

## THE KREMLIN'S SHADOW OVER THE US ELECTIONS

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Putin is not a candidate for the White House, and yet Russia has been so present in this campaign that at points it may have appeared otherwise. It is difficult, in fact, to imagine US elections in which Russia was more present. Not only as an issue for debate between the candidates, but also as a potentially destabilising element. The hacking attacks on voter records in Arizona and Illinois, along with various Democratic Party bodies (like the National and Campaign Committees) and individual members have set alarm bells ringing. The traces of some of these and other highly notable recent attacks on institutions point unequivocally towards Russia. This has led some journalists, analysts and intelligence services to speak of insurgency and even of a Russian attempt to undermine the elections. All of this in a context marked by tension and distrust of bilateral relations heightened by the successive failures to achieve a ceasefire in Syria, the constant skirmishes in eastern Ukraine and the effect of the Euro-Atlantic sanctions for the annexation of Crimea.

The Kremlin and its media apparatus – led by RT television, the former Russia Today, and the Sputnik agency – have shown their clear preference among the candidates and, in line with their general discourse, have fed the doubts about the integrity of the electoral process. In fact, this aspect is more relevant or at least more clearly identifiable and constant when seen as part of the Russian disinformation campaigns about the United States and the West. The logic of these campaigns is not so much to promote the virtues of Russia or its allies as to question the integrity of values that the West considers their own – political systems of a democratic nature, primacy of the law, equality of opportunities, etc. In any case, Donald Trump and President Putin have paid each other compliments, with the Republican Party nominee, in particular, praising the Russian leader as representing a model of strong leadership that inspires him. No surprise, then, that those Russian media organisations, which the Kremlin uses to project influence abroad, treat him in such a friendly way.

With his off-key declarations and unpredictable character, Donald Trump has earned the distrust if not the rejection of a large part

of the Republican Party “apparatus”. During the campaign, Trump has questioned the preservation of basic pillars of US foreign policy and security such as NATO. Trump bases his criticism on the lack of budgetary commitment made by most European members (something that Hillary Clinton agrees with) but has linked this issue with the applicability of article 5 – the automatic nature of response based on the premise that an attack on one is an attack on all. The credibility of article 5 determines that of the alliance as a system of collective defence. So everything that introduces uncertainty on this point contributes to the erosion of the organisation. Trump has, similarly, suggested that if he wins he will propose the sanctions are lifted. Which is to say, the Republican candidate is (at least for the time being) in clear harmony with the Kremlin’s main demands. Nevertheless, Trump is unpredictable for the Kremlin too, and some Russian analysts remain sceptical about his agenda if he finally reaches the White House. Even so, greatest concern in the United States in terms of national security surrounds the apparent links between Russia, including its intelligence services, and some members of his team and even with Trump himself – something Hillary Clinton has certainly not missed the chance to question him on.

Nevertheless, Trump is not the candidate to whom the Kremlin’s media gives the most favourable coverage. That is Jill Stein, the Green Party candidate. Stein, whose presence on RT is habitual, endorses the Kremlin’s whole narrative on the supposed “coup” to topple the regime in Ukraine, NATO’s policy of “encircling Russia” (one of Russian propaganda’s favourite myths), the downing of MH17 as a “false flag” operation, and greets the growing presence of RT on the US media landscape as a “step towards real democracy”. The ecologist candidate has no chance of winning, but this is illustrative of the convergence on both sides of the Atlantic between certain sections of the left and the right when it comes to Putin’s Russia.

There can be no doubt that the Democratic Party’s candidate, Hillary Clinton, is the option the Kremlin likes least. The animosity is manifest. In Putin’s eyes, Clinton, in her phase as secretary of state, is directly linked with two events that are fundamental to understanding the evolution of the Kremlin and the current bilateral context: the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime and the wave of protests in Moscow, both of which took place in 2011. In relation to Libya – and this goes a long way to explaining the Russian focus on the Syria question – the Kremlin insists that France and the United Kingdom committed an offence by abusing the Security Council mandate (Resolution 1973) and going far beyond the establishment of a no-fly zone to end up decisively contributing to the fall of Gaddafi. With regard to the protests, which play a central role in the ideological reconfiguration of the Putin regime, Moscow was profoundly irritated by the explicit backing given by the then secretary of state. In the Kremlin’s eyes, it all forms part of a grand plan orchestrated by Washington that seeks nothing other than a “Maidan in Red Square”, which, in turn, also explains Moscow’s reaction to the events in Kiev. All told, what is concerning is the apparent conviction of the Russian establishment that a Hillary Clinton victory would be the prelude to an open conflict. For the think tank run by Aleksandr Dugin (the influential Neo-Eurasianist ideologue) the electoral choice is nothing less than “Donald Trump or nuclear war”.