

OSW | COMMENTARY

Centre for Eastern Studies

NUMBER 227 | 09.11.2016

www.osw.waw.pl

Moscow chooses Trump Russia on the US presidential elections

Marek Menkiszak

Immediately after the announcement of the American election results, Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulated Donald Trump on his victory and expressed hope that the two countries' bilateral relations could be brought out of the current crisis. For Russia, the political situation in the United States is of crucial political importance, as in the perception of the Kremlin, the US is Russia's strategic adversary. Despite their official declarations of neutrality, the Russian authorities clearly favoured Trump's candidacy during the elections. This was linked to Moscow's hopes for the following events: deepening tensions in trans-Atlantic relations, and with the United States' other allies (including weakening of NATO); a partial review of US policy in the security sphere (including drawing down US military engagement in Europe, including on NATO's eastern flank); and in particular a possible strategic deal with Russia (based on the transactional approach seen in Trump's policy statements, and his perceived 'pragmatism' in relation to Russia). In recent months the Russian government has taken a series of active measures (aggressive actions and military demonstrations, cyber-attacks, leaks and media campaigns) whose objectives included compromising or weakening the camp or the candidacy of Hillary Clinton. In recent weeks, this was helped by Russia's artificial aggravation of the crisis in relations with the United States. At the same time, Moscow has demonstrated its potential to cause harm, and is now attempting to force a new US administration to enter a strategic bargain with it.

Donald Trump's victory in the elections significantly increases the likelihood that Russia will make a 'tactical pause': a break in, or limitations to, its aggressive actions against the United States, in order not to antagonise the president-elect and encourage him to review policy in Washington in a manner which benefits Russia. less likely, but still possible, is a scenario of Russia continuing, or (much less likely) even escalating, its aggressive actions until the end of outgoing President Barack Obama's term (20 January 2017), by when Washington will have difficulty in responding to any action Moscow might take.

The importance of the US elections for Russia

The presidential elections in the United States are of great importance for Russia. In the political system of the United States, the President has a decisive role in determining foreign and security policy, foreign economic policy, and the defence of the nation. The ruling Russian elite

sees the US as a strategic enemy, and a source of existential challenges for Russia. This is due to their belief that the United States is conducting a deliberate and systematic policy of crowding Russia out from its 'natural sphere of influence', weakening the Russian Federation (by external pressures and internal sabotage), and seeking to change the Russian political regime. In this way, US policy is generally seen as a personal

threat to the security of the Russian ruling elite. The US is also treated as the main obstacle to the implementation of the Kremlin's work of reconstructing the great-power status of Russia and expanding its influence abroad.

Russia's strategic interests regarding the United States and its administration

For these reasons, one of the strategic objectives of Russian foreign and security policy is (both independently and in tactical coalition with other countries, such as China) to weaken the international influence of the US. Many of Russia's actions in this sphere (including its activities in Latin America, the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region, and partly also in Europe) are elements of Russia's global anti-American policy. Moreover, the Russian military involvement in Syria, and even to some extent the war in Ukraine, are in a certain way proxy wars with the US.

On the other hand, the constant goal of Russian foreign policy since the collapse of the Soviet Union has been the attempt to come to a strategic deal with the United States. In Moscow's eyes, such a deal should apparently be based on the following concepts:

- the recognition (formal or informal) of the Russian sphere of influence in the post-Soviet area (with the temporary exclusion of the Baltic states);
- the US refraining from making geostrategic changes to the *status quo* by relocating troops and military installations in regions directly adjacent to Russia (especially in Central Europe, which would here imply the *de facto* creation of a buffer zone in kind);
- the recognition by the United States of Russia's position as a global power, and of its important foreign interests (which in practice amounts to cooperation with Russia, and consultation with it on important global and regional security issues).

The failure of previous attempts to strike the deal described above has led Moscow to systematically heighten tensions in its policy to-

wards the United States (after what are usually brief periods of a more pragmatic policy course).

It is therefore in Russia's interest that the US administration should on the one hand be quite weak, focused on domestic issues, limiting its foreign policy activity, and experiencing increasing problems in its relations with its allies; while on the other hand, it should be ready for dialogue with Russia, and open to making a strategic deal with Moscow and recognising important Russian interests.

Russia on the United States during the election campaign

Despite public declarations by the authorities of the Russian Federation on their country's neutrality regarding the candidates in the US presidential elections (such was the tone adopted on several occasions by President Putin and his spokesman Dmitri Peskov), Moscow was clearly betting on Donald Trump. This was for several reasons. Firstly, Russian experts and politicians perceived the success of Trump in the Republican Party primaries and the election campaign as a symptom of the political crisis in the United States.

The constant goal of Russian foreign policy since the collapse of the Soviet Union has been the attempt to come to a strategic deal with the United States.

In their eyes, he represents a rebellion by large groups of US citizens against the political establishment and political correctness in the liberal-dominated traditional media. Trump's success is also a signal of a rise in isolationist sentiments, in xenophobia (fear of 'foreigners', especially Muslims), and a reluctance to pursue an active foreign policy (especially in the spirit of the liberal/conservative interventionism of the Clinton and Bush Jr eras). The deep polarisation of public opinion in the US and the rise

of internal tensions (which will not disappear, and may even become more severe after the elections) are clearly seen in Russia as an opportunity to weaken the US domestically, a weakness which will likely be expressed as a reduced capacity and will to engage internationally, opening the field for Russia to be more active.

The candidature of Hillary Clinton was seen in Moscow as a scenario which carried more potential risks than opportunities.

Secondly, the rhetoric of Trump and some of his colleagues during the election campaign (referring among other things to a certain diminution of NATO's role and making the Alliance's support conditional on financial contributions from its allies; the announcement of a desire to renegotiate or abandon important trade agreements such as NAFTA, TTP or TTIP, etc.) raised concerns and (albeit not always publicly expressed) disapproval among both the publics and the ruling elites (or parts thereof) of many US allies, both in Europe and Asia. Such rhetoric, however, was received with joy and hope in Moscow, as it increased the probability that relations between the United States and its allies (including trans-Atlantic relations) would become tenser. This could also negatively affect the coherence, activity and agency of NATO (which Russia sees as a strategic enemy, an instrument of American policy and a tool of US hegemony in Europe in the security sphere).

Thirdly, both Trump's past business involvement and the rhetoric he and some of his associates have used (including positive opinions about Vladimir Putin as leader, his declarations of readiness to 'negotiate' with Russia, talking about the need for cooperation with Moscow against 'Islamic State', his downplaying and partial justification of Russia's aggressive policy towards Ukraine and the Baltic States, etc.) suggest his 'pragmatic' and transactional approach

to Russia. This has, in the eyes of the Kremlin, created an opportunity for dialogue with Trump as President, which could (at least in part) lead to some kind of strategic bargain and the recognition of some of Russia's important interests (for example, in the post-Soviet sphere).

At the same time, Russia may not be sure what the specific direction of US policy will be under a possible Trump presidency. From Moscow's viewpoint, there is a risk that its aggressive actions will meet with a stark response from Trump (partly for reasons of image), which will bring the risk of undermining Russia's great-power image promoted by its own propaganda.

In turn, the candidature of Hillary Clinton, despite occasional declarations by her or her colleagues about the need for a pragmatic dialogue with Russia, was seen in Moscow as a scenario which carried more potential risks than opportunities. This resulted, among other things, from the Russian ruling group and President Vladimir Putin's extreme distrust of and resentment towards Hillary Clinton, stemming especially from her association with US support for the potential candidacy of Dmitri Medvedev for a second presidential term (which did not happen) and the subsequent protests in Russia (from December 2011 to December 2012; Putin bluntly accused the then US Secretary of State of instigating and managing these protests, which were seen in the Kremlin as an American act of political sabotage aimed at regime change in Russia, i.e. another attempt at a 'colour revolution'). Clinton is also partially identified with the policy of her husband Bill Clinton (who was US President from 1993 to 2001), who is perceived today in the Kremlin as essentially anti-Russian (in the light of NATO's enlargement eastwards, the NATO aerial bombardments in Bosnia & Herzegovina and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, among other reasons). This negative image does not compensate for Clinton's involvement as Secretary of State (2009-2013) in the 'reset with Russia' policy (since 2009), of which, however, she was neither the initiator (formally, Vice-President

Joe Biden) nor the main executor (the key decisions were taken personally by President Obama). Finally, the Kremlin must have realised that the conviction of Democratic Party elites that Russia was conducting hostile sabotage against the party and Clinton's candidacy (especially in the form of cyber-attacks and media leaks) would have been a strong stimulus to a possible Clinton administration to take some (albeit limited) political retaliation against Russia and the Kremlin.

Russia's actions on behalf of Trump

For these reasons, during the US election campaign Russia took a number of explicit and implicit actions in *de facto* support of Donald Trump's nomination. With regard to explicit actions, Russia sought above all to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of US foreign policy as pursued by the Democratic administration of Barack Obama (part of which was implemented by Hillary Clinton), especially regarding Syria. Moscow first sought to create the illusion that there could be limited cooperation with the US on Syria, at the cost of making further ceasefire agreements to increase its actual impact on the situation, just so that it could provoke a formal break in this cooperation in October 2016 in the aftermath of its attack on a UN humanitarian convoy and massive air strikes on Aleppo. In addition, Russia demonstratively increased its military presence in Syria (by sending out more anti-missile systems – this time S-300s – and an aircraft carrier).

In October, Russia suspended its participation in the Russian-American agreement on the disposal of plutonium. The bill signed by President Putin contained a list of conditions under which Moscow was prepared to resume implementation of the agreement (these included the abolition of all US sanctions against Russia and compensation for the financial losses arising from them, as well as the withdrawal of US troops and military infrastructure from Central

and Eastern Europe to the state of deployment as of the year 2000). These unrealistic requests in fact had the following aims:

1. to demonstrate the profound scale of the crisis in Russian-American relations, and put the blame for this on the Democratic Obama administration;
2. to submit inflated requests as a prelude to future negotiations on conditions for the normalisation of relations with the new US administration (after the new President is sworn in on 20 January 2017);
3. to use this demonstration of assertiveness towards the US to improve the image and strengthen the legitimacy of President Putin, against the background of the anti-American sentiments of most of the Russian public.

During the US election campaign Russia took a number of explicit and implicit actions in de facto support of Donald Trump's nomination.

Apart from this, Russia has steadily ratcheted up tensions (particularly in autumn 2016) in its policy towards the armed forces of the US and its European allies and the US' partners in Europe, by making a large number of (mostly military) provocations (subversive activities, violations of airspace or provocative near-border overflights; combat aircraft approaching dangerously close to aircraft and ships; large-scale and/or provocative military exercises; deploying offensive weapons; tests of strategic nuclear weapons, etc.) carried out in the Arctic, the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea and the Western Balkans, among other areas.

In the wake of this, the aggressiveness of Russian state propaganda directed against the US and its allies has increased. Even in October a kind of 'psy-op' (psychological operation) was carried out through state-controlled Russian media (both traditional and new), implying

that Russia was preparing for war (even at the nuclear level) with the US and NATO.

Finally, the Russian state-controlled media regularly criticised Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, and spread (dis)information suggesting irregularities in the functioning of the American electoral system, as well as the political crisis in the US against the background of the presidential elections; and reports about Donald Trump were usually presented in ironic, neutral or even moderately sympathetic tones. This was reflected in the results of Russian public opinion polls concerning the US presidential elections.

Hopes of a revision of policy toward Russia and towards US' allies by the new US administration could well prompt Moscow to send signals of readiness to hold pragmatic talks, and avoid antagonising the new administration.

In October 2016 the WCIOM poll found that 57% of respondents regarded the elections as important to Russia; an improvement in relations between Russia and the US was forecast by 29% of respondents if Trump won, but only 4% in the case of Clinton; meanwhile 8% and 45% of respondents respectively forecast worsening relations. In turn, a survey by the independent Levada Centre reported 41% support for Trump and 10% for Clinton among those interested in US elections.

As for the partially implicit actions, in June 2016 Russian hackers broke into and stole sensitive information and data from the computers of the Democratic Party's electoral committee. The perpetrator of the attacks was most likely the hacking groups apt28/Sofacy/FancyBear and apt29/CozyBear, which according to the US government (an official joint statement on the matter was issued in October by the Department of Homeland Security and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence) are sup-

ported by the authorities and special services of Russia. According to the media, in August 2016 the same groups tried to attack the computer systems of electoral commissions in about half the states in the US. The above-mentioned information (including emails from Hillary Clinton herself or from her close associates) containing sensitive and/or compromising information was uploaded online from August to October, including on the homepages of WikiLeaks and DCLeaks (which have been acting in accordance with the political interests of Russia) and the alleged hacker Guccifer 2.0. Although Moscow has officially distanced itself from these activities, their attention-grabbing nature, as well as certain errors that enabled a partial identification of the attack sources, may suggest that the Kremlin was in fact interested in casting responsibility onto the Russian government.

It seems that all of the above-mentioned aggressive actions by Russia were intended not only to support the candidacy of Donald Trump in the elections, but also more broadly to demonstrate Russia's determination to use more and more offensive tools to achieve its political objectives, as well as Russia's significant ability (corresponding to its image as a great power) to cause potentially serious damage to states which in Moscow's assessment are pursuing anti-Russian policies (such as the US). This was probably intended to manipulate the new American administration (regardless of who is elected President) to take Russia seriously and enter into dialogue with it on strategic interests.

Russia's possible tactics towards the US during the post-election period

Taking into account the objectives of Russian policy, and the experience of its course up to this point, we may generally predict two models of Russia's behaviour in the post-election period, following Donald Trump's win in the elections.

1. The tactical pause (the most likely scenario)

Russia may temporarily suspend or limit its aggressive actions against the US (and possibly US allies) pending the swearing-in of the newly-elected President (20 January 2017), or until the formation of a new administration and its first declarations and decisions (to mid-2017).

Hopes of a revision of policy toward Russia by the US and its allies could well prompt Moscow to send signals of readiness to hold pragmatic talks (such signals have been in fact already conveyed), and avoid antagonising the new administration (which otherwise could discourage such a policy revision). This scenario is supported by the fact that this summer and autumn (especially in October) Russia has demonstrated its potential to do damage, and the further escalation of such aggressive actions would increase the risk of potentially dangerous incidents, and/or the critical hardening of US policy towards Russia, also under the new administration.

2. The continuation/escalation of aggressive actions (the possible, but clearly less likely scenario)

Russia may continue or even exacerbate the aggressive actions it has already implemented (cyber-attacks, attempts at political sabotage, provocative action/military demonstrations, etc.) in one or more of the regions and countries in which these have already taken place (in Syria, Ukraine,

the Baltic Sea, the Balkans, the Middle East, etc.). This scenario is supported by the fact that before Donald Trump is sworn in as President (20 January 2017), the US will still be run by the Democratic Obama administration (which is the object of political attacks by both Trump and the Russian government). In this situation, the Kremlin may feel encouraged to further demonstrate the weakness of this administration, the more so as it will not really be willing and able to retaliate against Russia.

An additional incentive is that some of Moscow's specific policy objectives (such as an attempt to halt implementation of the decisions of NATO's Warsaw summit, and the US decision to reinforce the so-called eastern flank of the Alliance) would need to be carried out in a hurry (their implementation is provided for between February and April 2017), which would incline Moscow to raise the pressure in the run-up period.

In each of the scenarios outlined above, we should expect pressure from Russia to cancel, delay or dilute the decisions of NATO and the United States regarding the reinforcement of NATO's eastern flank. However, Moscow's priority will be to deal with the question of the US-NATO anti-missile shield in Central Europe, especially the construction of the installations in Redzikowo (Poland). Russia will regard blocking this project as a priority short-term objective in its relations with the United States.

EDITORS: Adam Eberhardt,

Anna Łabuszewska, Katarzyna Kazimierska

TRANSLATION: Jim Todd

DTP: Wojciech Mańkowski

Centre for Eastern Studies

Koszykowa 6a, 00-564 Warsaw

phone: +48 | 22 | 525 80 00

e-mail: info@osw.waw.pl

The views expressed by the authors of the papers do not necessarily reflect the opinion of Polish authorities

Visit our website: www.osw.waw.pl