

U.S. Debate Night: Trump and Harris Spar Over Russia and Ukraine

By [Mack Tubridy](#)

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Former President Donald Trump and Vice President Kamala Harris take to the debate stage. **Saul Loeb / AFP**

In their first and possibly last debate on Tuesday night, former President Donald Trump and Vice President Kamala Harris [faced off](#) in what has shaped up to be one of the most contentious U.S. presidential elections in recent memory. While domestic issues such as the cost of living crisis, immigration and abortion took center stage, the candidates' starkly different views on foreign policy, especially on the war in Ukraine, led to some of the night's most heated exchanges.

Just hours before the debate, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov [downplayed](#) any Russian interest in the event, saying "It's none of our business, it's the business of American voters." Those remarks came a week after Washington [accused](#) the Kremlin-funded RT news network of election interference, sanctioning 10 individuals and two entities connected to the outlet.

Harris: 'Dictators and autocrats are rooting for Trump'

Vice President Harris criticized Trump over his previous comments on Russia and President Vladimir Putin, whom he [has called](#) a “genius” and a “strong leader.” She argued that Trump had enabled the Kremlin leader during his time in the Oval Office, recalling Trump’s praise of Putin’s early moves in Ukraine.

“It is well known that he [Trump] said of Putin, ‘He can do whatever the hell he wants and go into Ukraine.’ When Russia went into Ukraine, he called it ‘brilliant.’ It is absolutely well known that these dictators and autocrats are rooting for you again to be president because they are so clear they manipulate you with flattery and favors,” Harris said.

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“I believe the reason Donald Trump says this war would be over within 24 hours is because he would just give it up. And that’s not who we are as Americans,” she said, referring to the former president’s [repeated claims](#) that he would be able to broker a swift end to the conflict if elected for a second term in office.

At the same time, Harris stressed the United States’ commitment to Ukraine under the Biden administration, crediting American military support as a key reason Ukraine continues to stand as a sovereign nation. “If Donald Trump were president, Putin would be sitting in Kyiv right now with his eyes on the rest of Europe, starting with Poland,” she said.

Trump: 'I'll end the war before I take office'

Trump slammed President Joe Biden’s handling of the war in Ukraine and claimed that, had he still been in office, Russia would never have launched its full-scale invasion. He said that he has a “good relationship” with both Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, which would be central to his ability to resolve the conflict swiftly. “They respect your president... They respect me,” he said.

“I’ll get the war with Ukraine and Russia ended — if I’m president-elect — I will get it done before even becoming president,” Trump said. He added that he believed peace could only be achieved through direct negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow. “I’ll speak to one, I’ll speak to the other, and I’ll get them together,” he said.

“Biden had no idea how to talk to him [Putin],” Trump added. “It’s only getting worse and it could lead to World War III... we’re playing with World War III.”

Trump also questioned U.S. financial commitment to supporting Ukraine’s military in the war, arguing that European allies were contributing far less than Washington. “We’re in for 250 billion [dollars] or more because they [the Biden administration] don’t ask Europe... Either you pay up, or we’re not going to protect you anymore.”

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When asked whether he wanted Ukraine to win the war, Trump appeared to sidestep the question, instead emphasizing the need to end the conflict and save lives. “I want the war to stop. I want to save lives... people being killed by the millions. It’s millions. It’s so much worse than the numbers you are getting which are fake numbers.”

“I think it’s the U.S.’s best interest to get this war finished. Just get it done. Negotiate a deal. Because we have to stop all of these human lives from being destroyed,” he said.

Fact-checks and accusations

Trump’s claim that “millions” have died in the Ukraine war is not supported by official estimates. A February 2024 [report](#) from the United Nations Human Rights Office states that, over two years of war, more than 10,000 Ukrainian civilians had been killed. Last August, The New York Times, citing U.S. officials, [reported](#) that combined troop losses for Moscow and Kyiv were around 500,000.

While Moscow has not issued statements about how many of its own civilians have died since the February 2022 invasion, unofficial [estimates](#) put the number at several hundred.

One of the more contentious moments came when Trump falsely claimed Harris had met with Putin just before the full-scale invasion to broker peace between Moscow and Kyiv. “They sent her to negotiate with Zelensky and Putin, and three days later, the war started,” he said.

Harris dismissed Trump’s accusation. In fact, while the vice president [did meet](#) with Zelensky at the Munich Security Conference shortly before the Kremlin ordered troops across the Ukrainian border, there was no meeting between Harris and Putin.

“I met with Zelensky a few days before Russia invaded, tried through force to change territorial boundaries,” Harris said. “I shared with him American intelligence so that he could defend himself.”

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Trump also reiterated long-standing allegations against President Biden and his son Hunter, claiming they had profited from business in Ukraine and Russia. “Why did he get three-and-a-half million dollars from the Mayor of Moscow’s wife?” Trump asked.

That accusation is based on a joint report by the Republican staff of the Senate Finance and Homeland Security committees, which claimed that Hunter Biden received a \$3.5 million wire transfer from Elena Baturina, the widow of former Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov.

Since the report was released in 2020, Trump has repeatedly weaponized the alleged wire transfer against Biden. However, according to [reporting](#) by The Washington Post, there is no evidence that either the U.S. president or his son were involved in the transactions, which concerned the purchase of real estate in Brooklyn, New York.

Ned Garvey contributed to this report.

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