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The U.S. Midterms: What's at Stake for the Kremlin? (Op-ed)

Washington's approach to Vladimir Putin could radically shift if Democrats make gains.

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As Americans prepare to go to the polls on Nov. 6, in the upcoming U.S. midterms, there is a lot at stake for Moscow too.

Although nothing is certain — and there are still plenty of close races — the emerging consensus is that the Democrats have a good chance of winning back the House. Meanwhile, it seems likely that Republicans will retain control of the Senate.

Most Democratic House candidates have recognized that campaigning on issues like Moscow's role in the 2016 election, and what President Donald Trump's campaign knew (or

didn't know) about it, is not a winning strategy. Instead, they are honing in on domestic issues like health care, the environment or broader criticism of Trump. But that doesn't mean the Kremlin won't be watching uneasily.

If Republicans hold onto the House, there will be no meaningful congressional investigation into anything to do with Russia. The investigation led by special counsel Robert Mueller will wind down unceremoniously. Nobody in Washington — at least nobody with any real power — will pay attention to these questions until 2021 at the earliest.

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What's more, American policy towards Russia will be determined by a Republican Party that seems to be rethinking its position on Vladimir Putin on a weekly basis. This does not necessarily mean that Washington will adopt a dovish approach towards Moscow. But it does seem likely that voices which advocate a softer approach with Russia will be emboldened. And with a Republican win could come the confidence boost Trump needs to oust the remaining Russia hard-liners, notably Defense Secretary James Mattis.

Democratic control of the House (even if the Republicans keep the Senate) will mean something very different for Russia and its place in American politics. Democrats will have to choose which of the many Trump scandals to investigate and his campaign's alleged ties to Russia will probably make the cut. This means that there will be at least one House investigation into Moscow's role in the election, but other investigations into Trump's longer-term financial ties to Russia, for example, could create problems for his presidency.

Under Democrats, a probe into financial ties between Trump and Russia would inevitably balloon to include all suspicious financial ties between the United States and Russia. It would likely also expand to include an investigation of RT, other Russian media and Russian trolls. At the very least, Russia would be the subject of heightened American scrutiny for months, if not longer.

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In the shadow of an increasingly hostile relationship, American policy towards Russia could move in two very different directions. Democratic investigations could push the Republicans toward a softer position on Moscow. This would certainly make life easier for Trump whose instincts appear to be tilted in that direction. However, a hawkish Democratic Party might also force the Republicans to adopt similarly tough positions, so as not to cede any foreign policy ground to the Democrats.

These congressional investigations will also likely lead to different policies. A Democratic House will pass legislation that would make it more difficult for Russia, or any other foreign power, to intervene in American elections. That bill would have a good chance of passing through a Republican Senate. However, a Republican House would not entertain the possibility of such a bill, all but inviting Moscow to intervene again in 2020.

The relationship between Moscow and Washington has been influenced by American elections

in the past, but usually only presidential elections. Jimmy Carter's defeat by Ronald Reagan, Barack Obama's over John McCain and, Trump's 2016 win all altered the U.S.-Russian relationship. But there has never been a U.S midterm election where so much about the bilateral relationship has hung so definitively in the balance and where the stakes for the Kremlin have been so high.

Unlike the Russian media which has been paying minimal attention to this campaign, the Kremlin, which already has been accused of meddling, appears to be following the American midterms more closely than expected. And well it should.

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