

I respect 'Killer' Putin, says Trump, questions his country's own record

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Washington: President Donald Trump said he respects Vladimir Putin, and when an interviewer called the Russian leader "a killer," Trump said the US has many of them.

Donald Trump

"What do you think? Our country's so innocent," he told Fox's Bill O'Reilly in an excerpt released by the network. The president's interview was to air Sunday afternoon on the Super Bowl pre-game show.

Trump has long expressed a wish for better ties with Moscow, praised Putin and signalled that US-Russia relations could be in line for a makeover, even after US intelligence agencies determined that Russia meddled in the 2016 US presidential campaign to help Trump win against Democrat Hillary Clinton. Putin has called Trump a "very bright and talented man."

During Putin's years in power, a number of prominent Russian opposition figures and journalists have been killed.

In the interview, Trump says, "I do respect him," and then is asked why.

"I respect a lot of people, but that doesn't mean I'm going to get along with him. He's a leader of his country. I say it's better to get along with Russia than not. And if Russia helps us in the fight against ISIS, which is a major fight, and Islamic terrorism all over the world, that's a good thing," Trump said, using an acronym for the Islamic State group. "Will I get along with him? I have no idea."

O'Reilly then said about Putin: "But he's a killer, though. Putin's a killer."

Trump responded: "There are a lot of killers. We've got a lot of killers. What do you think? Our country's so innocent?"

In the excerpt released by Fox, Trump did not cite specific US actions. It was not clear whether he expanded on the comment or added context later in the interview.

The Trump administration on Thursday revised recent US sanctions that had unintentionally prevented American companies from exporting certain consumer electronic products to Russia. The change allows companies to deal with Russia's security service, which licenses such exports under Russian law.

The products were not intended to be covered by the sanctions the Obama administration imposed on 29 December after US intelligence agencies concluded that Russia interfered in the presidential election. The White House denied it was easing sanctions.

Also last week, the US ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley condemned Russia's "aggressive actions" in eastern Ukraine and warned Moscow that US sanctions imposed after its annexation of Crimea will remain until the peninsula is returned to Ukraine.

But she tempered her criticism, saying it was "unfortunate" that she had to condemn Russia in her first appearance at the UN Security Council.

“We do want to better our relations with Russia,” Haley said.

- AP inputs