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Elon Musk's Secret Conversations With Vladimir Putin

Regular contacts between world's richest man and America's chief antagonist raise security concerns; topics include geopolitics, business and personal matters

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Elon Musk, the world's richest man and a linchpin of U.S. space efforts, has been in regular contact with Russian President Vladimir Putin since late 2022.

The discussions, confirmed by several current and former U.S., European and Russian officials, touch on personal topics, business and geopolitical tensions.

At one point, Putin asked the billionaire to avoid activating his Starlink satellite internet service over Taiwan as a favor to Chinese leader Xi Jinping, said two people briefed on the request.

Musk has emerged this year as a crucial supporter of Donald Trump's election campaign, and could find a role in a Trump administration should he win. While the U.S. and its allies have isolated Putin in recent years, Musk's dialogue could signal re-engagement with the Russian leader, and reinforce Trump's expressed desire to cut a deal over major fault lines such as the war in Ukraine.

At the same time, the contacts also raise potential national-security concerns among some in the current administration, given Putin's role as one of America's chief adversaries.

Musk has forged deep business ties with U.S. military and intelligence agencies, giving him unique visibility into some of America's most sensitive space programs. SpaceX, which operates the Starlink service, won a \$1.8 billion classified contract in 2021 and is the primary rocket launcher for the Pentagon and NASA. Musk has a security clearance that allows him access to certain classified information.





Elon Musk visits Capitol Hill in July. PHOTO: SAMUEL CORUM/BLOOMBERG NEWS

Knowledge of Musk's Kremlin contacts appears to be a closely held secret in government. Several White House officials said they weren't aware of them. The topic is highly sensitive, given Musk's increasing involvement in the Trump campaign and the approaching U.S. presidential election, less than two weeks away.

Musk didn't respond to requests for comment. The billionaire has called criticism from some quarters that he has become an apologist for Putin "absurd" and has said his companies "have done more to undermine Russia than anything."

During his campaign swing through Pennsylvania last week, Musk talked about the importance of government transparency and noted his own access to government secrets. "I do have a top-secret clearance, but, I'd have to say, like most of the stuff that I'm aware of...the reason they keep it top secret is because it's so boring."

A Pentagon spokesman said: "We do not comment on any individual's security clearance, review or status, or about personnel security policy matters in the context of reports about any individual's actions."

One person aware of the conversations said the government faces a dilemma because it is so dependent on the billionaire's technologies. SpaceX launches vital national security satellites into orbit and is the company NASA relies on to transport astronauts to and from the International Space Station.

"They don't love it," the person said, referring to the Musk-Putin contacts. The person, however, said no alerts have been raised by the administration over possible security breaches by Musk.

Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the only communication the Kremlin has had with Musk was over one telephone call in which he and Putin discussed "space as well as current and future technologies."

Apart from that, he said neither Putin nor Kremlin officials were holding regular conversations with Musk.

A spokeswoman for Trump's campaign called Musk "a once-in-a-generation industry leader" and said "our broken federal bureaucracy could certainly benefit from his ideas and efficiency."

"As for Putin," the spokeswoman continued, "there's only one candidate in the race that he did not invade another country under, and it's President Trump. President Trump has long said that he will re-establish his peace through strength foreign policy to deter Russia's aggression and end the war in Ukraine."



A SpaceX Falcon Heavy rocket with the Europa Clipper spacecraft aboard launches from NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral earlier this month. PHOTO: CHANDAN KHANNA/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

A bottle of vodka

Musk has long had a fascination with Russia and its space and rocket programs. Walter Isaacson's biography of Musk said the businessman traveled to Moscow in 2002 to negotiate the purchase of rockets for his fledgling space program, but passed out during a vodka-heavy lunch. The sale ultimately failed, though his Russian hosts gave Musk a bottle of vodka with his likeness superimposed on a drawing of Mars.

The billionaire's conversations with Putin and Kremlin officials highlight his increasing inclination to stretch beyond business and into geopolitics. He has met several times and talked business with Javier Milei of Argentina, as well as former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, whom he defended in an acrimonious online debate

update.

Putin is on a different order of magnitude. The Russian leader has created an authoritarian system that oversees fraudulent elections and the assassinations of political opponents, for which President Biden called him a “killer.” With keys to one of the world’s most powerful nuclear arsenals and growing territorial ambitions in Europe, Putin has become the U.S.’s chief antagonist.

Labeling him a “despot,” the Treasury Department took the unusual step in 2022 of blacklisting him for invading Ukraine, putting him in the same company with North Korea’s Kim Jong Un, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus.



Russia’s President Vladimir Putin shakes hands with U.S. President Donald Trump during a meeting on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Osaka, Japan, in 2019. PHOTO: SPUTNIK/REUTERS

In October 2022, Musk said publicly that he had spoken only once to Putin. He said on X that the conversation was about space, and that it occurred around April 2021.

But more conversations have followed, including dialogues with other high-ranking Russian officials past 2022 and into this year. One of the officials was Sergei Kiriyenko, Putin’s first deputy chief of staff, two of the officials said. What the two talked about isn’t clear.

Last month, the U.S. Justice Department said in an affidavit that Kiriyenko had created some 30 internet domains to spread Russian disinformation, including on Musk’s X where it was meant to erode support for Ukraine and manipulate

Musk's X, where it was meant to erode support for Ukraine and manipulate American voters ahead of the presidential election.

After the Russian invasion in February 2022, Musk at first made strong public statements of support for Kyiv. He posted “Hold Strong Ukraine,” flanked by Ukrainian flags on what was then still known as Twitter. Shortly after, he jokingly challenged Putin to one-on-one combat over “Україна,” the Ukrainian language name for the country.

He followed up by donating several hundred Starlink terminals to Ukraine. By July some 15,000 terminals were providing free internet access to broad swaths of the country destroyed by the Russian attacks.

Later that year, Musk's view of the conflict appeared to change. In September, Ukrainian military operatives weren't able to use Starlink terminals to guide sea drones to attack a Russian naval base in Crimea, the Black Sea peninsula Moscow had occupied since 2014. Ukraine tried to persuade Musk to activate the Starlink service in the area, but that didn't happen, the Journal has reported.

His space company extended restrictions on the use of Starlink in offensive operations by Ukraine. Musk said later that he made the move because Starlink is meant for civilian uses and that he believed any Ukrainian attack on Crimea could spark a nuclear war.



A Starlink unit on the front lines in Ukraine in 2023. PHOTO: REUTERS

His moves coincided with public and private pressure from the Kremlin. In May 2022, Russia's space chief said in a post on Telegram that Musk would “answer

—2022, Russia's space chief said in a post on Telegram that Musk would "grow up like an adult" for supplying Starlink to Ukraine's Azov battalion, which the Kremlin had singled out for the ultraright ideology espoused by some members.

Later in 2022, Musk was having regular conversations with "high-level Russians," according to a person familiar with the interactions. At the time, there was pressure from the Kremlin on Musk's businesses and "implicit threats against him," the person said.

At the same time, Musk increasingly took to Twitter, for which he was completing the purchase, to say SpaceX was losing money by funding the operation of the terminals.

In October 2022, he asked his tens of millions of followers on X to vote on a pathway to peace that mirrored some aspects of the Kremlin's offer to Ukraine at the time.

Those conditions included continued Russian occupation of Crimea and Ukrainian neutrality outside of NATO. He also specified that Ukraine should continue allowing the supply of water to Crimea, an issue that had been an important concern of the Kremlin before the war.

One current and one former intelligence source said that Musk and Putin have continued to have contact since then and into this year as Musk began stepping up his criticism of the U.S. military aid to Ukraine and became involved in Trump's election campaign.



Musk and Trump attend a campaign event in Butler, Pa., this month. PHOTO: ALEX BRANDON/

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‘Red lines’

In the fall of 2022, political scientist Ian Bremmer, founder of New York-based consulting firm Eurasia Group, wrote on Twitter that Musk had told him he had spoken with Putin and Kremlin officials about Ukraine. “He also told me what the Kremlin’s red lines were,” he wrote.

Bremmer wrote in a newsletter to subscribers that Musk had relayed to him a message from Putin that Russia would secure Crimea and Ukrainian neutrality “no matter what,” and that it would respond to a Ukrainian invasion of Crimea with a nuclear strike. Musk said that “everything needed to be done to avoid that outcome,” Bremmer wrote.

Musk has publicly denied he said any of those things to Bremmer.

In the past year, Musk and Russia’s interests have increasingly overlapped. Apart from Russia’s use of X for disinformation and Musk’s outspoken opposition to aid to Kyiv, Ukrainian officials said earlier this year that Russian forces occupying the country’s eastern and southern swaths had started using Starlink to enable secure communications and extend the range of their drones.

Russian troops also began using Starlink terminals, brought in through third countries, at a massive scale, undermining one of Ukraine’s few battlefield advantages. Musk has said on X that to the best of his knowledge, no terminals had been sold directly or indirectly to Russia, and that the terminals wouldn’t work inside Russia.

Pentagon officials have said the military was working with Ukraine and Starlink to address the issue, and described SpaceX as a great partner in those efforts. People familiar with the situation have said controlling who is using Starlink in Ukraine is difficult.

Starlink has said on X that when SpaceX learns of claims that unauthorized parties are using the service, it investigates and can cut off access.

Earlier this year, Musk gave airtime to Putin and his views on the U.S. and Ukraine when X carried Tucker Carlson’s two-hour interview with the Russian

leader inside the Kremlin. In that interview, Putin said he was sure Musk “was a smart person.”



Musk speaks at a town hall in Pittsburgh. PHOTO: MICHAEL SWENSEN/GETTY IMAGES

“There’s no stopping Elon Musk, he’s going to do what he thinks he needs to do,” Putin said. “You need to find some common ground with him, you need to search for some ways to persuade him.”

Late last year, the Kremlin first made the request of Musk to not activate Starlink over Taiwan, said a former Russian intelligence officer briefed on the situation. The request was done as a favor to China, he said, whom Russia was increasingly relying on for trade and to get around sanctions. A representative of the Chinese embassy in Washington said they weren’t aware of the specifics and couldn’t comment.

Starlink has never secured permission to offer internet service in Taiwan, whose government places restrictions on non-Taiwanese satellite operators.

Taiwan is currently listed as “coming soon” on a Starlink map of where it provides service.

As the year progressed, Musk became more preoccupied with the presidential election.

Through the first months of the year, Musk said he would refrain from backing any presidential candidate while at the same time holding private conversations

discussing how he could get Trump elected. Musk publicly endorsed him in July. The businessman said he planned to commit as much as \$45 million a month to a new super political-action committee in part to get it done, according to people familiar with the matter. The effort included hiring armies of canvassers to scour battleground states for voters.

Since then, Trump has said he intends to make Musk the head of a “government efficiency commission.” The two speak often.

—Micah Maidenberg and Tim Higgins contributed to this article.

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