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A Farewell to Trump? Russia's Elite Braces for U.S. Elections

Trump's election made Russia a hostage of the battle raging in U.S. domestic politics. This time around, Biden's victory wouldn't be the worst thing for Russia.

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Patrick Semansky / AP / TASS

The U.S. presidential election is one of the most important events in Russian domestic politics, a popular Russian joke has it. There is actually some truth in this: the outcome of the U.S. campaign will have a noticeable effect on the Kremlin's future actions, and not just abroad but at home, too.

It's generally believed that the Kremlin favorite is still Donald Trump, and that Moscow sees a victory for Joe Biden as a threat to its own interests. Yet in reality, there is no consensus within the ruling Russian elite on which of the candidates would be better for Russia, and the

Kremlin's attitude to Trump is far more complex than is commonly believed.

Trump's 2016 victory was a delightful surprise for the Kremlin. His rhetoric on Russia was completely different from that of his predecessors: no criticism, no preaching, no promoting of liberal values—just calls to "get along" with Putin. Moscow hoped that his election would transform bilateral relations.

In addition, Trump shattered the West's united front, bickering with and alienating the United States' European NATO allies. He also scaled back the U.S. role in international conflicts, and said that the United States' main enemy was not Russia but China.

In other words, Trump appeared to promise two things for Russia: a destructive element that would sweep away previous U.S. approaches and make U.S. policy more inward-facing, and a creative element that raised hopes of "getting along" and striking a deal.

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The first was more or less delivered, though at the cost of much stricter and more numerous sanctions and the destruction of the relationship's very foundations. But the second aspect came to nothing: by 2018 it was already clear that no deal could be counted upon, with any hint of an agreement prompting new anti-Russian rhetoric within the United States and weakening Trump's position.

Despite four years of unfulfilled hopes, new sanctions, and decimated relations, the dream of reaching a deal with Trump lives on in the Kremlin: at least President Vladimir Putin himself would likely prefer to deal with Trump than with Biden. The feeling in Moscow is that if Trump cannot pull Russia out of its spiral of confrontation with the United States, no one can.

Still, the Trump presidency has an increasingly high price for Russia: in addition to sanctions, there's now a real threat to the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, while Trump's obsession with the threat from China has destroyed nearly all arms control agreements. And now Biden's chances of winning look strong enough for Russia to start preparing for that eventuality. This time around, Moscow is exercising more caution than in 2016, when it expended considerable effort to discredit the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton.

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There is no universal attitude to Trump's presidency and the risks of the impending election within the Russian elite. There are, however, several schools of thought.

There are those who still believe that Trump is "their man." These are the people who believed Trump would, if he could, offer Russia a good deal, and herald the start of a new era of relations. This was the dominant thinking until July 2018, when Putin met with Trump in Helsinki, full of expectations of a breakthrough and armed with a raft of proposals—none of which came to anything. There are increasingly few within the Russian elite who see Trump as an objective in himself, and their voice inside Kremlin offices has become noticeably weaker.

If not an objective, he can at least be an instrument to sow chaos within the U.S. political class and destroy Western unity—or so goes another school of thought inherent to Trump supporters. Under this thinking, it doesn't really matter that Russia can't get anything out of Trump during talks. What's important is that his contradictory and destructive policies make the United States more exposed and fragile, which gives Russia freer rein on the world stage and at home.

In this respect, Biden's positions on specific issues, such as his readiness to extend the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), are of secondary importance. In first place is Trump's propensity for isolationism: he doesn't intervene in Russia's internal affairs, or in conflicts in the post-Soviet space, or even in Syria. This thinking is popular among the Russian *siloviki* (security services), who would like to come to an agreement with Washington on specific practical matters, while staying out of each other's way in areas over which they disagree. This school of thought does not include any expectation of a breakthrough in relations.

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Then there are those in the Russian elite who see more problems from Trump's presidency than advantages. These people include a sizeable proportion of the diplomatic service and other experts who advise the authorities on foreign policy issues, but who don't take part in the decision-making process. As far as they are concerned, the increased unpredictability and reduced professionalism of U.S. politics under Trump is a threat not only to the U.S. state, but to the entire global community, including Russia.

Many of those people believe that a Clinton presidency would actually have been less harmful for Russia. For this reason, their hopes are now on Biden, who, as a politician from inside the system, will have more power than Trump has had to implement any agreements reached with Russia.

The final school of thought is a very simple one: the worse relations with Washington are, the more grounds there are for pursuing a conservative and repressive agenda at home, which boosts the position of some within the elite. Many of the *siloviki* and protectors are ready to defend the "national interest" and "political stability" from foreign enemies, regardless of whether the face of those enemies is Trump or Biden. The latter, however, might seem the most beneficial, as confrontational rhetoric and mutual distrust look set to grow: great grounds for tightening political control over domestic affairs.

The voice of this last group is for now on the periphery of foreign policy discussions within the Kremlin, but is getting louder and more frequently heard. The worsening confrontation with the West—especially amid the poisoning of opposition politician Alexei Navalny—gives this section of the elite an extra advantage.

Unlike in 2016, Russia has no desire to experiment this time around. The negative consequences of the Trump presidency and disappointment in him have led to a more sober and pragmatic approach. For the Kremlin, Trump has proven himself to be incapable of turning intentions into concrete action.

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Trump's election made Russia a hostage of the battle raging in U.S. domestic politics. Now there is hope that a Democratic victory may have at least one advantage: to move the spotlight away from the issue of Russian interference and, in turn, make any dialogue with Russia less toxic for the Americans.

Meanwhile, Putin has turned his attention to a new initiative: the discussion of key global issues at meetings of the permanent members of the UN Security Council. That will require more responsible and professional involvement from the United States, which will be difficult under Trump.

Of course, if Trump does get reelected, Russia will continue to gloat, take advantage of the fragility of American politics, and capitalize on the lack of Western unity. But there is also a feeling of Trump fatigue: from the destruction of the strategic relationship, the threat to Nord Stream 2, and Russia's status as a hostage of U.S. politics. All of this means that, moving forward, Biden's victory wouldn't be the worst thing for Russia.

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