduced the Georgia congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, who would this week interrupt the State of the Union address, rising to yell “Build the wall!” as an objection to Joe Biden’s immigration policy. But here she did not interrupt to object to the chanting of the Russian president’s name.

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*Jared Holt*

“I don’t believe anyone should be canceled,” Taylor Greene told the attendees of the white nationalist conference. She lashed out at a wide range of topics from Marxism to cancel culture but avoided the invasion of Ukraine, saying even less on the topic than Russian state media.

Devin Burghart, executive director of Institute for Research & Education on Human Rights, said: “In the world of the white nationalists, you are seeing a lot of support for Putin, as expressed by the cheerleading at AFPAC over the weekend.”

Others agree, pointing to a shared socially and culturally conservative ideology, disdain for democratic systems and appreciation for a “strong man” form of government. There was also the fact that it was the current Ukrainian government whom Trump attempted – and failed – to bribe to investigate his political rival Biden: actions which led to his first impeachment.

Jared Holt, a domestic extremism researcher with the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab, said: “When Russia invaded Ukraine, large parts of the far right were supportive.”

“The common thread is this idea that because of western European and US influence on Ukraine, Ukraine was a place where the same perceived downfalls of western society existed and Putin embodying a strong man authoritarian-type figure stepping in and inflicting suffering on Ukraine was viewed in a positive light.”

Fuentes is certainly the real deal of white nationalism. He attended the deadly “Unite The Right” rally in 2017 and was recently subpoenaed over his involvement in the pro-Trump insurrection on January 6 2021. He now carries on that effort with AFPAC, aiming to create a kind of far-right archipelago by bringing together white nationalists, fascists and Trumpist crowds talking only to each other in their own islands.



*Nicholas Fuentes flanked by anti-vaccine protesters at a demonstration in New York.*

The three-year-old conference sees itself as part enfant terrible, piquing the genteel wing of the Republican party, and part Weimar-era beer hall organizing before the putsch. It is far right, but no longer on the fringe of Republican politics.

Taylor Greene was condemned by some in her own party for speaking at AFPAC but is unlikely to be disciplined. And she was not alone. The Arizona congressman Paul Gosar made a video address. A lieutenant governor from Idaho and state legislator from Arizona also spoke at the event, which also attracted figures such as Gavin McInnes, the founder of the violent extremist gang the Proud Boys, which currently has more than three dozen members under indictment for the insurrection.

This represents a disorienting shift for a Republican party once staunchly opposed to communism and the Soviet Union, which President Ronald Reagan dubbed “the evil empire”. But Trump, who in 2015 ran for president promising to build a wall and impose a Muslim ban, stoked the party’s nativist elements.

And as America and the world grow more diverse, critics say, Russia has come to be seen as a beacon of salvation by white nationalists. In 2004 David Duke, a longtime leader of the Ku Klux Klan, described it as “key to white survival”. In 2017 Ann Coulter, a rightwing author and commentator, opined: “In 20 years, Russia will be the only country that is recognizably European.”

Researchers who monitor far-right groups agree that the moment of Putin enthusiasm in the US has intellectual underpinnings with deeper roots. Burghart said: “For almost a decade the work of Russian fascist Alexander Dugin has found a home in American white nationalist circles.”



*Donald Trump speaks during the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Florida.*

Dugin's ideology is steeped in Russian Christian nationalism and has chimed with Putin's world view. At the same time, it echoes much of the Christian nationalist activism in the US, where liberal values, gay rights and a desire to keep religion out of the state, are seen as decadent and responsible for American decline.

Burghart added: "There's an attraction to Putin's hardline authoritarian stand, his aggressive policies, they are attracted to his brand of traditional Christianity that Putin's expressed. Some have liked Putin's attacks on the Russian LGBTQ+ community."

On the eve of the Russian invasion, former Trump aide Steve Bannon hosted private security head Erik Princ, founder of the Blackwater military contracting group, on his popular War Room podcast. The two men – who are highly influential in Trumpist circles – praised Putin as "anti-woke".

After four years of praise for the Russian leader there's a large swath of the right that has internalized that message.

*Devin Burghart*

Bannon declared: "Putin ain't woke." Attacks on wokeness were also a constant thread running through CPAC, which this year had the official slogan: "Awake not woke."

The legacy of the Trump years shapes the perception of Putin among the right in the US as Trump demonstrated a clear affinity for the Russian leader, even as details emerged of the Russian attempt in the 2016 election to disrupt US democracy. Trump himself praised Putin as "genius" and "smart" as the invasion began only to change his tune later as the military action faltered and casualties mounted.

Even then, while condemning the assault, Trump told CPAC: “The problem is not that Putin is smart – which of course he’s smart – but the real problem is that our leaders are dumb.”

The same was true of America’s most popular conservative broadcaster, Fox News’ Tucker Carlson. Right up to the invasion Carlson was lambasting Ukraine as “not a democracy” and a puppet state of the US state department. He also praised Putin, saying: “Has Putin ever called me a racist? Has he threatened to get me fired for disagreeing with him? Has he shipped every middle-class job in my town to Russia?”

That sort of language – contrasting Putin favorably against Democrats on mainstream US television – has an impact.

Burghart commented: “After four years of praise for the Russian leader there’s a large swath of the right that has internalized that message. Some of the right have embraced Putin while others have been slow to denounce the invasion of Ukraine.”

Burghart says some extremist rightwing militias even see Ukraine as a potential scenario to discuss how to prepare for urban warfare and a future insurgency in the US itself. Instead of horror at the outbreak of brutal urban warfare, some US extremists are obsessed with the idea of a coming civil war in America.

“They see a societal collapse and need to prepare for an impending civil war, and their focus is on preparing for the battles of that here in the US,” Burghart added.