

Putin Still Selling U.S. Nearly \$1 Billion in Nuclear Fuel

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The United States has done a thorough job of sanctioning Russia, but it still relies on the nation for one key resource.

The U.S. and other Western nations were quick to sanction Russia after Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#) ordered an invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Western allies joined forces in [sanctioning resources like Russian oil and gas](#) to deprive the Kremlin of financial gain amid funneling money into its war against Ukraine. International companies located in Russia also [were quick to leave](#), further damaging the Russian economy, but Russia still maintains a firm grasp on a horde of something that many other countries want: nuclear fuel.

Nuclear energy, which generates power through a process of splitting uranium atoms, has evaded sanctions more than a year into the war. Enriching uranium is a highly specialized process that can only be done in certain countries, such as Russia. Russia has some of the world's largest uranium supplies, and it also excels in the necessary process of converting it to enriched uranium, which then can be used as nuclear fuel. Commercial plants converting uranium operate in Russia, Canada, China and France, with Russia having the most infrastructure needed for the conversion.



Russian President Vladimir Putin attends a ceremony resuming trams operation in the Azov Sea port city of Mariupol in Russian-controlled Donetsk region, via a video link from Saint Petersburg on May 2, 2023. In 2022,... More **MIKHAIL KLIMENTYEV/SPUTNIK/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES**

"There are multiple facets of the nuclear fuel supply market. While the U.S. is self-sufficient in fabrication, uranium, and uranium processing, U.S. capabilities in conversion and enrichment are another matter," Steven Nesbit, Immediate Past President of the American Nuclear Society, told *Newsweek*. "The market for nuclear fuel is international and quite competitive. Russia's state-owned nuclear company Rosatom has been an aggressive supplier of nuclear fuel and holds a significant share of the world market."

Because of this, Rosatom State Nuclear Energy Corporation—Russia's collection of nuclear suppliers—provides a quarter of the U.S.'s nuclear fuel, and the United States continues to pay for the resource, spending a collective \$1 billion last year, according to a report by the *Wall Street Journal*.

The nuclear fuel-for-money exchange is a spin-off of the 1993 Megatons to Megawatts Program that reduced Russian possession of nuclear fuel by converting 500 metric tons of weapons-grade uranium to 15,000 tons of low-enriched uranium, which was then sold to the U.S. for use as nuclear fuel. The program reduced Russian weapons capacity by more than 20,000 nuclear warheads and supplied the United States with much-needed fuel that could provide a cheaper, cleaner form of energy.

Nuclear fuel is experiencing a revival as the world battles the effects and increased concerns of climate change. Nuclear energy is zero-emissions and is the second largest source of low-carbon electricity in the world behind hydropower, according to a website by the U.S. Department of Energy's Office of Nuclear Energy.

In March, the U.S.'s first nuclear reactor in seven years started nuclear reactions in Georgia. CNBC reported that including the new reactor, there are 93 reactors throughout the United States providing a fifth of the nation's energy. A quarter of the nuclear resources needed to power that energy is sourced from Rosatom.

U.S. companies are paying steeply for the resources needed to power its reactors, which means it is funding both Russia and Ukraine during the war. However, at \$113 billion, [Congress support of Ukraine](#) by way of military, government and humanitarian aid has far surpassed the \$1 billion spent by U.S. companies for Rosatom nuclear fuel in 2022.

Update 5/12/23, 3:18 p.m. ET: This story was updated with comment from Steven Nesbit.