



RUSSIA AND THE US ELECTION

■ ANALYSIS

Russia's Trump Card?

The Prospects for Russia–US Relations After the Election of Donald Trump
Ruth Deyermond, London 2

■ ANALYSIS

The Kremlin's New Policy Toward the US

Sufian N. Zhemukhov, Washington 5

■ ANALYSIS

The Role of Russia in the US Presidential Elections

Robert W. Orttung, Washington 8

■ OPINION POLL

Russians on the US and the US Presidential Elections 11

US Voters on Russia 14

Russia's Trump Card? The Prospects for Russia–US Relations After the Election of Donald Trump

Ruth Deyermond, London

Abstract

The unexpected election of Donald Trump appears to offer the Russian government hope of both improved bilateral relations with the US and a more favourable international political climate. However, Trump's apparent interest in improving relations with Russia are at odds with the position of his own party, and this obstacle may be compounded both by Trump's temperament and his lack of foreign policy experience. Not surprisingly, the Russian government has adopted a cautious approach to the incoming administration, and there currently appears to be little reason to expect a sustained and significant improvement in US–Russia relations.

The unexpected victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election appears to offer the Russian government hope of both improved bilateral relations with the US and a markedly more favourable international political climate. The realization of either of these hopes is likely to remain elusive, however, because of the domestic constraints on Trump and the character of Trump himself. Thus, although the Russian government has publicly welcomed the opportunities seemingly offered by Trump's election, a degree of caution is evident, and likely to persist, in the Russian approach to the new president.

The election of a new US president has traditionally offered Moscow and Washington an opportunity to revise the relationship which has, in every case since the end of the Cold War, soured over the course of the previous administration. Critical to this revision are both the ability to wipe clean major areas of the policy slate and the development of a new personal relationship between the presidents. In these respects, the election of Donald Trump appears to offer interesting possibilities. Encumbered both by her responsibility for the Obama administration's early Russia policy (and in particular some of the most assertive rhetoric and actions in relation to Russia after the collapse of the 'reset') and the reported mutual personal hostility with Putin, Clinton would not have been able to create a fresh start in the bilateral relationship, and her anticipated election was regarded by many as likely to worsen the already historically disastrous US–Russia relationship.

In contrast, a Trump presidency appears to offer a radical change on policy and in personal relations with Putin. Trump has often appeared to be enthusiastic about both, expressing a desire to improve relations with Russia and optimism about the ability to work cooperatively with its president. More broadly, the outlines of Trump's approach to foreign policy—more limited in scope and in the projection of values, ambivalent about US alliances including NATO—appear to

suggest a weakening of those trends in US international behaviour that have most antagonized the Russian government. In all these areas, however, hopes of improvement may be illusory.

Anticipating the likely outlines of the new administration's Russia policy is significantly more difficult than normal—paradoxically so, since the subject of Russia played an unusually prominent role in the election. This uncertainty is the product of two factors—differences between Trump and his party on Russia, and the views and character of Trump himself.

During the election campaign, Trump's stated position on Russia was generally positive, suggesting an interest in improving bilateral relations and a positive view of Putin's leadership. Trump claimed that "I think it would be great if we got along with Russia because we could fight ISIS together", and the idea that Russia and the US could adopt a cooperative position on Syria has been a particular focus of Trump's statements before and after the election. Trump also appeared reluctant to criticise the Russian government during his campaign, dismissing the idea that Russia had intervened in Ukraine (a claim he had to walk back immediately, when challenged), and refusing to concede that the hacking of Democratic National Committee (DNC) files was connected to Russia, preferring to suggest that it could have been the work of the Chinese government or "somebody sitting on their bed that weighs 400 pounds".

At other points in the campaign, however, Trump appeared to take a much less positive view of Russia, saying that "Iran and Russia are against us" and claiming in a presidential debate that "our nuclear program has fallen way behind and [Russia] have gone wild with their nuclear program. Not good. Our government shouldn't have allowed that to happen." Thus, if the election offered an insight into Trump's likely approach to Russia, it was a confused and uncertain one, appearing to suggest the possibility of cooperation in some areas but the potential for friction in others.

Early post-election indications have been more straightforwardly positive. The telephone conversation between Putin and Trump (which apparently took place without any advice from US officials) was reported by the Russian government as having established agreement on the need for “constructive cooperation” on international terrorism and economic issues. A cooperative relationship on Syria and the lifting of US sanctions against Russia, together with a possible weakening of support for NATO, would provide the Russian government with the greatest series of gains in relations with the US since the 1990s.

Not surprisingly, Trump’s election was celebrated by sections of the Russian political elite, with Duma deputies breaking into applause when the news was reported. LDPR leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy held a party in the Duma to celebrate the result, and the governor of Omsk was reported to have told the Russian Federation Council that United Russia had won the US presidential election.

Putin’s interest in establishing an early and positive relationship with Trump has been clearly evident since the election. The Kremlin reported favourably on the post-election telephone conversation with Trump, and Putin has spoken flatteringly of the president-elect, telling NTV that Trump is a successful businessman and a clever man. In his 2016 address to Federal Assembly, Putin declared his readiness to restore bilateral relations with the Trump administration, asserting the benefits of US–Russia cooperation for global stability and “the fight against real rather than fictional threats”.

Critically, however, Trump’s apparent interest in improving relations with Russia and his benign view of Putin are at odds with the position of the wider Republican Party. Congressional Republicans are almost universally hawkish on Russia: they stridently opposed the ‘reset’, have condemned the Obama administration for alleged weakness towards Russia, pushed for an expansion of missile defence, and characterised Putin as a dangerous dictator. A Trump détente with the Putin administration would be likely to encounter strong bipartisan opposition in Congress, severely limiting the prospects for meaningful improvement in the relationship. The narrow Republican majority in the Senate would make it significantly more difficult for the Trump administration, not least because since the election a number of Republican Senators have been highly critical both of the Russian government and of Trump’s approach to it: John McCain, one of the most prominent Senate critics of the Russian government, has said that a warming of relations with Putin would be “unacceptable”, while Lindsey Graham has called for a congressional hearing on Russian activity, including the alleged DNC hack.

One of the frontrunners in Trump’s drawn-out and seemingly chaotic selection process for Secretary of State, Mitt Romney, is typical of the Republican establishment’s view of the Russian government. Romney has been a vocal critic of the Russian government, famously identifying Russia as the US’s “number one geopolitical foe” and excoriating Obama for the ‘reset’. Romney has previously identified Russia as one of the three major emerging threats to US security, together with Islamist terrorism and a rising China, and claimed that the Russian authoritarianism has generated a destabilizing and aggressive foreign policy.

This hawkish approach to Russia has also been evident in the position of some members of Trump’s team, notably the next Vice President Mike Pence, who has attacked the Obama administration for allowing “the small and bullying leader of Russia” to dictate terms to the US. During the election, Pence was strongly critical of what he alleged was Clinton’s failure to check Russian assertiveness toward Ukraine, Georgia, and the Middle East; suggesting that “provocations by Russia need to be met with American strength”; appearing to imply a need for greater US military assertiveness towards Russia in Syria; and advocating increased military spending to counter Russian defence modernisation.

The strong anti-Putin (and arguably Russophobic) consensus in the Republican Party is likely to be a particularly significant obstacle to improved US–Russia relations because the next president lacks the knowledge and the political experience to counter it. Even by the standards of recent US presidents, who have all lacked prior knowledge of and interest in foreign affairs, Trump is notable for his total absence of foreign policy experience. A politically inexperienced president who reportedly has little interest in policy detail is unlikely to be focused on, or able to control, the direction of foreign policy. Trump’s Russia policy is thus likely to be driven by those in and around the administration with interest and knowledge in the relationship, which renders any kind of sustained ‘reset’ unlikely.

This block on an improvement in relations may be compounded by the temperament of the president-elect. Several of Trump’s biographers have characterised him as thin-skinned, highly susceptible to both flattery and insult, and preoccupied with maintaining ‘alpha male’ status in all his personal and business interactions. If this characterisation is correct—and nothing about Trump’s conduct during or after the election appears to challenge it—then the prospects for an improved relationship with Russia are limited. Assertions of ‘alpha male’ supremacy and the tendency to respond to perceived insult with an escalation of public insults are not likely to be a viable basis for improving diplomacy with Russia or for a pos-

itive personal relationship with Putin. A ‘reset’ of presidential relations thus risks being derailed by the first point of disagreement unless Trump modifies his behaviour in office or Putin is able to bear the personal and political costs of public insults from the US president.

Not surprisingly, there are indications that the Russian government is cautious about the prospects for significant change in the relationship with the US for all of these reasons. One Foreign Ministry official suggested to *Interfax* that Trump’s ability to cooperate with Russia on Syria would be undermined by the US political elite. In an interview with the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, Sergei Lavrov spoke cautiously about the prospects for improved relations with the US under Trump, welcoming Trump’s campaign statements about improving relations with Russia, but noting the difficulty of reversing the damage to the relationship and observing that the Russian government hoped the Trump administration would avoid the mistakes of the previous administration (which does not, of course, signal that they necessarily expect them to do so). Perhaps most significantly, the generally positive comments on the relationship in Putin’s Federal Assembly address also included the warning that “attempts to break strategic parity are extremely dangerous and can lead to global catastrophe”, a statement that perhaps reflects concerns about the Republican Party’s longstanding commitment to an expansion of Missile Defence.

Beyond the particular concerns and hopes generated by the prospect of a Trump presidency, some Russian analysts argue that the deeper trends of international politics are unlikely to be significantly affected by the next occupant of the White House. For them, the fail-

ure of a US-led liberal order and the connected decline of the US as the world’s most powerful state, has been evident since the neo-imperial overstretch of the George W. Bush administration and accelerated by the 2008 global financial crisis. The shift from US leadership to a multipolar world is, in this view desirable, inevitable and something that a Trump presidency will not affect to a significant degree. Trump’s disregard for the hegemonic position of the US, his distaste for its costs, and his willingness to reconsider the institutional and normative foundations of US foreign policy since 1945, is thus for some Russian analysts merely a reflection of the shifting balance of power in international affairs, a pragmatic reflection of limitations on US power in the twenty first century. In this regard, Fyodor Lukyanov has suggested that Trump’s administration will share the fundamental strategic assumption of the Obama presidency—that US foreign policy needs to recognise and manage US decline. Again, however, even if Lukyanov is correct in his assessment of Trump’s position, it is not one that reflects the Republican view or the influential, conservative US analytical elite in think tanks like the Heritage Foundation.

Ultimately, then, the Russian government’s moderately optimistic caution and its careful approach to the mercurial president-elect appears to reflect both the opportunities offered by a new administration with a favourable view of improved relations with Russia, and the constraints on significant change to US policy. There currently appears to be little reason to expect a sustained and significant improvement in this vitally important bilateral relationship.

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The Kremlin's New Policy Toward the US

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Abstract

Following the election of Donald Trump as president of the US, the Kremlin officially announced its conditions for improving relations between the two countries, including demands that it did not make to the previous administration. It seems that the Kremlin believes that Trump painted himself into a corner with his promises “to get along with Russia,” and Putin intends to take advantage of the situation.

The Kremlin Did Not Really Support Trump during His Campaign

During the 2016 presidential elections, Donald Trump repeatedly claimed that the Russian president Vladimir Putin praised him. Those statements created a widespread belief that Putin personally favored Trump over other US presidential candidates, and that the Kremlin supported Trump and even helped him to win the elections. To what extent did the Kremlin prefer and support Trump during the elections?

Putin has always tried to remain politically correct and has never personally criticized any US president; Putin kept using terms like “smart,” “dignified,” and “strong” in regard to Barack Obama even when the world media were discussing the American president’s comment that Putin “wasn’t so smart.”¹ The Kremlin’s flattery, however, never sounded sincere because it was usually accompanied with direct criticism of its “overseas partners,” namely the U.S administration and with actions designed to challenge it. US politicians usually did not find the Kremlin’s flattery to be more than lip service.

Therefore, it was more that unusual when Trump became the only presidential candidate who tried to capitalize on the Kremlin’s compliments. Trump even exaggerated the Russian leader’s attention, announcing that Putin had called him “a genius.”² Putin, however, never engaged in a mutual exchange of praise with Trump during the campaign. In fact, the Russian leader never confirmed Trump’s claims, but instead, tried to distance himself from Trump and even went so far as to correct Trump by pointing out that “I only said that he was a bright person.”³

The Kremlin Sought to Undermine the Legitimacy of the US Elections

Strategically, the Kremlin always aimed to discredit the US electoral system rather than to support any of the candidates. During every US election, the Kremlin pur-

sues a policy of calling attention to all shortcomings with American democracy. By pointing out problems in the US election process, the Kremlin tries to distract attention from concerns about its own legitimacy and push back against accusations of unfair elections in Russia. The contradiction between the possibility of winning the US Electoral College while losing the popular vote remains the Kremlin’s favorite example of the imperfection of American democracy; that has happened five times in US history, including the 2016 elections.

Instead of supporting any of the candidates during the 2016 US presidential elections, the Kremlin followed its usual policy of finding controversies in American political practice. As in every US election, Putin personally spoke about the lack of democracy in the US to counter the traditional criticism of the unfair Russian elections. This time was no exception, and Putin was prepared to defend his point with facts, asking US journalist Fareed Zakaria, “Do you think that the elections are democratic in the United States? Twice in American history, a president was elected who did not get the majority of votes.”⁴

During the 2016 elections, the Kremlin also developed a new argument that, as an anti-establishment candidate, Trump did not have any chance of winning, even though he was more popular. This new narrative was supposed to demonstrate that the American establishment would not let an outsider like Trump become president and that Clinton’s victory was guaranteed by the predictable US political system. That new argument sought to prove that US elections were as corrupt as Russian elections, which guaranteed Putin’s victory. The pro-Kremlin media even discussed the possibility of Trump’s assassination if he were to win.⁵

The Kremlin’s calculations turned out to be completely wrong since the election proved the opposite: it was Clinton who lost in spite of winning the popular vote and the support of the establishment. In

1 <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-30629200>>

2 <<http://www.reuters.com/video/2016/05/08/trump-putin-called-me-a-genius?videoId=368403586>>

3 <<http://www.politico.com/story/2016/06/putin-zakaria-russia-trump-224525>>

4 <<http://www.politico.com/story/2016/06/putin-zakaria-russia-trump-224525>>

5 <<https://rg.ru/2016/11/30/glava-cru-pripugnul-trampa-posovetovav-byt-ostrozhnij-v-obeshchaniiah-rf.html>>

the relativity of Russian propaganda, however, losing an argument did not mean anything. Kremlin propaganda instantly pivoted by using Trump's victory as a sign of the Kremlin's wisdom and praising Putin for supporting Trump, even though Putin had never really done so.

A Trump–Putin Bromance?

Though the Russian elite did not believe in Trump's victory and even tried to capitalize on his presumed defeat, the Kremlin preferred to deal with anybody but Hillary Clinton as the new US president. While the Kremlin hoped for another “reset” with a new US president, Clinton's foreign policy platform proposed building on the legacy of the previous administration rather than restarting US–Russian relations again from scratch. Trump's approach was the opposite of Clinton's: he announced that he wanted to get along with Russia. How unique was Trump's suggestion to “get along with Russia” and how did the Kremlin interpret that idea?

A positive policy toward Russia played an important role in Trump's election program as he asked voters, “Wouldn't it be a wonderful thing, frankly, if we actually got along with Russia?”⁶ Most uniquely, Trump openly expressed his pro-Kremlin position and personal admiration for the Russian leader.

In the logic of US–Russian relations, however, Trump did not offer any new approach. In fact, every new president, both in the U.S and Russia, have started their terms in office by announcing efforts to get along with the other. It is also true that each president has ended his term with worsened relations between the two countries. The 42nd US President, Bill Clinton (1993–2001), and the first Russian president, Boris Yeltsin (1991–1999), maintained the longest period of good relations between their countries until they became alienated over the Yugoslavia conflict in 1999. The 43rd US President, George W. Bush, started relations with Putin by infamously stating, “I looked the man in the eye. I found him very straight-forward and trustworthy—I was able to get a sense of his soul,”⁷ but, at the end of his term, Bush called Putin “cold blooded.”⁸ The 44th president Barack Obama officially “reset” the policy between the two countries, but at the end of his term, their relations deteriorated to the lowest level since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

President-elect Trump is apparently aware of the up-and-down dynamic of the US–Russian relations. When asked after the election if he would have a reset with Russia, Trump answered, “I wouldn't use that term after what happened, you know, previously.” At the same time, Trump reaffirmed that “getting along with Russia” would be “a positive thing.”⁹

Relations Between an Amateur and a Pro

There are two important issues that put Trump in a uniquely unfavorable position with Putin. First, all other American and Russian presidents started cooperating with each other having relatively equal experience in foreign politics. Yeltsin and Clinton were elected two years apart, in 1991 and 1993, respectively; Putin and Bush became presidents in 2000 and 2001; and Medvedev and Obama in 2008 and 2009. The difference in experience between Trump and Putin, however, is striking. While Trump is ready to get along with Russia for the first time, Putin will be playing that game for the third time, which makes the Russian leader much more experienced than the new US president.

Secondly, and more importantly, Trump won election with a promise to improve relations with Russia, unlike all other US presidents who have never previously tied themselves up with such a promise. The new US president-elect complicated his relations with Russia by artificially putting himself into a position in which he apparently has no choice but to get along with Russia. All previous “resets,” between Clinton and Yeltsin, Bush and Putin, and Obama and Medvedev, were based on mutual interests between the countries' leaders, and both sides would have to agree on the conditions of the new relations. This time, however, the Kremlin assumes beforehand that Trump does not have the luxury to negotiate with Russia.

Russians expect President-elect Trump to deliver on his promises that he would consider recognizing Crimea as Russian territory and lifting the sanctions against Russia.¹⁰ Trump's pro-Kremlin rhetoric caused the Russian parliament to applaud Trump's victory.

The former procurator of Russian Crimea, MP Natalia Polonskaya, tweeted, “It's time for the new US president-elect @realDonaldTrump to fulfill his big election promises about recognizing the Crimean referendum [to join Russia].”¹¹ Pro-Kremlin activists created billboard

6 <http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2016/08/03/trump_u_s_russia_should_join_forces_to_strike_isis_in_syria.html>

7 Angela Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: US–Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) p. 62.

8 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/us-politics/8121385/George-W-Bush-thoughts-on-world-leaders.html>>

9 “Donald Trump's New York Times Interview: Full Transcript,” The New York Times, November 23, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/23/us/politics/trump-new-york-times-interview-transcript.html?_r=0>

10 <<http://www.politico.com/story/2016/07/trump-crimea-sanctions-russia-226292>>

11 <<http://www.segodnya.ua/world/poklonskaya-nadeetsya-chto-tramp-vypolnit-obeshchanie-priznat-krym-rossijskim--768473.html>>

advertisements celebrating a Trump–Putin “friendship” with the caption, “Let’s make the world great again — together.” Additionally, the Kremlin worked on setting clear conditions for improving relations between the two countries.

Putin’s Plan for Trump: The Kremlin’s New Uncompromising Rhetoric toward the US

Putin did not wait long to capitalize on Trump’s mistake of cornering himself into good relations. While praising the president-elect personally, the Kremlin adopted a new, demanding, tone in its official rhetoric toward the US.

In response to Trump’s election statement that he was ready to consider recognizing Crimea as Russian territory, the Kremlin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov stressed, “no one in Russia—never—will be ready to start any kind of discussion about Crimea.” Instead, Peskov told Western journalists, “We are patient enough to wait until this understanding occurs in Washington, in the States, in Europe.”¹² Apparently, the Kremlin takes for granted that the US would recognize Crimean annexation before beginning any negotiations with Russia.

While the Kremlin claimed to be “patient enough to wait,” what is the real time frame for Putin to wait until Trump would meet Russia’s demands? Putin’s administration apparently counts on normalizing relations with the US some time before the 2018 presidential elections in Russia. Western recognition of the Crimean annexation and a decision to lift the sanctions would become Putin’s best electoral card for his 2018 reelection. If indeed the new US president-elect trapped himself with his straightforward promises to get along with Russia, Trump would have no other choice except working for Putin’s personal popularity before the 2018 Russian elections.

To back up the Kremlin’s new uncompromising position, within weeks after the US elections, Putin signed the 2017 Concept for Russian Foreign Policy. A comparative textual analysis of the document indicated that the new policy mostly repeated the previous policies adopted since 2013. However, the Kremlin included in the 2017 document a few new important statements concerning relations with the US.¹³ The most important of the additions is that for the first time, there is uncompromising rhetoric toward the US. Article 72 of the document stated, “Russia rejects the US’s extrajurisdictional practice of their jurisdiction beyond the frames of

the international law, [Russia] rejects [the US’s] attempts at military, political, economic, and other kinds of pressure, and [Russia] will regard as its right to harshly react towards unfriendly actions [from the U.S].”

Going after ISIS Together

While announcing his readiness to get along with Russia, the only example of policy co-operation with Russia that Trump mentioned was going “after ISIS together.”¹⁴ Trump’s hopes to ally with Russia against terrorism is also not new. Bush had a similar position after 9/11, and Obama started his “reset” with Russia based on fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan. Both those times, however, Russia had its own interests. In 2001, siding with the US’s fight against terrorism, the Kremlin hoped to avoid criticism for the Second Russian Chechen war that it started in 1999. In 2008, allowing NATO to transit non-lethal cargoes to Afghanistan via the Russian city of Ulyanovsk, the Kremlin pursued its own interests in stabilizing the weak borders between Afghanistan and the post-Soviet countries and to prevent uncontrolled flows of Afghan drugs into Russia. Both times, however, Russia never directly joined the US in fighting terrorists.

It is not clear on what political platform Trump’s administration would cooperate with the Kremlin in fighting ISIS. A year of Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war proved that Washington and Moscow do not share mutual interests in the region. Trump never acknowledged that the US and Russia have been fighting two different causes in the Middle East. While the US is helping the Iraqi government in fighting ISIS, Russia is involved in the civil war in Syria supporting Assad’s regime against his political opposition. This time, regarding the fight against ISIS, US and Russian interests do not coincide and even have important nuances that might play out differently than during the previous normalizations of relations between the countries.

Conclusion

The US and Russia are entering an era of unpredictable relations. Both Trump and Putin are known for making statements that they do not really mean and for sudden changes in their positions. Putin’s foreign policy proved to be extremely flexible, as zig zags in Russian–Turkish relations demonstrated, when within months, Putin pivoted from calling the Turkish leader a friend to naming him an enemy who stabbed him in the back, and then turned around and called him a close ally again. The

12 <<http://us.pressfrom.com/news/world/-4263-putin-aide-trump-could-build-confidence-with-nato-pullback/>>

13 <<http://spektr.press/situaciya-izmenilas-konstantin-fon-eggert-rasshifroval-novuyu-koncepciyu-vneshnej-politiki-rossii/>>

14 “Donald Trump’s New York Times Interview: Full Transcript,” The New York Times, November 23, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/23/us/politics/trump-new-york-times-interview-transcript.html?_r=0>

warm personal relations between Trump and Putin may change dramatically and unpredictably.

Putin is an experienced enough politician to understand that the situation may change against his favor, even though the Kremlin currently seems to be bluffing as if President-elect Trump has no choice but to deliver on his promises to get along with Russia. As

Gleb Pavlovsky, Putin's former political adviser, commented, "Whoever Trump is, he would remain as the leader of the most powerful economy and army in the world. He would not follow us from behind, he would walk over us... And if the Kremlin would forget to be careful and start constantly drawing attention to itself, it would become an international target."¹⁵

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15 <<http://www.colta.ru/articles/society/13280>>

ANALYSIS

The Role of Russia in the US Presidential Elections

Robert W. Orttung, Washington

Abstract

Russia played an unusually large role in the chaotic 2016 American presidential election. President Vladimir Putin was an object of debate between the two candidates, while the Russian government was seen as intervening in the election. Russia's purpose likely was not to support either of the candidates, but to undermine the legitimacy of American democracy.

An Abstract Concept

For most Americans, Russia is an abstract concept. As prominent TV commentator Dmitry Kiselev likes to point out, Russia can turn the US into "radioactive ash," but most Americans do not really think about this threat much on a day to day basis. The US has few trade ties to Russia and no significant financial flows slosh between them.

Russia is just one of many problems that Americans consider in assessing the outside world and usually it takes a back seat to more pressing concerns, such as terrorism or China's economic might. In the popular American mind, Vladimir Putin is considered a crafty world leader, but most political cartoonists portray him in a macho pose without a shirt, so it is hard for most people to take him seriously.

Praise from Trump

In his unusual campaign, candidate Donald Trump broke with the conventional wisdom in the US that Vladimir Putin is an authoritarian strongman working against American interests and praised him as a "leader far more than our president," referring to Barak Obama. Trump explained his admiration for the Russian pres-

ident by noting that "he does have an 82% approval rating," and had "great control over his country." Trump also promised that "I think that I will be able to get along with him," claiming that Putin had praised him in the past. "I think when he calls me brilliant I'll take the compliment, ok?" the billionaire president-to-be said.

The source of Trump's esteem for Putin is unknown and a topic of intense speculation. Trump never released his tax returns during the campaign and provided few financial details about his extensive business empire, so it is hard to divine the exact nature of the financial ties between Trump and Russian counterparts. Trump tweeted that "I have ZERO investments in Russia" and many reports indicated that Trump had wanted to build an eponymous tower in the land of the czars, but had never succeeded. However, investigative reports showed that some of his projects had the backing of Russian financiers, who themselves had close ties to Putin. Trump had to seek Russian help when his bankruptcies prevented him from obtaining financing from American sources. Additionally, one of Trump's campaign managers was Paul Manafort, who had previously served as an advisor to Russia-backed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, before the Euromaidan revolutionaries

chased him from the country. Manafort maintained ties with Russia's oligarchs.

Another possibility is that the former American reality TV star saw something common in the Russian leader, who previously served in the KGB. Both make a living from understanding human psychology and exploiting the weaknesses they find. The two men typically rely on their intuitions and have little concern for formal institutions. In Trump's world view, Putin is a good negotiator since he is able to leverage a relatively weak position into considerable international influence.

Trump might see Putin as an ally in the fight against ISIS, which seems to be the main idea behind his first foreign policy appointees. This approach drives Trump's national security advisor designate Michael Flynn, whose recent book *The Field of Flight* is subtitled "How We Can Win the Global War Against Radical Islam and Its Allies." However, this presumed alliance elides the fact that in Syria Putin's efforts have been aimed at backing President Bashar al-Assad and not at decimating ISIS. Flynn's ideas about Russia seem to shift over time. He famously attended a 2015 gala dinner for the Kremlin "propaganda bullhorn," as Secretary of State John Kerry dubbed it, RT, the international network formerly known as Russia Today. Flynn, then the former Defense Information Agency chief, sat next to RT head Margarita Simonyan and two chairs down from Putin himself. Flynn regularly appeared on RT to advocate US–Russian cooperation in Syria. However, his 2016 book points out that "war [is] being waged against us" not only by "Radical Islamists," but also others who share their hatred of the West, including Russia, North Korea, China, Cuba, and Venezuela.

During the third presidential debate, Hillary Clinton sought to gain political advantage from Trump's support for dictators, dubbing him Putin's "puppet." The Republican apparently had no way to defend himself and could only shoot back lamely "You're the puppet. No, you're the puppet." Although some right wing American commentators have also praised Putin and his self-declared defense of "conservative values," it is unlikely that Trump's praise for the Russian dictator had much influence on the vote outcome.

A Sinister Russian Hand?

Beyond the apparent Trump–Putin bromance, the Russian security services loomed large in the election when it appeared that they had hacked into the e-mail servers of the Democratic National Committee and began releasing embarrassing e-mails through the "pro-transparency" website Wikileaks. In April, the firm CrowdStrike reported that it had evidence of two hacking groups with ties to the Kremlin, Cozy Bear and Fancy Bear,

breaking into Democratic Party servers. Hackers also breached the e-mail security of Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta. The e-mails obtained in these operations were released on sites such as DCLeaks.com, Wikileaks and Guccifer 2.0.

Public release of the e-mails during the campaign proved embarrassing to many Democrats. The messages detailed various campaign strategies and internal discussions that were not meant for public consumption.

On October 7, the Department of Homeland Security and the Director of National Intelligence issued a statement that "[t]he U.S. Intelligence Community (USIC) is confident that the Russian Government directed the recent compromises of e-mails from US persons and institutions, including from US political organizations." Moreover, the statement declared, "[t]hese thefts and disclosures are intended to interfere with the US election process. Such activity is not new to Moscow—the Russians have used similar tactics and techniques across Europe and Eurasia, for example, to influence public opinion there. We believe, based on the scope and sensitivity of these efforts, that only Russia's senior-most officials could have authorized these activities."

The release of the documents had real consequences for the campaign. Democratic party chief Deborah Wasserman Schultz resigned her position on the eve of the Democratic Party Convention. The steady release of Podesta's e-mail to public view created a backdrop that highlighted Clinton's own e-mail problem, stemming from the fact that she had used a private server for public business when she served as secretary of state.

After the campaign concluded, several reports claimed that "fake news" inspired by Russia had swayed some voters. The reports cited the biased coverage of sources like RT and the Sputnik news agency, who had generally provided coverage that favored Trump over Clinton. The Kremlin clearly was concerned about a Clinton victory, given her likely hard line on Russia. In 2012, Putin blamed then Secretary Clinton for inspiring the massive street protests against the Russian president for engaging in electoral manipulations. Despite Putin's claims, however, it was unlikely that Clinton would be able to mobilize such protests in the Russian capital.

There have also been allegations that Russian hackers were able to manipulate the election results and throw some close battleground states to Trump. In its October statement, the US intelligence community (USIC) discounted this possibility: "The USIC and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) assess that it would be extremely difficult for someone, including a nation-state actor, to alter actual ballot counts or election results by cyber attack or intrusion. This assessment is based on

the decentralized nature of our election system in this country and the number of protections state and local election officials have in place. States ensure that voting machines are not connected to the Internet, and there are numerous checks and balances as well as extensive oversight at multiple levels built into our election process.”

However, some researchers have detected anomalies in the vote count and Green Party candidate Jill Stein, who won only a tiny percent of votes, has succeeded in winning recounts in a few states. The Clinton campaign has joined the effort, but publicly announced that it does not expect the recount to change the outcome of the vote. Trump has complained, via Twitter, about the recount, perhaps unhappy that while he won a majority in the Electoral College, Hillary actually won more than 2.2 million votes more than he did in the popular vote.

Russia's Objectives in the Campaign

While Russian leaders and citizens may have preferred Trump over Clinton in the campaign, it is hard to say what exactly Trump will deliver for the Kremlin, if anything. During the campaign Trump questioned the need for sanctions, hinted that he might recognize the annexation of Crimea, and told NATO allies that he might not protect them if they did not pay a larger share of the military alliance's budget, all policies that serve Kremlin goals. On the other hand, Trump's actions in office are largely unpredictable at this point and most members of the Republican establishment are critical of any efforts to thaw relations with Russia. Similarly, the Democrats are also critical of Putin's Russia, as are leading liberal media institutions, such as the editorial boards of the New York Times and the Washington Post. Beyond Trump, Flynn, and a few others, Russia has few friends in Washington.

Russia's real intention in the US presidential campaign was to undermine confidence in American democracy and the stability of the country's key political institutions. Russia long ago gave up on the idea of building a positive image for itself in the world. Foreigners find little to love in a nationalistic autocracy whose exports consist mainly of energy, weapons and wheat. Rather, through a vast array of media, web sites, social media bots and trolls, experts, and other means, the Kremlin prefers to tar the image of the Western democracies, convincing audiences in Russia and abroad that the coun-

tries in the Atlantic alliance are no less corrupt and dysfunctional than Russia itself.

In this sense, the election of a vulgar opportunist, willing to use racist and anti-Muslim rhetoric, as the “leader of the free world” plays perfectly into Kremlin strategies. Russian propaganda has its biggest impact in places like the Middle East and Latin America. In those markets, Russian information warfare will likely succeed in benefiting from the outrageous statements that Trump likes to make about Islam and Hispanics.

President Trump

Students of Eurasian politics will be comfortable analyzing the Trump presidency. Trump is the first business magnate to become the American leader. In this sense, a close analogue might be to Petro Poroshenko, a Ukrainian oligarch elected as the leader of his country in 2014. On the campaign trail Poroshenko promised, for example, to sell his television network. However, upon taking office, the Ukrainian leader has continued to control his broadcaster and his businesses have been among the few that continue to thrive even as Ukraine itself faces economic hardship in the face of war with Russia.

Even before taking office, Trump is already taking several pages from the Putin playbook. Like the Russian leader, Trump has started by putting pressure on the media and is seeking to limit their ability to cover him critically. Additionally, he has pressured companies to change their business practices and maintain jobs in the US, rather than transferring them to Mexico, where labor is cheaper. Although not unprecedented, such use of state power to influence individual business decisions is extremely unusual in American practice. Trump's advisors have already warned observers to expect more of the same. Putin gained a lot of popularity for pulling a similar stunt in Pikalevo, where he forced oligarch Oleg Deripaska to pay workers at a factory that was losing money and would otherwise have been closed. Trump's plans to build numerous new infrastructure projects will likely out do the \$55 billion Sochi Olympics in their ability to transfer state funds to well-connected insiders.

The main question now is whether American institutions will prove to be more resilient than their Eurasian counterparts. Only time will tell.

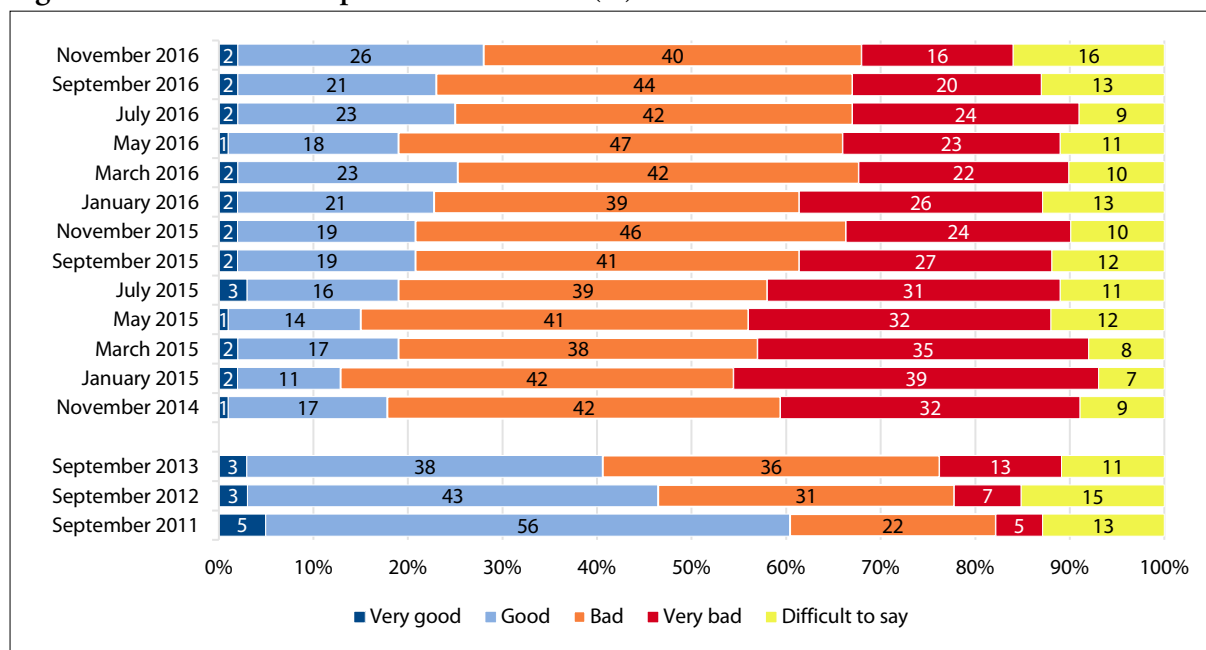
About the Author

Robert Orttung is Director of the GW Sustainability Collaborative and an Associate Research Professor of International Affairs at the George Washington University.

OPINION POLL

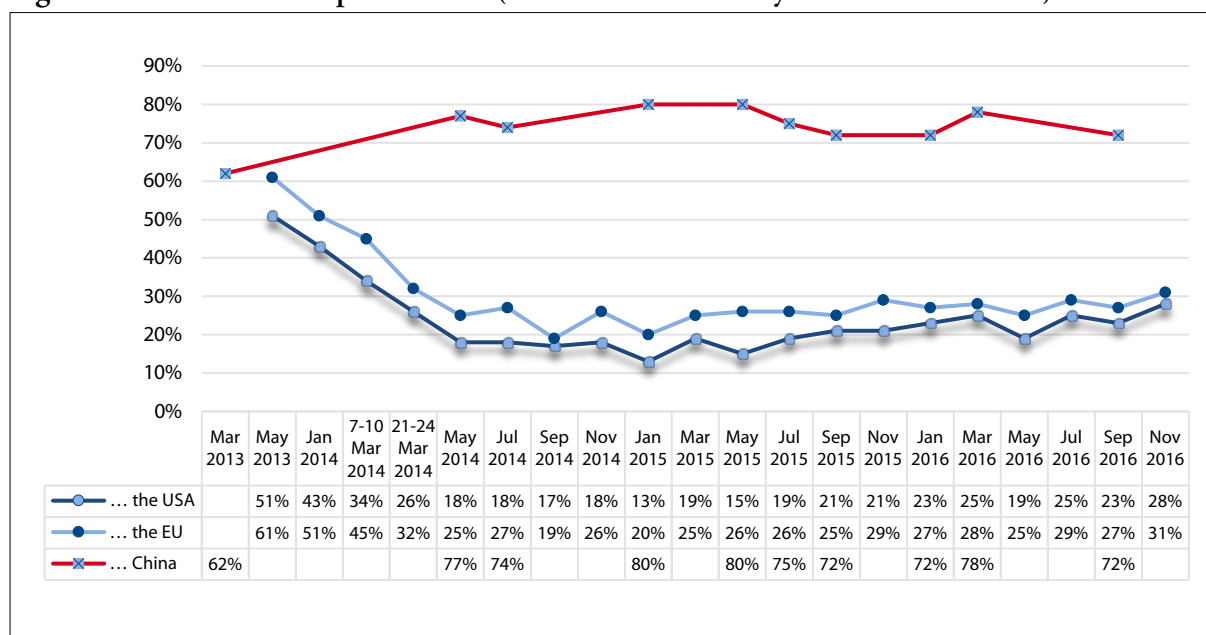
Russians on the US and the US Presidential Elections

Figure 1: What is Your Opinion of the USA? (%)



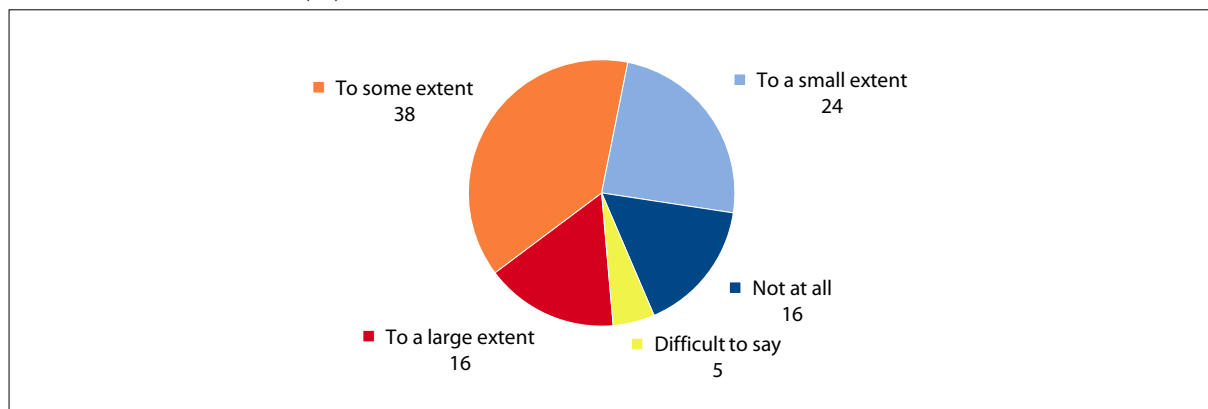
Source: representative opinion polls by Levada Center September 2011 – 18–21 November 2016, <<http://www.levada.ru/2013/10/11/rossiyane-ob-otnoshenii-k-drugim-stranam/>> and <<http://www.levada.ru/2016/11/29/mezhdunarodnye-otnosheniya-4/print/>>

Figure : What is Your Opinion of ... (Sum of Answers “Very Good” and “Good”)



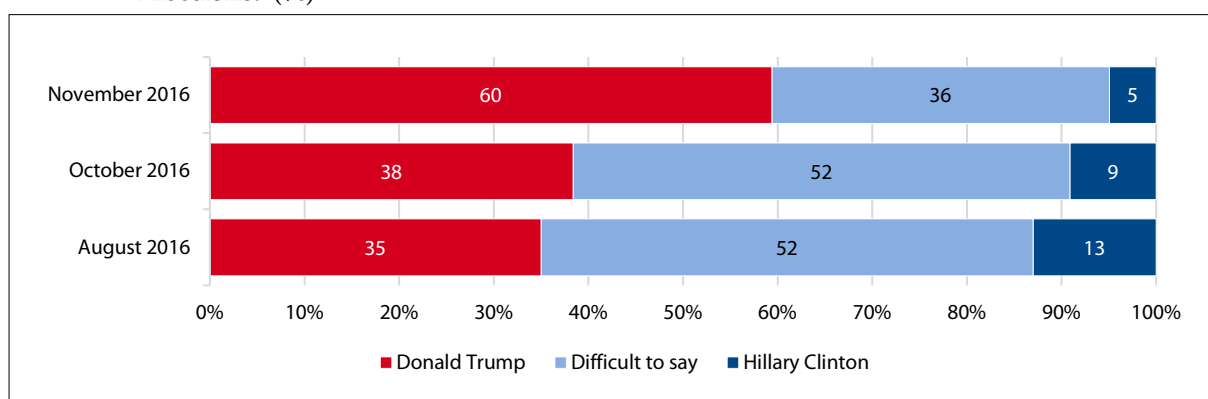
Source: representative opinion polls by Levada Center March 2013 – 18–21 November 2016, <<http://www.levada.ru/2016/11/29/mezhdunarodnye-otnosheniya-4/print/>>, <<http://www.levada.ru/2016/10/19/mezhdunarodnye-otnosheniya-3/print/>>, <<http://www.levada.ru/2014/06/05/otnoshenie-rossiyan-k-drugim-stranam-6/>>

Figure 3: To What Extent Does the Question Who Is President of the USA Influence the Lives of Russians? (%)



Source: representative opinion polls by Levada Center 8–21 November 2016, <<http://www.levada.ru/2016/11/24/prezidentskie-vybory-v-ssha/print/>>

Figure 4: Would It Be Better for Russia If Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton Were to Win these Elections? (%)



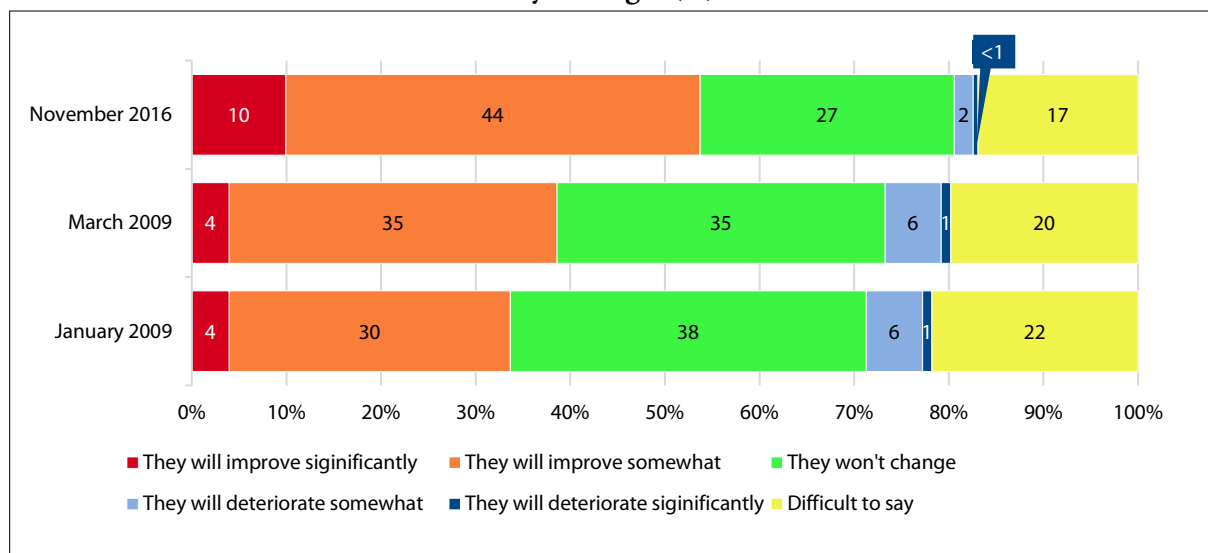
Source: representative opinion polls by Levada Center August 2016 – 8–21 November 2016, <<http://www.levada.ru/2016/11/24/prezidentskie-vybory-v-ssha/print/>>

Table 1: Why Do You Think It Would Be Better for Russia If ... Won These Elections? (% of Respondents Who Mentioned Trump or Clinton; Several Answers)

| | | “Proponents of Trump” | “Proponents of Clinton” |
|--|----|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| A friendlier attitude towards Russia | 60 | 63 | 22 |
| Has a fresh view of world problems | 32 | 32 | 30 |
| Does not try to interfere in the life of other countries | 21 | 20 | 22 |
| More experienced and predictable politician | 12 | 12 | 12 |
| Has better professional qualities | 9 | 8 | 15 |
| Other | 2 | 1 | 5 |
| Difficult to say | 3 | 3 | 8 |

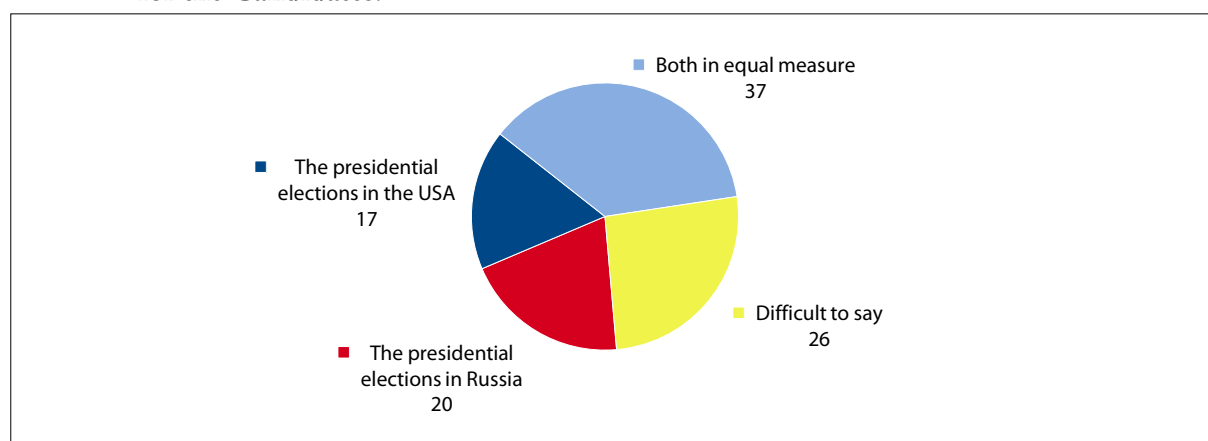
Source: representative opinion polls by Levada Center 8–21 November 2016, <<http://www.levada.ru/2016/11/24/prezidentskie-vybory-v-ssha/print/>>

Figure 5: What Is Your Opinion: Will the Relations of Russia and the USA Change After the Election of Barack Obama [2009 Polls] or Donald Trump [2016 Poll] As President of the USA; If Yes, How Will They Change? (%)



Source: representative opinion polls by Levada Center January 2009 – 8–21 November 2016, <<http://www.levada.ru/2016/11/24/prezidentskie-vybory-v-ssha/print/>>

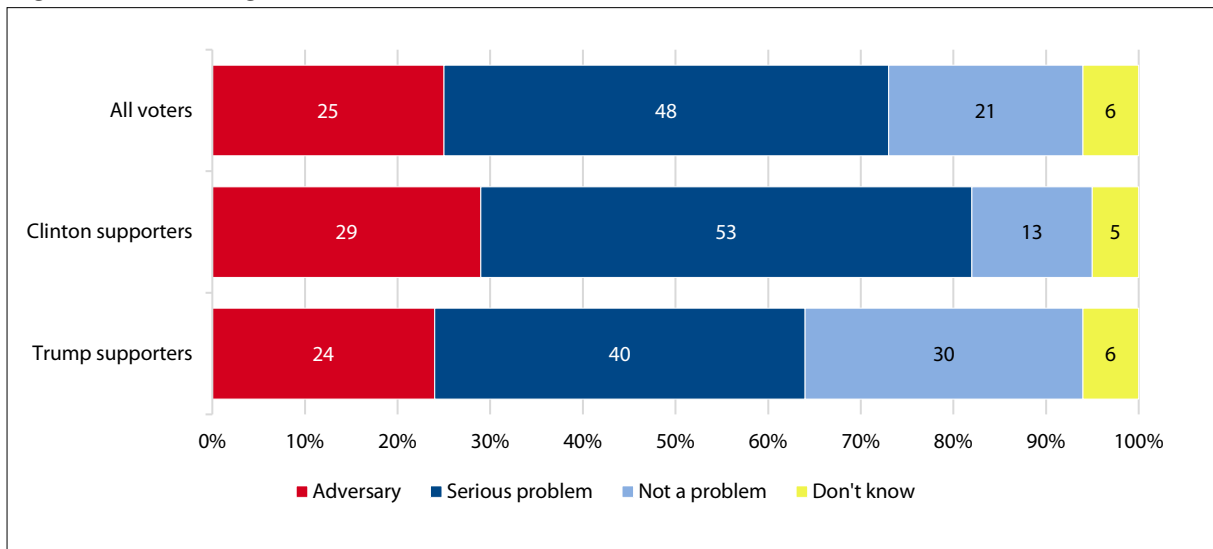
Figure 6: If You Compare the Presidential Elections of March 2012 in Russia and the Recent Presidential Elections in the USA, Which of These Guaranteed a Fairer Competition for the Candidates?



Source: representative opinion polls by Levada Center 8–21 November 2016, <<http://www.levada.ru/2016/11/24/prezidentskie-vybory-v-ssha/print/>>

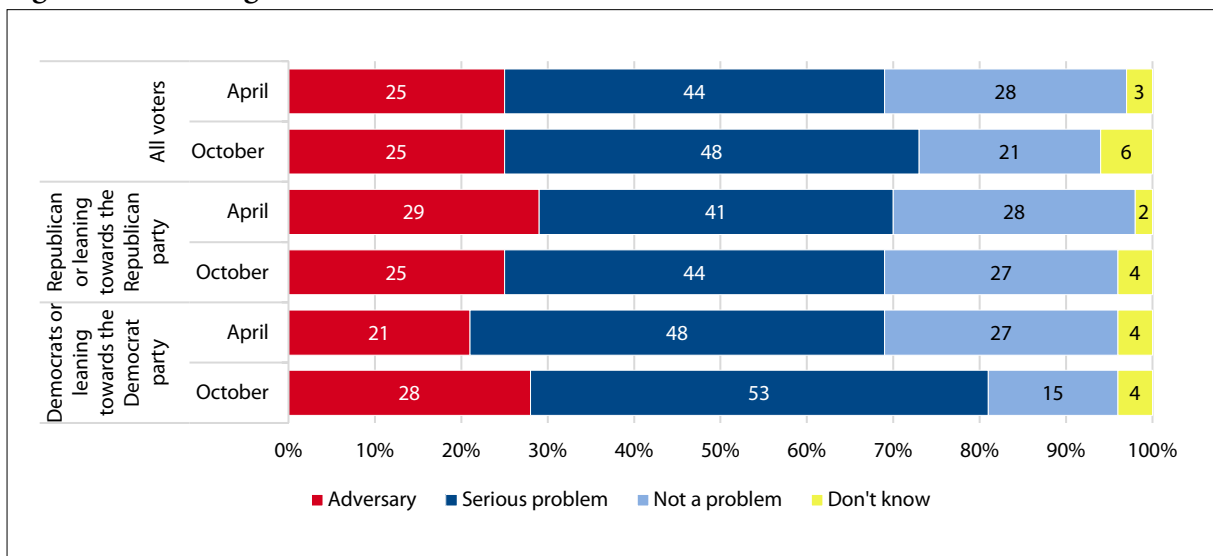
US Voters on Russia

Figure 1: Percentage of Voters Who Think of Russia As ...



Source: representative opinion polls by Pew Research Center 20–25 October 2016, <http://www.people-press.org/2016/10/27/7-opinions-on-u-s-international-involvement-free-trade-isis-and-syria-russia-and-china/7_9-2/>

Figure 2: Percentage of Voters Who Think of Russia As ...



Source: representative opinion polls by Pew Research Center 20–25 October 2016, <http://www.people-press.org/2016/10/27/7-opinions-on-u-s-international-involvement-free-trade-isis-and-syria-russia-and-china/7_9-2/>

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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