

Russia on Trump's victory: uncertainty, assertiveness, and waiting for an offer

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Official Russian reactions to Donald Trump's victory have been reserved yet consistent, giving the impression of a deliberate political signal aimed both at the domestic Russian audience (tempering expectations for a swift end to the war and an improvement in relations with the United States) and Trump's future administration (expressing appreciation for his statements about the desire to end the military confrontation and improve relations).

Russia has indicated that it remains open to proposals but expects Trump to take real actions signalling a departure from the United States' policy it perceives as hostile. The Kremlin has pointed out that peace will require meeting Russian conditions. Given the developments on the battlefield and the West's growing 'fatigue' with the war, Russia feels that it can wait for an offer from the White House, aiming to negotiate from a position of strength.

In Russian propaganda media, expressions of satisfaction with Trump's victory were accompanied by noticeable confusion and concern due to uncertainty over his policies, particularly with regard to Ukraine. As a result, there were few tough words or presentations of concrete scenarios. Both the tone of Russian media coverage before the results were announced and the content of the post-election statement from the Russian Foreign Ministry focused on alleged irregularities in the United States' electoral process. This suggests that Moscow hoped to see the losing side contest the results and trigger a political crisis in the United States.

Staying assertive while awaiting an offer

Official reactions to Trump's election have been measured and cautious, in stark contrast to those in 2016, when the mood in Moscow verged on euphoria and the government openly expressed its expectations for a fundamental shift in United States policy.

Unlike in 2016, Vladimir Putin has not sent an official congratulatory message to the president-elect. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov explained this decision by saying that the United States is an "unfriendly" state engaged "indirectly and directly in war" against Russia. It was only on the evening of 7 November that the Russian authoritarian leader congratulated Trump and praised him for his courageous response to the assassination attempt against him. He highlighted Trump's statements about his desire to improve relations with Russia and resolve the "Ukrainian crisis" as "worthy of at least some attention". He announced that Moscow was ready to engage in dialogue and improve relations with the United States but emphasised that "the ball is in Washington's court".

Putin stated that the “neutrality” of Ukraine, which he insisted must become “independent of external controlling forces”, is an essential condition for peace. He also suggested that Russia is prepared to discuss nuclear arms control, provided that mutual relations are comprehensively regulated.

Peskov earlier described the president-elect’s words about his peaceful intentions as significant, adding that Moscow would judge the future US administration by its actions rather than declarations. The official statement from Russia’s Foreign Ministry asserted that Russia’s conditions for ending the war and improving relations remain unchanged and have been clearly communicated to Washington. It also emphasised that the election has not mended the deep rift within American society, which has taken the form of a conflict of values. It assessed that Trump’s presidency would exacerbate the “internal tensions and animosity between opposing camps”. These statements reflect the widespread belief among Russian elites that the political divisions in the United States are so severe that they will inevitably lead to a profound political crisis.

The Foreign Ministry’s statement also stressed that the Kremlin has no illusions about Trump or the Republican majority in Congress, as the entire United States political elite maintains an “anti-Russian stance and a policy aimed at containing Moscow”. At the same time, it declared a readiness to cooperate with the new administration in the White House, but with a focus on “achieving all the objectives set by the special military operation”.

Uncertainty: propaganda regarding the elections

In recent days, the United States presidential election has been a key topic in Russian propaganda media. Coverage of this election was directly linked to the war in Ukraine, reflecting the Kremlin’s priorities in its relations with the United States. Commentators differed in their assessments and sometimes contradicted one another, suggesting that directives from the Kremlin, which usually accompany major events, were less precise than usual due to the uncertainty over the election’s consequences.

In propaganda reactions, Trump’s election has been portrayed as having ambiguous implications for Russia. On the one hand, it offers a chance for a shift in Washington’s policy and an end to the war on Moscow’s terms. On the other hand, due to the president-elect’s impulsiveness and unpredictability, it carries certain risks. Despite this uncertainty, Trump was the Kremlin’s preferred candidate, actively promoted by its propaganda. Given the lack of clarity about the president-elect’s future decisions, Russian propaganda has adopted a wait-and-see approach. It has noted that the new American leader has the tools to coerce Ukraine into capitulation and that, although his circle does not include “Russophobes”, his first administration imposed sanctions on Russia and sent weapons to Ukraine.

The commentators reached no consensus on the terms under which Trump could seek to end the war. In this context, they highlighted Russian inflexibility and determination, stating that the Kremlin could only negotiate with the United States based on the demands it made in December 2021, as for Russia, the Ukraine issue is a prelude to a broader overhaul of Europe’s security architecture. At the same time, concerns were voiced that the new United States president could demand an immediate ceasefire of the conflict along the front lines without ceding all the annexed Ukrainian regions to Russian control.

Disappointment and hopes

Russian reactions have also conveyed a sense of disappointment: the Kremlin's earlier expectations that the elections would not yield a clear result or that the outcome would be contested, leading to a destabilisation of the United States political system or (in Moscow's ideal scenario) a state of paralysis and even civil war, did not materialise. This strategy aligns with the active measures Russia employed throughout the campaign. Reports from United States security agencies indicate that Russian pre-election interference (primarily in the cyber domain) was mainly aimed at provoking and exacerbating internal conflicts, as well as undermining the American people's trust in their state, particularly the impartiality of its electoral process.

Russian reactions indicate that Moscow remains uncertain about Trump's future policies; however, his previous statements provide hope for a reassessment of the critical stance towards Russia and an opportunity for strategic bargaining. Accordingly, the Kremlin has been conveying positive signals of its readiness to engage in dialogue and improve relations; however, it believes that the new president's administration must take the initiative. It expects an offer that takes into account its demands not only with regard to Ukraine but also concerning European security and other aspects of bilateral relations.