

With Trump's Hands Tied, Putin Is Free to Act (Op-ed)

The obvious avenue for Moscow is to further exploit the current discord between American institutions

By [Maxim Trudolyubov](#)

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Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump **Kremlin Press Service**

As U.S. President Donald Trump's hand hovered over the comprehensive sanctions bill he had to sign, it is easy to imagine him envying Vladimir Putin.

The Russian parliament does not undermine the president's agenda. The press does not pick at his every misstep. The intelligence agencies are his bulwark, not his detractor.

Trump has just signed a [bill](#) that literally calls Russia an adversary and ties his hands in setting his Russia policy. Putin, meanwhile, is still free to take his U.S. policy in any direction that he sees fit.

Set aside the drama of new sanctions, which are no good for Russia and will be next to impossible to repeal down the road. This is a tale of two very different political cultures trying to influence each other.

Recently, Republican Senator Tim Scott from Trump's own party was cited by the Washington Post as [saying](#): "We work for the American people. We don't work for the president... We should do what's good for the administration as long as that does not in any way, shape or form make it harder on the American people."

A representative of the legislative branch of government talking about the executive in this tone is something unimaginable in Russia, even from the so-called opposition.

Russia is different. The speaker of the Russian parliament, Vyacheslav Volodin, in Sochi in 2014 famously [equated](#) the president with the country he leads: "If Putin is there, Russia is there. If there is no Putin, there would be no Russia." Volodin was the deputy head of the presidential administration at the time.

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In a meeting with students earlier this year Volodin, as speaker of the Russian parliament, enthusiastically [endorsed](#) a suggestion by one of the students to introduce legislation that would defend the honor and dignity of the president.

"You are right, the entire international experience suggests that legislation like this is badly needed, laws like this exist everywhere," he said.

Various legal protections for the executive branch of government do exist all over the world. But if there's one thing the Russian president doesn't need, it is yet more protection.

The protections that Russia already have are just fine. Examples of the Russian press attacking the Russian president are so few and far between that Russian officials have to quote American media to prove the need for more defense in the media.

The security of the presidential authority and public approval of the one in office are the ultimate measures of the Russian government's success. Russia's daily political routine swirls around the president's approval rate, the technical details associated with his next run for office, and speculation concerning which political figures he will keep, promote, or discard in his next term.

The fact that most institutions in Russia exist to protect the executive is not news, but it is still worth pondering given the current state of U.S.-Russia relations. The Russian assumption that the executive is by far the most important force in any government is key to understanding Moscow's approach to the 2016 U.S. presidential elections.

I am agnostic as to whether state-sponsored hackers or even ordinary Russian cyber activists tried to interfere with the workings of the American election.

But I do see that the Kremlin was invested in the campaign. The consensus view among many serious U.S.-watchers in Russia is that the Kremlin's plan was to weaken an inevitable Hillary

Clinton presidency, not to get an unpredictable Trump presidency.

The latter possibility was deemed unrealistic anyway because of Russian assumptions about the primacy of the executive. “The American elites” or “the system” would not let Trump win, according to Russian [conventional wisdom](#) in 2016.

Several top U.S.-watchers in Russia who spoke to Bloomberg immediately after election night admitted they did not expect a Trump win. Most of them predicted that Putin was likely to be cautious to see just how far Trump was ready to go before opening the embrace too far.

Still, the whole argument back then focused on whether it would be a Clinton or a Trump presidency. Now, eight months after the election, Russia is realizing that the constellation of forces it has to deal with in the U.S. includes Congress, the intelligence agencies, law enforcement, and the media — not just the executive.

Even if you hack the executive or somehow manage to co-opt it, “the system” may turn against you, because it is more complex than you thought. Moscow was aiming at dealing with what it considered its equal, the executive. Instead, it ended up strengthening another branch of government, the legislature.

“The system” is an important phrase in Russia. The term is often used to refer to the kind of influence the government institutions, security forces, police and intelligence agencies have over society. The historian Stephen Kotkin called it “[uncivil society](#).”

A good “uncivil society” — or, according to the Russian establishment, a clever society — is one that can keep its grip on power while holding elections and producing some superficial changes. Many in Moscow are convinced, not entirely without reason, that this is how the U.S. system works.

They thought that mastering this trick was the main thing to learn from the Americans. “Americans have taught me that the system always prevails,” said [Konstantin Kosachev](#), chairman of the International Relations Committee of the Federation Council, the upper house of Russia’s parliament, in an interview with Rossia-1 state television channel.

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Today, Russian officials routinely call the U.S. Congress “Russophobic” while stopping short of criticizing Trump. Yet another round of anti-Russia sanctions signed into law is a major debacle, considering Russia’s policy goal was to have sanctions lifted altogether through influencing the U.S. executive. It is highly unlikely that Moscow will just leave the situation where it is.

One obvious avenue for Moscow is further exploiting the discord between the American executive, the Congress, and other institutions of government and society.

This might not bring Russia major victories anytime soon, but it would give its politicians the satisfaction of proving their political thinking right. It is a safe bet that the executive-legislative relations in the U.S. will be so rocky that Moscow will have plenty of chances to

point out disagreements and mock America's political "schizophrenia." [Putin's spokesperson](#) has done so already.

Russian ideologues say that viable governance demands the subordination of all branches of government to the executive. Free the executive from the shackles of parliament and the press, and you, too, can be saved.

I wonder where Trump stands on that credo.

Maxim Trudolyubov is a senior fellow with the Kennan Institute. This article was originally published by the [Kennan Institute](#).

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