

IS US – RUSSIA RAPPROCHEMENT STILL POSSIBLE?

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The Perspectives of the US – Russia relations under the Trump Administration is one of the key foreign policy issues hotly debated in political and expert circles both in the US, Russia and elsewhere. The steep deterioration of bilateral relations since the start of the third Presidential term of Vladimir Putin brought back into the scene almost forgotten terminology of “Cold War”, “containment”, “great power rivalry”.

The US was disappointed in almost all spheres of interactions with Russia – Ukraine, with little or no hope of implementation of Minsk deal and permanent allegations by Russia and Ukraine pointing to each other as the main culprit of disaster, Syria, where US – Russia ceasefire deal was reached through lingering Lavrov – Kerry negotiations just to be unraveled days after coming into force, Russian domestic politics with growing US concern over Russian tilt towards more authoritarianism.

In sharp contrast to these developments Donald Trump was “suspiciously” positive in his assessments on Russia. He overtly hailed Vladimir Putin as a great leader who is surpassing Obama, reiterated his hope to work things out with Russia and even called Moscow to hack Hillary Clinton’s emails sent or received through her private server.

Trump’s statements were especially interesting under the backdrop of Hillary Clinton’s harsh rhetoric on Russia and President Putin itself with clear vision of Russia containment as the sole realistic way to deter Russian efforts aimed at the destruction of liberal international order. This political dichotomy was fused with personal uneasy relations as the Russian leadership was accusing Clinton on efforts to make a regime change in Russia through supporting or even orchestrating the December 2011 Moscow protests held in aftermath of Duma elections.

Trump victory in November 2016 created hope in Russia and not only that may be the “black strip” of relations can be put aside. As American troops were moving into Eastern Europe at the last days of Obama administration to calm down the concerns of Eastern European and Baltic members of NATO on the possible Russian destabilization efforts with use of hybrid warfare tactics the World was looking forward to the January 20, 2017 to see Mr. Trump’s first statements and then actions on Russia as the President of the US.

There were signs signaling the possibility of another US and Russia “reset”. Trump’s picks for key national security posts including National Security Advisor and Secretary of State had, in different circumstances and capacities, dealt with Russian leadership including President Putin. General Michael Flynn was even sat on the same table with Russian President during the December 2015 Gala event on the 10th anniversary of RT network. Rex Tillerson had several meetings with Putin as a CEO of ExxonMobil and was awarded medal personally by the Russian President. The first phone

call between the two leaders was described as successful by both sides potentially setting the stage for further steps.

Things started to change since mid-February 2017. The first harbinger was resignation of the National Security Advisor Flynn with allegation of misleading the White House senior officials including Vice – President Pence on his contacts with Russian Ambassador in the US – Sergey Kislyak. This was a sign that the controversy over alleged Russian interference into the US 2016 Presidential campaign, which resulted in new set of sanctions and expulsion of 35 Russian diplomats by Obama in last days of 2016 and the publication of declassified report of US intelligence agencies on Russian meddling into the US domestic politics with clear aim to hurt Hillary Clinton, help Donald Trump and destroy the trust towards the US democratic institutions has not fallen into oblivion with the change of Administration. The disclosed facts on US Attorney General Jeff Sessions contacts with Kislyak which allegedly have been concealed from the US Senators during confirmation hearings does not help to defuse the concerns.

March 2017 revelations of General Flynn being paid approximately 68000 USD by Russia related entities in 2015 with more than 45000 USD from Russian RT channel for his participation in December 2015 Gala event only deepen the suspicions among American political establishment. Another blow was the fact that Flynn was hired as “Foreign agent” to work for Turkey during second half of 2016 when he was actively involved in Trump campaign made things even more complicated.

The controversy over Trump’s former campaign manager Paul Manafort receiving payments of 12.7 million USD from Ukraine pro – Russian “Regions party” for his advisory work done in 2007-2013 allegedly involving offshore companies and “Black/secret ledger” only added additional impetus into the situation.

The last but not the least, in this chain of revelations was the March 20, 2017 House of Representatives Intelligence Committee hearing on Russian meddling into the 2016 Elections with participation of FBI director James Comey and NSA director admiral Michael Rogers. The FBI director’s public confirmation that since late July 2016 FBI has launched an investigation on Russian Government’s efforts to interfere in the Presidential elections, which includes investigating the nature of any links between individuals associated with the Trump campaign and the Russian government and whether there was any coordination between the campaign and Russia’s efforts was a clear sign that controversy over Trump’s associates illegal connections with Russian government will not calm down shortly.

In such circumstances, any major step to mend fences with Russia undertaken by the US President will only create additional suspicions on nature of Trump’s links and connections with Russia. In a hostile bipartisan environment with battles ahead on repealing and replacing Obamacare and FY 2018 budget draft the potentially risky improvement of US – Russia relations may not be included Trump’s Administration top priorities. This may result in keeping status quo in bilateral relations at least for the short-term perspective.