

Andrei Tsygankov: “The US establishment, not the Kremlin, is undermining normalisation with Russia”

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*The release of an intelligence report on Russian interference in the US presidential election, alongside allegations of links between Donald Trump and the Kremlin, have strained US-Russia relations. **Andrei P. Tsygankov** argues that there remains a deep-rooted fear of Russia within the American establishment, but that Donald Trump's election provides an opportunity for the two countries to normalise their relations.*



Washington has made it official: Russia is the enemy aiming to undermine not only the United States' role in the international system, but the very political system upon which America is built. The Kremlin has been accused of waging an information war on the West, launching cyber attacks on the Democratic National Committee, and releasing confidential materials through Wikileaks with the purpose of discrediting the U.S. political class. After losing the presidential election, Hillary Clinton went as far as to attribute Donald Trump's victory to the actions of the Kremlin. The US [intelligence report](#) on Russia's alleged hacking of the US electoral system released at the beginning of January served to consolidate this image of Russia as an enemy of the US.

Russia may indeed have been behind the cyber attacks but not for the reasons it is blamed for. Instead of trying to subvert the US system, it seeks to defend its own. The Kremlin's goal is to demonstrate that it is capable of defending itself against the US global policy of changing regimes and meddling in Russia's internal affairs. The United States has a long history of meddling and covert activities in foreign countries since the Cold War. As exposed by Julian Assange and Edward Snowden, activities of the US government since the Cold War included special "digital" spying on American and foreign citizens and financial tools for engaging foreign activists and monitoring foreign governments. Washington's establishment assumes that America defines the rules and boundaries of proper behaviour in international politics, while others simply follow the established rules.

As the world transitions away from the US-centred unipolarity, political competition in the international system is increasing. While the United States seeks to preserve its global standing by all available means, the rising powers aim at improving their international position including by obstructing the power of the hegemon. Non-Western nations such as Russia, China, and others want to protect their interests, values, and status in the system. By showing strength in the cyber space, Syria, and elsewhere, the Kremlin seeks to be recognised as a great power with sovereign control over domestic affairs and independence in foreign policy.

This explains why the US media and political class are worried about Russia. With the Kremlin's meddling in America's domestic affairs, US politicians are getting a taste of their own medicine. Yet, they are also painfully aware of their inability to discipline a Russia that defies sanctions and continues to engage in assertive foreign policy. This realisation is expressed in feelings of growing insecurity within the US political class. Russophobia is an emotional reaction to the loss of control by this once confident superpower.

This lack of confidence and fear has grown significantly since the mid-2000s, in the context of the Kremlin's assertiveness in the wake of the coloured revolutions in the former Soviet region, Russia's intervention in Georgia in August 2008, the practices of limiting space for political opposition, and the annexation of Crimea. Putin's return as President prompted the fear of Russian propaganda that is so wide spread in the West today. Although Russia's resources are no match to those of the Western nations, many are concerned that the Kremlin is outperforming the West on the information front. For instance, California Congressman and Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Relations Ed Royce believes that Putin's information power "may be more dangerous than any military, because no artillery can stop their lies from spreading and undermining U.S. security interests."

In addition to being an emotional reaction, this approach also assists the US establishment in preserving unity in the face of a perceived threat to Western values. Russia is viewed as everything that the liberal West is not – a corrupt and abusive autocracy that has no respect for human rights. This narrative serves to confirm the identity of a "free" America at home which is the leader of the "free world" abroad.

Following the election of Donald Trump, this narrative also serves the function of challenging the new President's domestic and foreign policies. Trump has positioned himself as a critic of the liberal Western establishment and a supporter of normalising relations with Russia. His rejection of the main tenets of liberal globalisation – free trade, democracy promotion, and a military presence in key regions across the globe – makes him an easy target for the US establishment, but also allows for improving ties with the Kremlin.

The latter is ready to coexist with liberal globalisation, but only if there is sufficient room for Russia's own regionally defined ambitions. Russia may not be a global power on par with the United States, but the Kremlin is fully capable of defending its core interests in Europe and Eurasia. If Trump is consistent, the US and Russia may yet arrive at a mutually agreeable definition of global threats and challenges.

The fear of Russia within the US establishment will complicate Trump's efforts to normalise relations. The above-cited intelligence report as well as preparations by the US Congress for new sanctions against Russia will constrain the new President in his actions. Politically speaking, Trump remains a Washington outsider who struggles to build networks of influence in relevant circles. Many of these circles are heavily populated by liberal and neoconservative critics of Russia.

Other potential obstacles for US-Russia normalisation stem from the considerable gap in the US and Russian perception of their security interests in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. The thorny issues of the US missile defence system, relations with Iran, Ukraine, and Nato expansion are likely to continue to separate the two countries. Trump and Putin's decisive, macho personalities may provoke further disagreements and crises in US-Russia relations.

Still, there is a chance that the high days of the Russia scare campaign in the United States are coming to an end. The US and Russia have viewed each other as convenient scapegoats for their problems for too long. Both Putin

and Trump have sent ample signals that they consider the two countries' relations to be critically important and that they will work to improve them. Their objectives are different, but they don't have to be pursued at each other's expense. The momentum for rapprochement must be exploited.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured: Russian President Vladimir Putin with the Foreign Minister of Russia Sergei Lavrov (left) and US Secretary of State John Kerry. Credits: [Kremlin.ru](#).

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