

Venezuela Sets the Stage for a Putin-Trump Confrontation

In the past, Trump has taken hard stances against Russia, only to back away.

By [Tinatin Japaridze & Lincoln Mitchell](#)

February 13, 2019



Cristian Hernandez / EPA / TASS

During the last few weeks, the economic tragedy in Venezuela has evolved into a full-blown political crisis. Demands for President Nicolas Maduro's ouster, now fronted by the head of the opposition-controlled National Assembly Juan Guaido, have reached fever pitch as years of his misrule have destroyed Venezuela's once prosperous economy.

Trump Administration's reaction to the crisis stands out as a notable anomaly in his foreign policy record. Thus far, his strategy has differed from that of his predecessors by seeking to scale down American military commitments in Afghanistan and the Middle East, moving the

U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, convening a summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and cultivating a well-documented relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

However, the decision to recognize Guaido as the legitimate Venezuelan leader is exactly what we would have expected from any recent president, going as far back as Ronald Reagan almost four decades ago.

Related article: [Maduro's Collapse Would Be a Defeat for Putin Too \(Op-ed\)](#)

Trump's position stands in sharp opposition to the view from Moscow.

As one of its strongest economic partners, particularly with ties in crude oil, loans and arms sales, Russia is unlikely to abandon Venezuela any time soon. To give an example, Kremlin-controlled oil company, Rosneft, has provided billions in credit lines and loans to Venezuela, and remains an active financial backer of the Maduro government.

President Vladimir Putin has [warned](#) the U.S. against aggressively supporting the Venezuelan opposition and criticized Trump's suggestion that U.S. military intervention could be an option in resolving the current crisis.

This is significant because historically, the Trump Administration has sought to avoid pushing back against Russian actions in Ukraine and elsewhere. Additionally, on the backdrop of this crisis lurks the ongoing enquiry into Russian involvement in the 2016 election and Trump's financial ties with Moscow.

With that in mind, the current differences between the two countries regarding an issue of such urgency raises many questions about the bilateral relationship.

Trump's critics have drawn attention to his [comments](#) regarding NATO, his [withdrawal](#) of troops from Syria and his Brexit [views](#), claiming that they support Moscow's position rather than conventional American ones. However, the Trump Administration's policy on Venezuela is different as it directly confronts Russia and offers nothing to Moscow.

Aside from the economic interests guiding Russia's support of Maduro, also important is Putin's uneasiness with the concept of regime change and "Color [Revolutions](#)." From the Russian view, regime change is an often-used Washington foreign policy strategy which seeks to topple U.S. opponents, particularly in Russia's "near abroad." Russia will see the fall of Maduro as another example of that trend.

Related article: [The Putin Touch in Venezuela \(Op-ed\)](#)

Despite this, Trump has staked out a position that is popular in Washington, particularly among his own Republican Party, while simultaneously signaling that he is not beholden to Russia's interests.

This is clearly a political victory for Trump, but the question as to whether he will maintain his position is significant.

In the past, Trump has taken hard stances against Russia, on matters like [sanctions](#), only ultimately to back away from them.

If he repeats this tendency with regards Venezuela, the perception that he is doing Putin's bidding will become all the more difficult to refute. A change in policy would make it even more difficult for Republicans, particularly foreign policy hawks like Senator Marco Rubio, to maintain the position that there is no untoward relationship between the President and the Kremlin.

The wise move for Trump would be to maintain his current course on Venezuela. Increased pressure from Russia on one side and from Congress on the other may, however, put Trump in a very difficult position, forcing him to choose between two relationships that are very important to him.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/02/13/venezuela-sets-the-state-for-a-putin-trum-confrontation-op-ed-a64463>