

Russia on the US presidential elections Neutrality, with a slight tilt towards Trump

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Russia's ruling elite believes that the outcome of the US presidential elections will have only a negligible impact on Washington's policy towards Moscow, because the American establishment is convinced that Russia under Vladimir Putin has consistently pursued an anti-American policy. In Russia's view, each candidate has both strong and weak points, but in the end the Kremlin would prefer to see Donald Trump remain in the White House. To this end, Moscow has been active – particularly in the sphere of propaganda – with the aim of weakening Joe Biden's candidacy and stoking domestic tensions in American society. However, the scope of Russia's activity seems more limited compared to the previous electoral campaign. However, Moscow is likely to step up its activities should a political conflict emerge over the outcome of the election. A victory for the Democratic presidential candidate will result in revisions in US policy towards Russia. The incoming Biden administration can be expected to combine tough rhetoric on its divergences with Russia in the field of values with attempts to find areas where their interests converge and where cooperation can take place (such as arms control, the resolution of regional conflicts and the fight against terrorism), complemented by efforts to coordinate the West's policy towards Russia.

The United States as seen by Russian elites

Russia's attitude and reaction towards the US presidential election have been determined by a number of factors. The first is the Russian elite's perception of the United States' position in the international balance of power. The second factor is the role of the US in Russia's foreign policy and the present state of Russian-American relations. The third factor is Russia's extreme disenchantment with Trump's policy and the memory of the crushed hopes which Moscow had cherished

when Trump took office back in 2017. The fourth is Moscow's calculations regarding the policy it expects the candidates to follow if elected. The fifth factor is the experience of Russia's interference in the 2016 US elections.

The Russian elites' perception of the United States is based on two elements. On the one hand, for many years these elites have been predicting an inexorable decline of American (and the West's, more generally speaking) global hegemony. In their opinion, the US is undergoing a serious political crisis; it appears riven by divisions, with



its government proving incapable of coping with basic social problems (drug abuse, crime, racial tensions) or the COVID-19 epidemic. They see the US as a country which is on the brink of revolution, or a collapse similar to that which happened in the USSR at the turn of the 1990s.

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On the other hand, Russia’s ruling elites view the United States as the main obstacle blocking their aspirations in the international arena, and as the biggest, even an existential threat to the survival of the Russian regime. The US is perceived as Russia’s main rival in the international arena (Russian political journalists tend to refer to the US using the Cold War-era term ‘principal adversary’). It poses a triple threat to Russia due to its military power, the role of the US dollar in the global economy, and its resort to ‘colour revolutions’ as an instrument of foreign policy. The Kremlin believes that Washington deliberately destabilises entire regions and instigates mass protest movements under the pretexts of democratisation and defence of human rights, in order to topple those governments/regimes that refuse to accept the US’s hegemony and replace them with pro-American political forces. It seems that the Kremlin has been convinced since at least 2011 that Washington is ready to use a similar set of instruments to target Russia.

As a consequence, the principal goal of Russia’s foreign policy is to weaken the position of the United States globally and to build a new international system that would curb the US’s freedom to act, while at the same time creating a safe environment for the present Russian system of power by protecting it from any foreign interference (of the kind, for example, carried out under the aegis of humanitarian interventions or the defence of human rights). A good example of the Kremlin’s idea of how such a system should operate is its attitude to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the Intermediate-Range

Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF). While Russia either still insists (CWC) or has insisted (INF) that these documents should remain in force, at the same time it did not feel obliged to abide by their provisions. In Moscow’s view, the restrictions contained in these documents should be binding on the remaining signatories, but not on Russia.

While the Kremlin pursues an essentially anti-American policy, at the same time it is interested in preventing Russia’s rivalry with the United States from becoming a comprehensive Cold War-like confrontation accompanied by an arms race. This is because, being economically and technologically weaker than the US, Russia would likely lose this confrontation. It seems that the Kremlin’s strategic objective is to create a situation in which the US, worn down by Moscow’s hit-and-run tactics aiding warfare and exhausted by the cost of global politics, will be forced to come to an agreement with Russia establishing a bilateral *modus vivendi* on Russia’s conditions; it is no coincidence that senior officials of the Russian regime have made references in their public statements to the ‘Yalta order’ as a model for Russia’s relations with the West.

Russia’s restrained attitude during the electoral campaign

Although back in 2016 Moscow had an unambiguously negative opinion about Hillary Clinton’s candidacy, and was highly positive (even enthusiastic) about the candidacy of Donald Trump, in the recent campaign the Kremlin’s actions were based on a more nuanced assessment. Most importantly, Moscow is convinced that the causes of the conflict between Russia and the US are deeply structural, and so – regardless of which candidate will finally make it to the White House – no significant change in the US’s policy towards Russia should be expected. Nor should any major improvement in Russian-American relations be expected. From the point of view of Russian interests, both candidates have their strong and weak points, although it seems that Trump was the preferred candidate, especially for the Kremlin.

One important difference between the pre-election situation back in 2016 and the situation in 2020 is that in 2016 the victory for the Democratic Party nominee seemed almost certain. In these circumstances, the Kremlin's positive attitude towards the other candidate, alongside Russia's clandestine activity in cyberspace, were mainly intended to politically weaken and discredit Hillary Clinton, as well as to stoke the conflicts within the American political establishment and American society at large. The most reported and best documented example of such activity involved stealing and publicising e-mail correspondence between Democratic Party activists which exposed the undemocratic methods the party apparatus had used to push through Ms Clinton's candidacy.

In contrast, ahead of the 2020 election, the final outcome remained uncertain despite the Democratic candidate's poll advantage. The increasing likelihood that Joe Biden will achieve victory in the final stage of the electoral campaign has prompted the Kremlin to signal its openness to dialogue with the new administration. Expressing his concern over Biden's "harsh anti-Russian rhetoric", President Putin has emphasised left-wing values as the basis for establishing contacts with the Democratic administration. He claimed that he himself subscribed to such left-wing values as a former 'idealistic' member of the Communist Party. In addition, Putin suggested that the left wing of the Democratic Party should appreciate the fact that he is an heir to the Soviet tradition of anti-racist struggle. In addition, the Kremlin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov flatly denied that Trump's candidacy was more to the Kremlin's 'liking'.

Russia's lower level of interference in the elections

Russia has launched a number of actions intended not so much to influence the electoral outcome as to weaken the United States, both by aggravating political and social conflicts and by propagating doubts regarding the fairness of the electoral process, the country's democratic mechanisms, and the trustworthiness of American public

institutions. Since most of these actions have been carried out online, only very tentative hypotheses are possible here, based on public announcements by the American authorities and media reports, but always bearing in mind that the issue of Russian interference in the election has been subject to heavy political instrumentalisation.

” In its Russian policy, the Biden administration will combine harsh rhetoric with attempts to find areas of converging interests.

The scale of this interference is difficult to compare with that of 2016 because the US has undertaken a number of preventive measures since then. In addition, it seems that Moscow too has drawn conclusions from the previous elections; this time its interference has not crossed a certain threshold, and was mainly limited to propaganda and disinformation activities carried out on social media. These activities were intended to weaken and discredit Biden's candidacy and to aggravate social and political divides. In addition, the Russians have tried to better conceal their activities. For example, they set up new online media channels and recruited Americans as their content contributors. Unlike in 2016, there were no spectacular cases involving the publication of illegally seized private correspondence; nor have any major attempts to penetrate the electoral systems' cybernetic infrastructure been recorded. However, US cybersecurity experts expressed concern that Russians might have infected the electoral systems with sleeper viruses that may become activated during the vote counting process. Thus far, though, it seems that these concerns have not been justified.

It is difficult to assess whether this low level of Russian interference resulted from the security measures already taken (sealing the systems) and preventive actions (such as operators of social networks deleting suspicious accounts), or from the fact that the Russian side deliberately limited this type of activity to avoid a situation similar to the one that happened in 2016. At that time, the disclosure of the extent and nature of this type of

practice led to a tightening of US policy towards Russia; it was recognised as a state clearly hostile to the US, whose actions on the international arena required firm counteraction on the part of the US, and with which no cooperation – at even the most limited level – was possible.

Moscow's disillusionment with Trump's policy

The reason behind the more nuanced and restrained attitude towards the US election on the part of both the Kremlin and the Russian political establishment more generally was their profound disillusionment with Trump's presidency, on which Moscow had initially pinned great hopes. Back in 2016, Trump was viewed as a candidate who might revise the US's policy towards Russia and would be inclined to sign a strategic agreement ('a great deal') to ultimately regulate relations between Washington and Moscow. This positive assessment of Trump's candidacy was based both on his declared intention to improve the US's relations with Russia and on his criticism of liberal interventionism. His promise to abandon the Obama administration's economic integration projects intended to consolidate the Western world (e.g. TTIP and TPP) also played a role. Trump was seen in Moscow as a more convenient interlocutor, and possibly even a partner, due to his transaction-based approach to politics and his lack of experience on the international stage. Another important factor was that his views were ideologically convergent with the conservative worldview held by most Russian elites.

Moscow's unprecedented abandonment of its routine symmetrical response to the sanctions imposed on it at the end of December 2016 by the outgoing Obama administration (in response to Russian interference in the electoral campaign) was proof of how strongly the Kremlin had been hoping for a change in the US's policy towards Russia. Moscow's decision not to retaliate was meant as a gesture of goodwill towards the incoming Trump administration, and was intended to create a favourable atmosphere for the US to launch a policy of a 'new opening' towards Russia.

However, after just a few months into the Trump administration, it turned out that Russia's hopes were in vain. The first unpleasant surprise for Moscow was Trump's decision to launch a missile attack on Russia's ally, Syria's President Bashar al-Assad, in response to his use of chemical weapons in the territory controlled by Syrian insurgents (April 2017). Although Trump consistently avoided criticising Russia and President Putin, delayed and softened Congress-mandated sanctions, and reiterated his intentions to improve the US's relations with Russia, this failed to translate into specific concessions or any readiness on the part of the US to accept Moscow's proposals leading to the normalisation of relations. On the contrary, both Congress and the presidential administration took steps (such as introducing new sanctions) that further aggravated the Russian-American relationship.

” The paramount goal of Russia's foreign policy is to undermine the global position of the United States.

As a consequence, in their the pre-election analyses Moscow-based experts close to the Russian state (the Russian International Affairs Council, the Valdai Discussion Club, commentators on state-controlled TV stations) almost unanimously agreed that Trump's re-election would not foster any positive change (from Moscow's point of view) in Washington's policy towards Russia, nor would it result in the normalisation of bilateral relations. In addition, they pointed to a number of policy elements in Trump's first term which went contrary to Russia's interests. Their biggest concerns were raised by the increase in US defence spending and its approach to arms control, including quitting the INF treaty and the intention of abandoning START III. The present generation of Russia's rulers takes it for granted that excessive defence spending was one of the main reasons behind the collapse of the Soviet Union, and so they see avoiding an open arms race with the US as a matter of political priority.

From the Kremlin's point of view, the Trump administration's readiness to use economic and military pressure against those states which are

Russia's important strategic partners (Iran) or political clients (Syria, Venezuela) was another problem. In addition, Moscow had become accustomed to US policy towards Russia being predictable and 'responsible' (in all conflict situations with Russia, both Republican and Democratic administrations took care not to 'provoke' it and to avoid any escalations of tension). This allowed the Kremlin to use the threat of escalation instrumentally against Washington, and to compensate for its weakness by carrying out surprise military operations (in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria). Trump's unpredictability, and his readiness to stoke conflicts and launch actions that exceeded the limits of the 'liberal establishment' (putting military pressure on North Korea, waging a tariff 'war' with Beijing, breaking off the nuclear deal with Iran, easing restrictions on offensive actions in cyberspace etc.) repeatedly put the Kremlin in awkward situations.

Russia's nuanced assessment of Joe Biden

Just as Russia's assessment of Donald Trump during this year's campaign was more nuanced, and not as unambiguously positive as back in 2016, its assessment of Joe Biden was not as unambiguously negative as its opinions on Hillary Clinton four years ago. Obviously, Moscow views Biden as a typical representative of the American liberal establishment. It therefore expects that his policy will be based on the assumption that there is a fundamental conflict of values between the authoritarian Russia and the West. That will make him a less convenient partner than Trump was. Moscow also expects Biden to publicly criticise Russia and the Russian president for violating democratic principles and human rights; he is also expected to intensify US support for democratisation processes in post-Soviet states, especially in Ukraine. Biden's announced intention of restoring unity to the West will also hurt Moscow, in particular since this approach is likely to prioritise the coordination of the Western states' policies towards Russia.

On the other hand, from the Kremlin's point of view, the advantages of Biden's presidency would

include his readiness to resume arms control talks (he announced that he would extend the START III treaty which expires on 21 February 2021) and resume the nuclear deal with Iran. In addition, Moscow appreciates the fact that Biden is a more predictable and cautious politician than Trump, hence even his declared policy of confronting Russia will not include any radical steps which could trigger an escalation of conflicts or generate major costs for the US (such as structural economic sanctions).

The future Biden administration's policy towards Russia

Judging by the rhetoric alone, Joe Biden's presidential victory should trigger a major toughening of the US's policy towards Russia. Biden has clearly labelled Russia as an 'opponent' of the United States, and announced that he would respond in a tougher and more decisive manner than his predecessor to actions directed by Russia against the US's interests. He has also promised to restore the common front of Western states to coordinate their policy towards Russia.

” Profound disillusionment with Trump's presidency was the reason for the Kremlin's more restrained attitude towards the recent US election.

However, a closer look at the announcements made by the Democratic presidential candidate and a detailed analysis of texts and statements by the foreign and security policy experts who are close to him (mainly former Obama-administration officials) prompt the conclusion that Washington's policy (excluding its rhetoric, which will involve open criticism of Russia and the Kremlin) will in fact be more moderate, and oriented towards achieving an at least partial normalisation of the relations between the two states. It is striking that the declarations about future toughening of the US's stance on Russia have not been accompanied by any specific ideas and proposals explaining in detail what this would involve. As regards sanctions, suggestions can be heard that

their potential as a policy tool has been exhausted, and that intensifying them will either be counterproductive or will generate excessive costs for the United States and destabilise global markets. There are also suggestions about the need to balance a tougher policy towards Russia with the effort to find areas of cooperation. One can also detect fears that an excessively tough policy may ruin any prospects for future cooperation. The incoming Biden administration has already announced its intention to accept one Russian proposal, namely an unconditional extension of the START III treaty. In addition it can be expected that, in order to meet the expectations of a major portion of its electorate, this administration will reduce defence spending; that in turn might cast a shadow not only on the further reinforcement of NATO's eastern flank but also on the continuation of the present programme of enhanced US military presence in NATO's border states.

Russia, for its part, will pursue a 'small steps' policy in order to improve the atmosphere in bilateral relations and to restore mutual trust. For example, this will involve military-to-military contacts (to avoid accidental confrontations, the process of so-called 'deconflicting'); counter-terrorism cooperation, and regional conflict resolution (Syria, Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, territorial disputes between Turkey and its neighbours in the Mediterranean Sea). Russia will strive to achieve a gradual normalisation of bilateral relations without having to make concessions on any of the issues which have triggered the present crisis in Russia's relations with the West. These mainly include the conflict with Ukraine and the support for al-Assad's regime in Syria.

Russia's reactions to the potential domestic post-election dispute in the US

The election in the US has confirmed the deep political divisions affecting this country, and so

it is all the more likely that its outcome will be contested. A dispute over the election result and political conflict in the US will certainly be a source of great satisfaction for the state authorities in Moscow. It would confirm the Russian leadership in their belief that the US is experiencing a deep structural crisis affecting the system as a whole. It would also prove that thus far Russia's policy towards Washington has been correct, and would boost the Kremlin's belief that (regardless of the cost Russia has borne so far) this policy is highly likely to succeed. As a consequence, a potential post-election dispute would encourage the Russian leadership to continue on its present course intended to weaken the United States and the West, and to build an alternative regional and global order based on pragmatic cooperation with non-Western powers such as China, India, Iran and Turkey.

It can be assumed that in this situation Russia will attempt to aggravate and extend the conflict triggered by the post-election dispute, most likely by using its information and cybernetic warfare tools. In addition, it will likely use this dispute in its propaganda, intended to undermine the prestige and tarnish the image of the United States and the Western system of democracy in the eyes of Russian society and the international community. If this crisis is prolonged, it cannot be ruled out that Moscow will take both diplomatic and military steps to test to what extent this situation limits the US's capability to respond to Russia's possible aggressive actions in the international arena, in particular those targeting Russia's neighbours (e.g. Ukraine).