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As Trump Woos Russia, Kremlin Shifts Blame to Europe

By AFP

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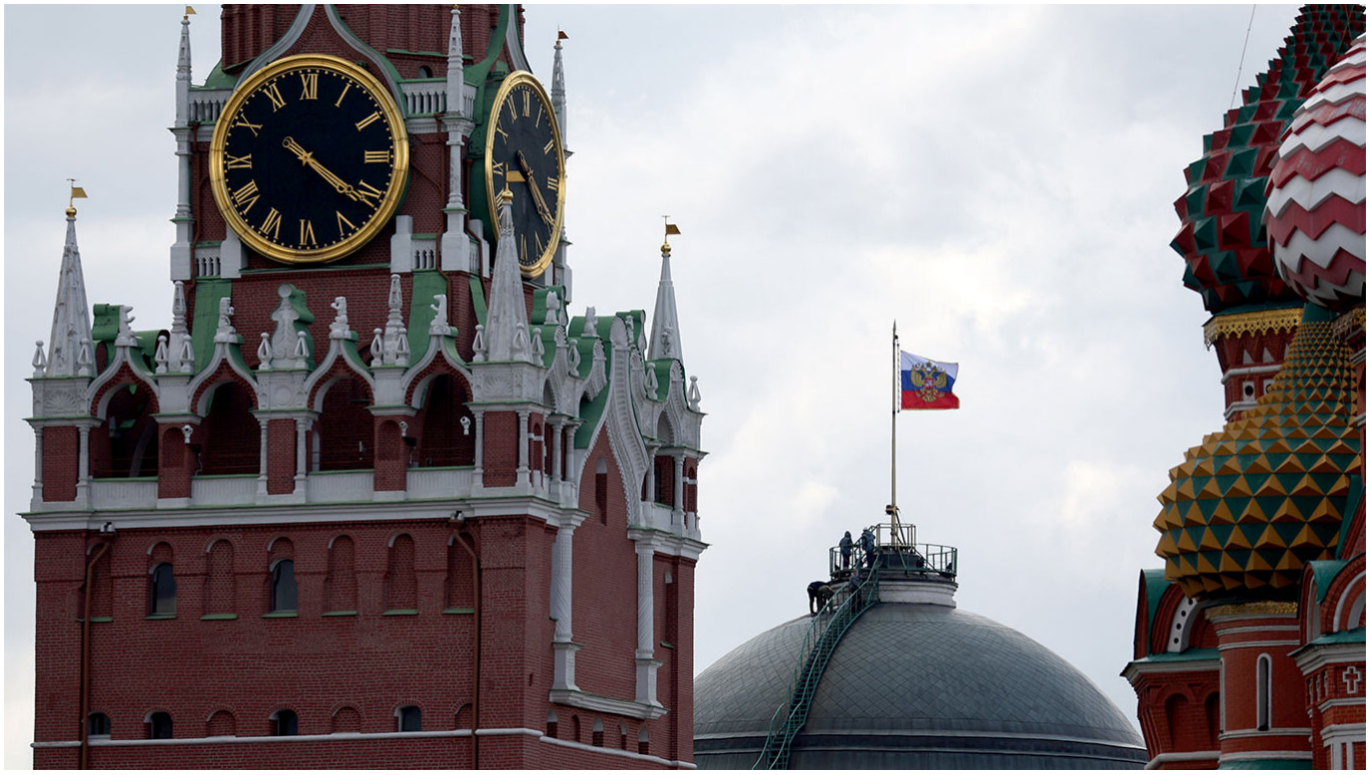

Sergei Bobylev / TASS

For three years, the Kremlin saw the United States as its biggest enemy, accusing U.S. President Joe Biden of prolonging the Ukraine conflict by supplying weapons to Kyiv.

But with U.S. President Donald Trump initiating a rapprochement with Moscow and halting support for Ukraine, the Kremlin is redirecting much of its anger towards European leaders who have stood by the embattled country.

Pro-Kremlin media and pundits have amplified Trump's criticism of Kyiv and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky while accusing Europe of wanting to "continue" the fighting.

And Russian President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov last week described Europe — not the United States — as being the main obstacle to peace in Ukraine.

"Europe is replacing the United States as a bogeyman in our propaganda, and will gradually

replace it in people's minds," independent analyst Konstantin Kalachev told AFP.

By shifting the blame away from the U.S. to Europe, Russia can keep its rallying cry of being encroached upon by a hostile West, he said — while opening the door to potential cooperation with the White House.

"Our people cannot live without the image of the enemy, without the image of the alien, hostile other," Kalachev said.

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Pro-Kremlin tabloid Komsomolskaya Pravda has in recent weeks glossed over Washington's traditional backing for Kyiv in favor of broadsides on U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer and French President Emmanuel Macron.

"Macron is on the march: Europe is ready to get into huge debts for the sake of war with Russia," one headline said.

"Peace is war: Starmer shares Britain's take on ending the Ukraine conflict," said another.

Meanwhile Alexander Dugin, an ultranationalist commentator dubbed "Putin's brain," said Wednesday that France had "declared war on Russia" after Macron described Moscow as a threat in a speech to the nation.

EU 'viewed worse' than U.S.

Recent polling shows this kind of messaging appears to be resonating with Russians, who have adopted a hostile attitude to European leaders while softening their stance on the U.S.

"We know from focus groups that Macron and (European Commission chief) Ursula von der Leyen are the face of Europe today, and the attitude towards them is bad," said Denis Volkov, head of independent pollster Levada Center — listed as a "foreign agent" by the Russian government.

"Not only did the attitude towards the US start to improve at the end of last year — we had about 15-16% [with a positive attitude] — today it is 30%," Volkov said.

"But the U.S. is now viewed better than the European Union, even though it had always been the other way around."

Only around 21% currently have a positive attitude towards the EU, he told AFP.

"It has never happened before that the EU is viewed worse than the U.S."

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Putin cited NATO expansion as one of the reasons for his full-scale invasion of Ukraine in

February 2022, accusing the U.S. of using the alliance to threaten Russia on its doorstep.

But Trump has since voiced support for this view, saying Ukraine can "forget" about joining NATO and blaming Ukraine and Biden for having "started" the fighting.

Trump 'like-minded'

European leaders including Macron and Starmer have stressed their support for Ukraine and taken steps to bolster their defense amid Trump's dramatic shift in foreign policy.

The reversal in U.S. foreign policy has surprised even the Kremlin, which is reported to have told state media outlets to temper their praise for the U.S. leader.

"This was really impossible to imagine," Peskov said last week after the U.S. twice sided with Russia at the United Nations.

On Thursday, he praised comments by U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio who referred to the Ukraine conflict as a "proxy war."

Peskov said the comments were "absolutely in line" with Kremlin thinking, adding: "We agree. That is how it is."

Kalachev said that while Moscow remains suspicious of Washington's intentions, many of Russia's elites view Trump as a "like-minded person."

"The speed with which our propagandists change their position is astonishing to a large part of the public," Kalachev said.

"But people's minds are malleable. And if necessary, they will be ready to believe that America is now our friend and ally, even if it ruins the usual picture of the world."

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