

Russian Government and the Republican Party: The Question of Common Ground

Donald Trump's victory in the presidential election and Republican Party's victory in the Congressional elections of November 2016 gave the Republicans almost total control over Washington. Despite the consensus between the president and the Party members on a wide range of issues, there have been significant contradictions in approaches to Russian-American dialogue. Trump stated the importance of normalizing bilateral relations and mentioned the possibility to ease the sanctions regime. In his view this could be done in exchange for signing a treaty on the reduction of nuclear weapons¹. But the Congress and the Republican Party have another position. The Congress has a strong belief in Russian interference in US elections (and later Trump acknowledged it too). Therefore it considers that sanctions should be strengthened. The possible initiative of the White House in the convergence in Russian-American relations led to the opposite effect. It revitalized the idea to codify anti-Russian sanctions.

This consequence seems logical and once again confirms that primitive optimism in this situation is hardly appropriate. However, when we meet a significant uncertainty and signs of a crisis, it makes sense to look at those aspects that do not relate to the conjuncture of the moment and can become part of the foundation of mutual understanding.

At least within the next two years the Congress will remain under control of the Republican Party and until 2021 the White House will also be behind the Republican President. In this regard, it is interesting to ask where common points of contact can be found between the Republican Party, Donald Trump and Russia.

¹ Trump's offer to Russia: an end to sanctions for nuclear arms cut // Reuters, January 16, 2017. URL: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-russia-arms-deal-idUSKBN14Z0YE>

Historical context

In Russian political circles, even from Soviet times, there is an idea that it is easier to find a common language with Republicans than with Democrats. This thesis is more emotional than real, but it has a historical basis, which exists in the subconscious of some Russian politicians.

The détente period of the Cold War (1969 – 1979) was widely associated with Republican presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. During this decade, significant progress has been made in the field of international security. The United States and the Soviet Union also expanded bilateral cooperation in various non-military spheres, including business contacts. For example, an American entrepreneur Armand Hammer established relations with Soviet government and signed several contracts for the construction of industrial and residential buildings. It is worth noting that Hammer was also a supporter of the Republican Party.

Development of this cooperation did not eliminate the confrontation between the capitalist and communist blocs, but allowed to implement controls, set "game rules", create and enhance bilateral interest. As president Nixon noted, in the situation of nuclear parity “neither major power can get a decisive advantage over the other”. Hence the relations could be developed considering existing divergence in opinions and recognition that there was “no alternative to negotiation at this point”².

After the failure of detente, which related to many different factors, the Ronald Reagan administration declared the USSR an "evil empire", and new round of the arms race had begun. But during the second term of the Republican president, a new rapprochement took place. Of course, it was caused by the weakening of the Soviet Union and the policy of "new thinking", proposed by the General Secretary of the

² Transcript of The President's News Conference, October 12, 1971. URL: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=3186&st=&st1>

CPSU Central Committee, Mikhail Gorbachev. Good relations were continued with the arrival of the George H.W. Bush administration.

After collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, generated vacuum of power in Eastern Europe was filled by NATO. It caused Yugoslav Wars which were extremely negatively perceived by Russia. Against the background of the policy of Clinton administration, bilateral relations began to deteriorate again. The symbols of this time were "Primakov's Loop", when Russian Prime-minister canceled his visit to Washington as a response to bombing of Yugoslavia, or criticism of Russian military actions in Chechnya.

With the coming to power of Vladimir Putin and George W. Bush, there was a short-term warming in Russian-American relations. At those time, Putin sought to expand cooperation between Russia and NATO, and George Bush called him "a straightforward and reliable" partner³. Further events, such as the Iraq war (2003), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004) and the war in Georgia (2008), became a serious obstacle for building a constructive Russian-American dialogue. However, there was logical understanding of actions on both sides.

Undoubtedly, events that previously took place, whether it was détente or "politics of new thinking" or talks about Russia-NATO cooperation, they were caused by the conjuncture of the moment. However, all these events related to the Republican Party. This fueled the idea that cooperation with this party could be much easier. It was also facilitated by a close perception of the nature and essence of international relations. At the present stage, not only foreign policy approaches, but also some socio-cultural problems can bring together the Russian elite and the Republican Party.

³ Bush and Putin: Best of friends // BBC News, June 16, 2001. URL: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1392791.stm>

International Relations

There are two main foreign policy paradigms in the Republican Party: political realism and neoconservatism. The first is closer to the European tradition and is based on the ideas of a balance of power, national interest and sovereignty, while the second defends the policy of democracy promotion by force. However, both paradigms recognize anarchy as the essence of international relations, see the state as the main player on the world stage and force as one of the key factors in world politics.

For the Russian foreign policy tradition ideas of realism are much closer. There is a historically strong state institution and it prevails over subnational, partisan and non-governmental elements. Consequently, the paradigm that regards the state as of paramount importance takes precedence over the rest of the others, and empirical experience also confirms the accuracy of this idea.

The Russian foreign policy school was formed in a pan-European way, within the framework of the Westphalian system and traditional European politics. The historical experience accumulated from the 17th to the 20th century suggests that a conflictual and potentially unstable environment of international relations needs a balance of power, borders and buffer zones. It acknowledges existence of spheres of interest. There are frequent statements in modern American press that Russia acts in nineteenth-century imperial style, while modern international relations should be based on free market, trade, globalization, etc.

In the Russian perception, such aspects as sovereignty, security and power depend on each other. Without them economic development and improving the quality of life seems to be difficult. In condition of limited resources providing the necessary power to preserve sovereignty and security is a priority. The accumulation of social benefits occurs afterwards.

This principle is largely traditional and has worked repeatedly in the XIX-XX centuries. For example, in the conditions of the Cold War, when the Soviet Union

was inferior to the United States in the number of nuclear warheads, ensuring safety and security of the state and the population was a top priority. Already after achieving nuclear parity, since the late 1960s the quality of life in the country has gradually increased. This is one of the most important elements of the strategic thinking of Russian elites, regardless of the political system that exists in the country.

It can be said that at the heart of Russian historical experience ideological approaches seem to be secondary and ineffective. The only historical exception is the revolutionary actions of the Comintern, which was the tool for providing of the utopian ideas of the Soviet Communists. However, its work was terminated in 1943, largely because of strategic considerations for the sake of partnership with the Allies in the Second World War.

It can't be said that absolute de-ideologization is characteristic of the American foreign policy tradition. It is based on other principles which are usually associated with "universal values" and the Manifest Destiny doctrine. Neoconservatives, with their ultimatum thinking, formed in "unipolar moment" of the 1990s are one of the examples of ideological foreign policy thinking. Their ideas about regime change, nation building and creating of the "Pax Americana" led to negative consequences for both the international system and the United States. American realism also does not exclude dialogue in the language of values and morality, but it rejects the claim to their monopolization. Therefore, it seems more inclined to cooperation and mutual understanding.

In general, both American paradigms and Russian foreign policy approach perceiving the nature of international relations in the same way. Consequently, even with the growth of contradictions, the understanding of motives of the opposite side, its further actions and their possible consequences remains.

Conservatism

There is no official ideology in modern Russian politics as it was in Soviet Union. However, there is a clear tendency towards conservative ideas, which have wide support in both political circles and society.

The Russian and American versions of conservatism are different in their origins and goals. At the same time, they have got common philosophical elements, which are inherent to conservatism in general. In this sense, we can talk about "everyday conservatism". This includes the belief in the existence of a universal moral order, recognition of continuity and traditions as basic values, rejection of any premature changes and faith in gradual and consistent reforms as the only correct and reliable path of development, perception of the family as the basis of society, and religion as the cornerstone of civilization.

The Republican Party platform notes that the family is a “foundation of a civil society”⁴. Similar statements were made by Russian President Vladimir Putin. He noted that the values of traditional families are one of the "foundations of civilization"⁵. As it noted in the Heritage Foundation’s papers, “families and religious communities first create and then raise the next generation of law-abiding, economically productive members of society”⁶. It means that, the existence of family values is responsible for healthy social development. This is the common idea for Russian and American conservatives.

They also recognize the special importance of religious institutions. Conservatives are concerned about the decrease in the number of religious people, which is displayed in the opinion polls. As Patrick Buchanan points out, faith creates the culture that supports civilization, and if faith dies, then society dies after it.

⁴ Republican Party Platform 2016. URL: <https://prod-cdn-static.gop.com/static/home/data/platform.pdf>

⁵ Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, December 12, 2013. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19825>

⁶ Anderson R. The Crisis of Liberty in the West // The Heritage Foundation, March 7, 2017. URL: <http://www.heritage.org/conservatism/report/the-crisis-liberty-the-west>

Conservatives share the idea of the importance of religious schools as an element of quality education for future generations and the preservation of society.

However, there is a difference between American and Russian conservatism. If an American conservative sees the process of society degradation around him, his Russian colleague tries to isolate himself from these processes. He perceives Russia as an island or fortress, from where he watches for "perishing West". This concept is traditional for Russian conservatism and has existed for many decades, despite the long period of Soviet power. The process of degradation is seen in the assertion of neoliberal order, globalization and those forms of social relations that are created under their influence.

But modern Russian conservatives wish to see their American colleagues as their supporters in the ideological opposition with neoliberal ideas. They also try to perceive Donald Trump as an ideological ally. As the Russian conservative Boris Mezhuyev notes, the main conflict of the modern world is the confrontation of "conservative democracy" with "liberal authoritarianism". For example, Russian conservatives endorse Trump's rhetoric and its style. They protest the political correctness as an act of opposition to "authoritarian" liberal approaches.

Possible conclusions

The arguments presented here may seem abstract. But these issues attract attention of Republicans and Russian political establishment. Hence it makes sense to explain their approaches to each other a little better. The bilateral dialogue aimed at mutual clarification and understanding of foreign policy approaches would be very useful. With mutual study of bilateral relations, the degree of understanding could increase significantly.

Similarly, the establishment of dialogue in socio-cultural spheres could have an applied result. It could be formalized as part of the creation of joint commissions or general studies aimed at understanding the ongoing social processes and ways of

an adequate transformation of the Judo-Christian society, the institution of the family, etc.

Even a superficial analysis shows that both sides have common approaches and interests. Work aimed at improving mutual understanding could have a positive outcome. It is worth saying that such cooperation should not be limited to Republicans and conservatives only. Many common features can also be found with the Democratic Party, for example, in the social sphere. It should be noted that among the Soviet legacy, Russia still has some positive elements: well working Labor Code, the right for free medical care and free primary and higher education - the same issues that concern supporters of the US Democratic Party.