

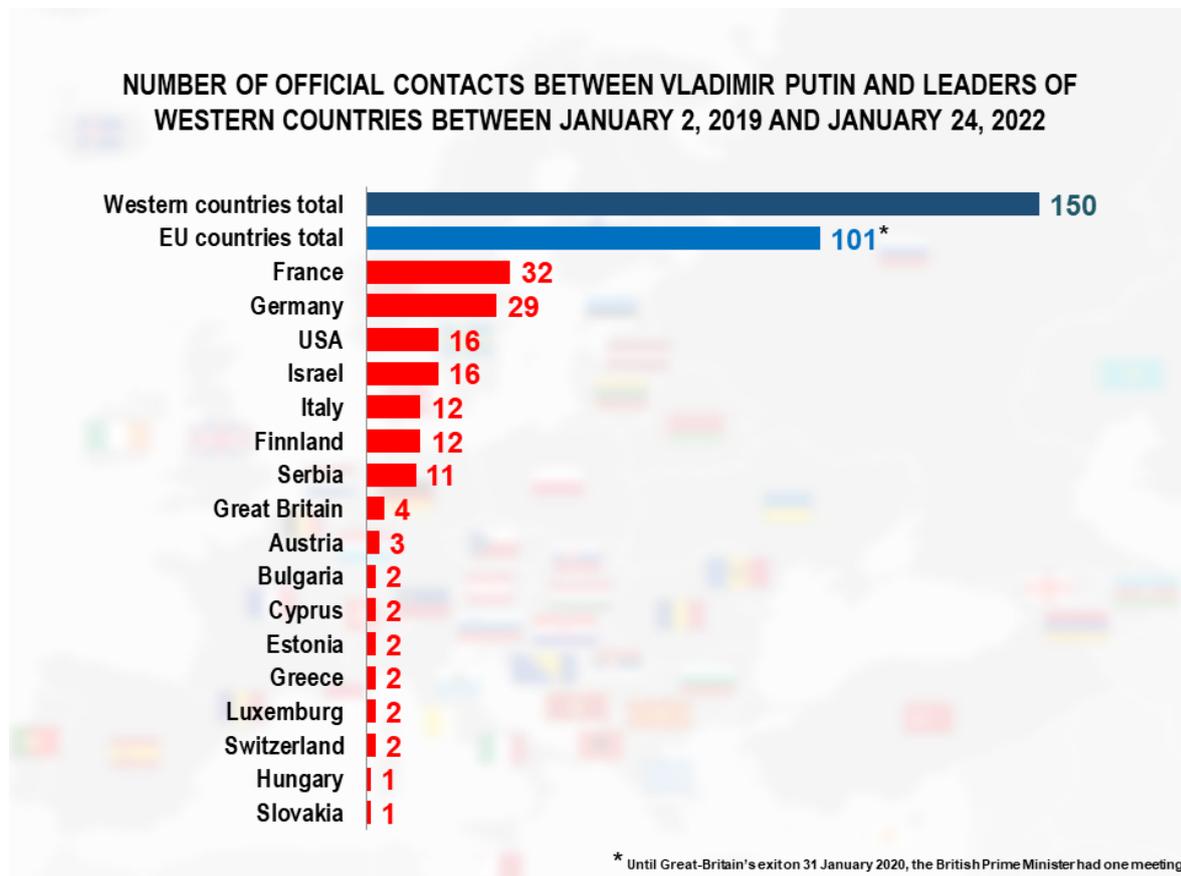
Three years and a hundred meetings

Putin's relationship with Western leaders

Since the 2014 conflict in eastern Ukraine, the liberal media has labelled Vladimir Putin as an undesirable person in world politics and thus putting pressure on some countries' leaders and distorting international relations by calling into question whether holding talks with him is acceptable. Diplomatic events in recent years show that the reality of international relations is much more nuanced than that: although Russia's president is divisive, he remains unavoidable in world politics.

More than 100 meetings between EU leaders and Putin in three years

Over the past three years, apart from major multilateral summits, Vladimir Putin has participated in around 550 bi- or trilateral diplomatic talks with leaders of 75 countries. Of these, 411 were by phone and, despite the pandemic, 139 were in person. More than a quarter of the talks, 145 were with leaders of 16 countries in the Euro-Atlantic area. The 16 Western countries, including one meeting before Britain's exit, include 13 EU countries whose leaders have arranged 101 official meetings with Russia's president in person or by phone in the past 3 years. Turkey had the highest number of official meetings (43), followed by Belarus (42), Kazakhstan and Armenia (36-36) from the post-Soviet region.



Emmanuel Macron has contacted Putin a total of 32 times in the last three years, including 4 face-to-face meetings: in Osaka in June 2019, in Bormes-les-mimosas (France) in August, in Paris in December and in 2021 with Merkel through a video conference. In terms of official contacts, the French president has held talks with the Russian president the fifth most times among world leaders over the past three years, followed by the German chancellor in sixth place with 29 conversations. Angela Merkel, in addition to 23 phone calls, has met the Russian president 5 times in the last three years. They met in June 2019 in Osaka as a side event of the G20 summit and in December with Macron and Volodomir Zelensky. Olaf Scholz has so far only received Putin's congratulations on his appointment last December when he also asked for information on the situation in Ukraine. In January 2020, they held a joint press conference in Moscow pointing out the security of gas supplies; in March 2021, they discussed the EU registration of the Sputnik vaccine with the French President through a video conference; and in August, they held a joint press conference in Moscow discussing, among other things, the situation in Afghanistan. The United States is the 9th most frequent official contact of the Russian president, with 16 presidential talks, including 1 face-to-face meeting in Switzerland last June.

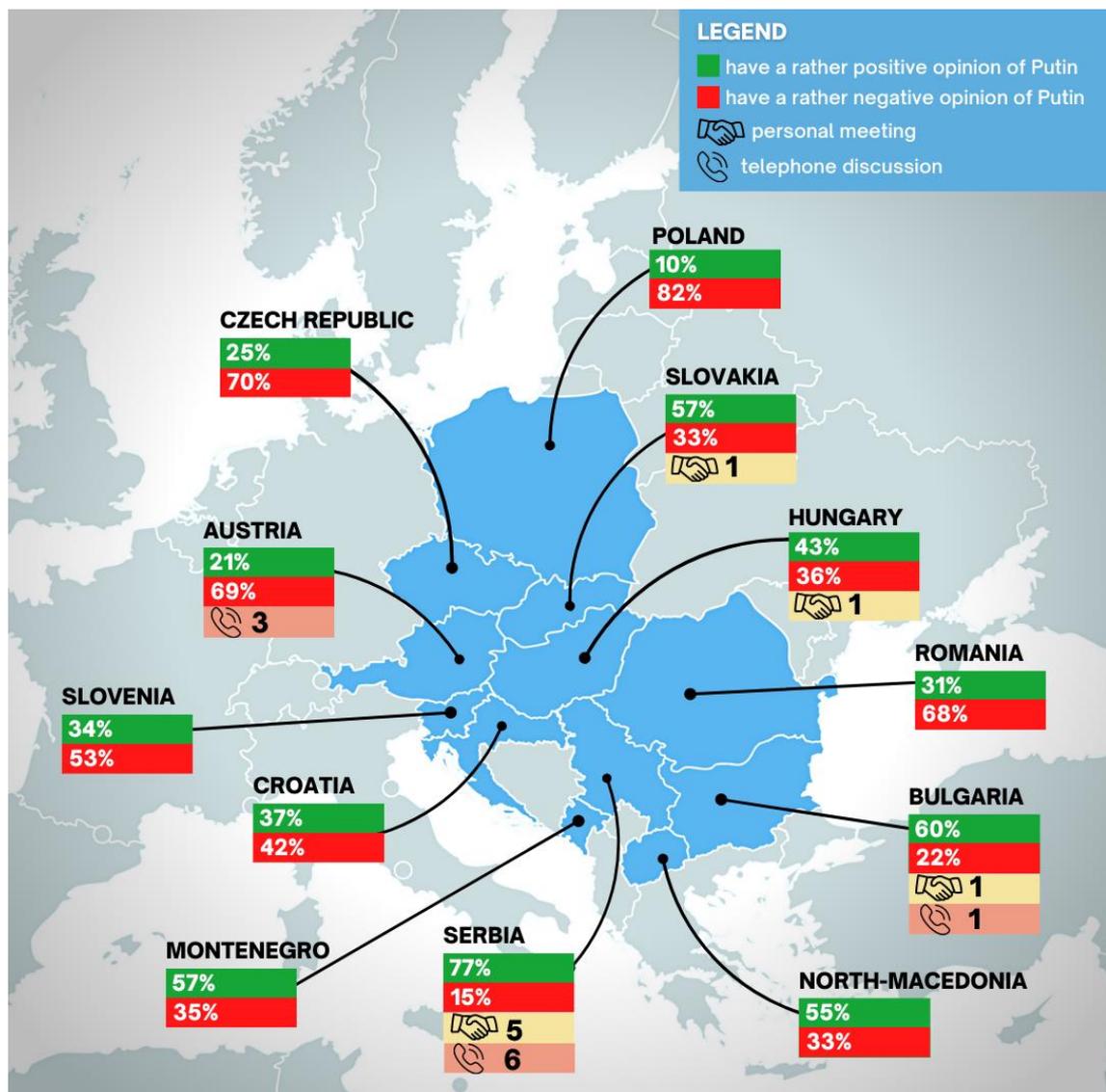
Russia-friends, pragmatists and Russia-critics in Central Europe

Of the Central European region, only the leaders of Serbia, Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovakia have contacted the Russian President in person or by phone in the last three years. Although not all leaders in the region have held official talks with Vladimir Putin, the perception of him as a person is a good indicator of the countries' relationship with Russian politics. Russia-friendly countries, due to their Slavic affinities and traditional geopolitical relations, such as Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Slovakia and Northern Macedonia are particular. Compared to pro-Russian countries, pragmatist countries have a different attitude towards Russia, where public opinion on the Russian president is typically more divided and diplomatic relations are not driven by ideology but by economic and political interests of the country.

The Serbian President contacted the Russian President most frequently, 11 times in total, 5 of which were face-to-face meetings and 6 were phone conversations. Three meetings were held in 2009, in January in Belgrade, in April in Beijing, where President Vučić thanked Russia for its support in Kosovo, and in December in Sochi, where they discussed general issues of cooperation between the two countries. In June 2020, they met in Moscow on the 75th anniversary of the Great Patriotic War, where Serbian and Russian forces marched together. In November 2021, a working visit was held in Sochi, where they discussed on the gas pipeline running through the Bulgarian border. Serbs have the most favourable opinion on Putin's image in the region, with 77 percent having a positive and 15 percent a negative opinion of him. The Bulgarian president last met Putin in June 2019 and had a phone conversation with him in February 2020. At the meeting in St. Petersburg, the energy sector was one of the main topics, as 75 percent of energy exports goes to Bulgaria. Bulgarians have a rather pro-Russian attitude. The Russian president's image is the second most

favourable in the region, with 60 percent of Bulgarians having a positive opinion of him and only 22 percent a negative one. Putin is popular among 55 percent of northern Macedonians, while 33 percent have a negative opinion of him. In Montenegro, the proportion is the same, 57 and 35 percent respectively.

The pragmatist countries include Hungary and Austria. Viktor Orbán held talks with the Russian President in October 2019 in Budapest at the Carmelite Monastery, and they will meet again in Russia on 1 February. In Hungary, Putin's image is not as good as in the pro-Russian Balkan countries, but there is a relative majority (43 percent) of those who have a positive opinion of the Russian president compared to those who have a negative (36 percent). Their negotiation practice suggests that Austria's leadership is also one of the pragmatists. Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz did not meet the Russian President in person, but they consulted three times by phone: the first in November 2020 on the issue of coronavirus vaccines and gas supplies, the second in February last year on the possible supply of Sputnik V vaccine, and the third in April on the Ukrainian conflict and on the fight against the coronavirus. During the epidemic, the ideological aversion also felt by Austrians has been put aside: only 21 percent of the Austrian population think positively of the Russian president and 69 percent negatively.



Slovenia and Croatia are also considered to be pragmatist countries, however, both countries have a majority of critical views. 34 percent of Slovenians and 37 percent of Croatians have a positive opinion of the Russian president, while 53 percent and 42 percent have negative.

Russia-critical countries include Poland, the Czech Republic and Romania, where the majority of people have negative opinion of Putin. In Poland, the Russian-backed Belarusian border incident has recently heated up tensions, while in the Czech Republic an explosion at an arms depot was linked to Russian intelligence, and a decision has been recently taken to help Ukraine with arms supplies. Only 10 percent of Poles have a positive opinion of Putin and 82 percent a negative one, while among Czechs he is popular among 25 percent and unpopular among 70 percent of the population. Despite Putin's popularity among the population, Slovakia is also among Russian critics. After their involvement in the Czech-Russian dispute last spring, the country expelled three Russian diplomats. The then Slovak Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini met Putin in St Petersburg in June 2019. The Slovak sentiment is closer to a pro-Russian attitude, with 57 percent seeing Putin positively and only 33 percent negatively. Romania also strengthens the camp of Russia critics. After being a committed NATO member, Romania would not give in to Russia's recent demands regarding the grouping of NATO troops. Putin's popularity is also relatively low, with 31 percent of Romanians holding a positive view of him and 68 percent a negative one.

Methodology

The statistics on face-to-face meetings and phone calls between Vladimir Putin and leaders of other countries are based on official talks between 1 January 2019 and 24 January 2022, as reported on the Russian Presidential Administration website. The data on Vladimir Putin's perception as a person are the results of CEPER's telephone (CATI), and face-to-face (TAPI) opinion polls for Serbia and Montenegro, conducted in November-December 2021. The results are based on the proportion of "Positive" and "Negative" responses to the question: "Please tell us if you have a positive or negative opinion about Vladimir Putin! Please also tell us if you do not know him!" Data were collected in the twelve Central European countries by interviewing 1000 respondents per each country. In each country, the sample is representative of the adult population (18 years and older) by gender, age, region, type of settlement and education. In case of a sample size of 1000 respondents and a confidence level of 95 percent, the maximum sampling error is 3.1 percent. The timing of data collection is shown in the table below.

Country	Date of data collection
Austria	2 December – 16 November, 2021.
Bulgaria	1–18 November, 2021
Czech Republic	8–23 November, 2021
North Macedonia	6–12 November, 2021
Croatia	2–18 November, 2021
Poland	27–21 October, 2021
Hungary	17–26 November, 2021
Montenegro	2–26 November, 2021
Romania	8–25 November, 2021
Serbia	1–18 November, 2021
Slovakia	18–26 November, 2021
Slovenia	2–18 November, 2021