

The World After Trump: Russia-Friendly, But for How Long?

Russia's new friends around the globe will only be useful as long as their own interests are not hit.

By [Mark Galeotti](#)

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AP/Alexander Zemlianichenko

No wonder many in the West see Putin as winning. The European Union is in crisis, with Britain's Brexit potentially being followed by other "exits." Elections have seen the rise of Moscow-friendly presidents: Bulgaria's Rumen Radev, Moldova's Igor Dodon, and Donald Trump in the U.S.

However much there are those who want to see Moscow's hand behind all this, it actually played a minimal role, if any, in most of these developments. Moreover, while the new situation offers some new opportunities, it is harder to be sure Russia is in much of a shape to take advantage of them. The hacked emails and other examples of Russian mischief in

the American elections were intended to weaken an expected Clinton presidency, not elevate Trump. If anyone gave Trump the election, it was the FBI, not the FSB: its eleventh-hour statement about its investigations killed Hillary Clinton's momentum at a crucial moment.

Likewise, for all that Russia's propaganda stations and troll farms assiduously backed Brexit, hoping it would start unravelling the European Union, there is no evidence that Kremlin machinations played any part in the referendum's outcome. In France, Marine Le Pen's Front Nationale notoriously received a €9 million (\$9.7 million) loan from a Russian bank. Czech president Miloš Zeman's campaign was in part bankrolled by the local head of Russian company Lukoil. But that does not necessarily mean their support has been bought or generated by Moscow.

The West is bleeding, but its wounds are self-inflicted. There is a generalized crisis of legitimacy, as complacent political elites fail to connect with communities feeling disenfranchised and discriminated against. There is a toxic disconnect between a Brussels consensus of ever-closer political union and the aspirations of most EU member states and their populations. Governments across Europe are being held to account for promises broken, corruption unfettered and reforms stalled.

Of course, Moscow will gleefully encourage these internal tensions, and exploit them whenever it can. Russian propaganda, diplomacy and money will lever open whatever splits they find — but the West cut those rifts in the first place. As a result, the West is divided, distracted and debilitated. Its capacity to resist Russian adventurism is suffering.

If Trump begins to look lukewarm about sanctions, for example, the shaky European consensus on maintaining them will evaporate overnight. How can Russia capitalize on this moment of weakness on the part of the West? The truth is it won't be able to do much. What, after all, does it have to offer? It could be a little less obstructive in the Middle East, albeit by selling out one of its last allies. It could let Washington revisit its deal with Iran, but at the cost of one of its major arms customers.

It could be a little less confrontational and subversive in Europe, but it's unclear how far Trump would care about that. It could share more intelligence about the Islamic State, but with ten terrorists being detained in Moscow and St. Petersburg, this ought to be a greater priority.

The West remains fundamentally stronger in every sense but one. It has social, economic, military, political, and soft power advantage; but Russia has will, a powerful central government without meaningful checks and balances, that can focus resources on its priorities and ignore the limitations and conventions of democratic societies. In the short term, that looks like power and would-be strongmen from Turkey's Recep Erdogan to Trump are drawn to Putin's example.

But it is a kind of power that depends on the temporary weaknesses of others, and is bought at terrible cost. Military adventures and domestic quietude are draining Russia's national reserves, and at the expense of any meaningful economic reform. Even ostensible friends, from Le Pen to Trump, put their own and their countries' interests first. If they let sanctions slide or turn a blind eye to bloodshed in Syria, it is because they see some

advantage to themselves.

This is the best the Kremlin can hope for: a new generation of Western leaders who don't care enough about what it does at home, or in "faraway countries" and to "people of whom we know nothing." But the moment Putin appears to be challenging their direct interests, he may find that authoritarian populists are rather more formidable enemies than multilateralist liberals.

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