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[‘The Putin Interviews’ and the Kremlin’s Useful Idiot](#)



Oliver Stone just filmed another tribute to another dictator. Previous main parts of Stone documentaries have gone to Fidel Castro, Hugo Chavez, Yasser Arafat and others. This time it is Vladimir Putin in the leading role.

The 4-hour relationship between Putin and Stone seems to unfold smoothly on the screen. In general, there seems to be a strong rapport: Putin and Stone smile, laugh and exchange jokes; they generally find themselves in agreement with each other’s worldviews. Both seem to justify Russia’s latest aggressive actions in the world as its attempts to defend itself against the ambitious and destabilizing aggressiveness of the United States. Looking lovingly at Putin, Stone rarely poses him any tough questions, while always ensuring there is an easy way for Putin to respond. For example, rather than addressing criticisms regarding Russia’s lack of an independent parliament, media freedom and prosecution of the opposition one by one, Stone mixes these concerns altogether into one fuzzy question, providing Putin with a chance to calibrate his answer in any direction he likes. Stone’s inability to challenge Putin, and his ingratiating manner, is quite reminiscent of the approach used by Russia’s sycophantic media, and is particularly shocking during some episodes. A striking example of this was when Putin, an ex-KGB officer under whose reign the secret services have almost entirely [penetrated Russia’s state apparatus](#), says that “we [Russians] have a strong dislike of special services”, and Stone just nods in approval. In general, each of four 50-minute long videos spends less than 3 minutes to softly address some criticisms of Russia’s system and always provides Putin with a chance to fully reject these

allegations.

As result, Stone pictures Putin as a strong, perceptive, just and intelligent macho man, who is quite charming, competent, [knows world politics](#), and is rightly annoyed by American imperialism. Stone makes sure to back Putin's responses with anti-US video sequences streamed in the background to strengthen that perception.

"The Interviews" may be more instrumental for the Kremlin than it seems at the first sight. The filming started in summer 2015, around the time when the Kremlin realized a need to improve its western image damaged by the war in Ukraine. In "Comrade J: The Untold Story of Russia's Master Spy in America," an ex-Soviet spy Sergei Tretyakov explains how Russia's high-level spies typically work with their "contacts" in the west, making them assist the USSR in achieving its goals. These "useful idiots" did not necessarily realize that they were providing the Russians with useful information; many of them believed that they were exchanging information with an "ally." In the end, however, they promoted the interests of the Kremlin, and damaged their own country's interests. That is exactly the position Stone now finds himself in. Whether intentionally or not, "The Putin Interviews" will be used by the Kremlin for its own purposes.

The leitmotif of Russia's propaganda, in the [words of the head of RT](#) Margarita Simonyan, is that "There is no such thing as objective reporting". Any lie or falsification has an equal right to exist in the media alongside truthful and fact-checked statements. Such a principle always provides the lying party with a distinct advantage. Western media objectively reporting both sides of the story will have to repeat any fake assertion in order to be comprehensive, and public opinion will shift partially toward a false reality, as the audience typically [believes that](#) "there is no smoke without fire." Stone's series achieves just that. You may have heard the US intelligence community [announcing](#) that Putin ordered the cyberattack on the DNC emails, but when the movie shows a confident calm Putin rejecting that accusation as a complete lie, that might make the public indecisive on the issue or even likely to embrace the Kremlin's viewpoint - particularly if the audience is already predisposed to such beliefs.

Specifically in the United States, the show might play into the narrative of Putin's admirers given the country's polarization on the Russia issue. The Russia topic has been increasingly [dividing](#) Democrat and Republican voters in light of the ongoing investigation into [possible collusion](#) with the Kremlin by members of the Trump Administration. In a survey conducted this May, 74 percent of Democrats believed there was evidence of the Trump campaign colluding with Russia, while 80 percent of Republicans [thought no evidence of collusion existed](#). Over half of the Republicans [surveyed](#) called the investigations of collusion a political distraction that should be put aside. The issue is even more revealing when it comes to the attitudes of Republicans towards Russia: despite revelations of Russia's meddling in the US election, Republicans have been increasingly warming to Russia. In February 2017, 32 percent of Republicans viewed Putin positively (as opposed to 12 percent in 2015). The Republicans also felt much more positive about Russia than Democrats: 35 percent versus 16 percent, [respectively](#). In May 2017, 49 percent of Republican voters [said](#) they considered Russia an ally or friendly to the United States, up 11 points from a survey in late March.

Hence appeals to understand the Russian viewpoint may play into the current divide. And it does seem that Stone's movie drew more interest and positive coverage from the Conservative media, which [emphasized](#) Stone's [skepticism](#) regarding the allegations of Russia's interference in the US election, and criticized "[the Russophobia](#)" of the Democrats.

If this trend continues, the ongoing shift in public opinion might eventually allow the Trump Administration to "reset" America's relations with the Kremlin, and even abolish some of the sanctions. In other words, the Kremlin's propaganda goals would be achieved.

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