

What Trump's Victory Might Mean for US-Russia Relations

[Anna Borshchevskaya](#)

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Given his campaign rhetoric about Russia, Putin, and NATO, Trump could decide to pursue a number of problematic policy moves, such as lifting Crimea-related sanctions in exchange for Moscow's cooperation in Syria.

Upon learning that Donald Trump won the American presidency on November 9, the Russian Duma (parliament) [broke out in applause](#). The Kremlin had every reason to be happy. During his campaign Trump repeatedly -- and consistently -- [expressed admiration](#) for Russian president Vladimir Putin above all other dictators. He [said](#) he would "look at" lifting sanctions against Russia and recognizing Crimea as part of Russia. He described NATO as "[obsolete and expensive](#)" and [suggested](#) America may not come to the aid of vulnerable NATO allies if they are attacked, even though the US is treaty-bound to do so. Trump surrounded himself with associates close to Moscow while Russian hacking into the Democratic National Committee's email system helped Trump's campaign.

What is Trump going to do with regard to Russia now that he is president? The short answer is we don't know. Trump is unpredictable. Moreover we simply don't know his foreign policy plans because he barely sketched them out. Most of his focus was domestic.

That said, given Trump's Russia rhetoric, his penchant for making deals, his lack of ideological principle, and a clear preference for nativism, it is highly possible he will lift sanctions in exchange for Putin's cooperation in Syria, since Trump and Putin see the situation similarly -- everyone who is fighting Syrian dictator Bashar Assad is a terrorist. This would be frightening. Putin will feel further emboldened to bully Russia's neighbors, assert himself in the Middle East, intensify his disinformation campaign to weaken Europe, and continue his domestic crackdown. And other dictators of the world will be watching.

At the same time, for all of Moscow's enthusiasm for Trump during the campaign, they will now have to deal with him. Putin knows well that talk is nothing until it is backed up by action. Furthermore, the US system will still restrain Trump. And down the road, if Putin says America is no longer the enemy, who will he blame for Russia's problems?

Historically, Soviet leaders preferred to deal with Republicans who were consistent and pragmatic; they did what they said they would do. Thus, the Kremlin always knew what to expect and where it stood with Republicans. The Kremlin respected them for that and saw Democrats as weak, even if perception did not necessarily match reality. Trump has broken away from many Republican traditions -- indeed he was a Democrat most of his life -- and his unpredictability and erratic behavior may become problematic. Trump and Putin may get along until they don't -- but the damage to US credibility and allies may already be done.

Trump's victory is bad, but to repeat, we don't know anything yet. The next several weeks will reveal more.

Anna Borshchevskaya is the Ira Weiner Fellow at The Washington Institute.