

## “We had it coming”: The 2016 *Russiagate* and its aftermath revisited

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This paper examines the reactions to a complex case involving a series of developments labeled in the United States as Russia’s meddling in the 2016 American elections. The paper addresses major developments or political fallouts of *Russiagate*. First, some politicians, mostly in Russia but only few in the West, insisted that there has been no meddling or interference. Second, to other commentators, especially in the West, the meddling with US elections indeed took place. Yet to others, and this is the third development, the problem was not necessarily about the act of the 2016 meddling, but rather about the following “collusion” between Donald Trump and some Moscow’s operatives, on the other, and their attempts to “cover up” their mutual illegal affairs. In the context of these policy narratives, this paper’s conclusion refers to the “We had it coming” phenomenon in international relations. The *Russiagate* became a subject conveniently fitted in the political narratives of both national capitals. In Moscow the belief has been that this case had been totally fabricated and fueled by anti-Russian sentiments in Washington. In the United States, there is little doubt that Russia has meddled with the elections and would do it again. Both sides used the case to advance their strategic domestic foreign policy narratives.

*Keywords:* Russian-American relations, US foreign policy, *Russiagate*.

This paper examines the reactions to a complex case involving a series of developments labeled in the United States as Russia’s *meddling* in the 2016 American elections. It has also been often nicknamed as *Russian interference* or *Russiagate*. In the English language *Russiagate* is used to allude to the Watergate scandal in the 1970s, which resulted in president Nixon’s resignation from the office. The paper addresses three major developments or political fallouts of *Russiagate*. First, some politicians and commentators, mostly in Russia yet few in the West, insisted that there has been no meddling or interference. To them, the causes of this political scandal have been political forces in the West interested to blow this case out of proportion to smear Russia and achieve their domestic political goals. Second, to other commentators, especially in the West, the meddling with US elections indeed took place. They refer to official government documents to support their view. It was unknown for years however how much the Moscow’s leaders knew about the interference and who had actually ordered it. This point of view received substantial support in official documents in the United States and in the media in the West. Yet to others, and this is the third development, the problem was not necessarily about the act

of the 2016 meddling but rather about the following “collusion” between Donald Trump and some Moscow’s operatives, on the other, and their attempts to “cover up” their mutual illegal affairs. Meanwhile, the relations between Russia and the United States have been worsening.

The debates related to *Russiagate* in Russia and the United States have been for years clearly ideological and distinctly partisan. Although the allegations of the Trump-Russia collusion have been largely dismissed by 2019, Trump’s domestic critics focused instead mostly on the president’s and his associates’ assumed interference with the legal investigation of the alleged collusion. Such interference would be deemed illegal based on American laws. Most supporters of the Democrat Party tended to hold on to the idea of the interference. Most supporters of the Republican Party did not. The *Russiagate* has become a common theme of discussions in the United States associated with Trump’s presidency. The scandal has also played a major role in worsening of US—Russia relations.

### Washington’s Views of the Collusion

Although the proof of the alleged collusion between Russia and the Trump campaign (involving operating contacts and communications between the sides or coordination of their activities) has been debated for two years and eventually dismissed in the 2019 Mueller Report, officially titled *Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election* (Robert Mueller was a specially appointed federal counsel), the “collusion” and related to it conspiracy theories have been circulated in the media and were preset the political discourse in Washington for years. From anchors on major television networks to late night comedians, from media commentators to office casual conversations, the allusions and innuendo about Trump’s ties to Russia have been relentless.

The “Russian investigation” and the potential obstruction of justice associated with the investigation of the Trump’s electoral campaign’s interactions with Russian officials was a central theme of a larger political scandal in Washington in 2017–2020. The scandal has certainly affected a series of new allegations against Trump in 2019. These allegations focused on president’s use of diplomacy to affect electoral laws and politics in his own country. In a phone call to Ukrainian president in the summer of that year, Trump discussed possible investigative or legal actions against a family member of his electoral opponent, Joe Biden, a Democrat. The theme of “collusion” with a foreign government to achieve domestic political goals has again been revived as a theme connecting *Russiagate* with new developments. This collusion theme was also impactful on domestic politics during the 2020 presidential campaign. Overall, the real extent and bearing of the Kremlin’s involvement in hacking Democratic servers and the *WikiLeaks* disclosures will probably never be fully known and is likely to be interpreted with various political and legal standards [1].

### Washington’s Views of the Interference

While the collusion allegations have been largely dropped from public discussions by 2019, the interference subject has not. In the eyes of the public, Russia has played an unexpectedly high-profile role in the 2016 US presidential elections and continued to play that role for many years after. Quite a few American experts and politicians have alleged that

Moscow had deliberately intervened in the electoral process in the United States. The outgoing Obama administration in 2016, for example, stated clearly that the Russian government attempted to interfere in the elections. Official government statements in 2017 and later also suggested that the US intelligence had obtained information about Russia's attempts to gain access to the software used in voting machines. The 2019 Mueller Report came to a similar conclusion. The report found that the Russian government "interfered in the 2016 presidential election in sweeping and systematic fashion" and also "violated US criminal law" [2]. The US government also revealed that Russia orchestrated the hacking of emails of several political organizations, including the Democratic Party. (The hackers allegedly did not try to access the Republican Party's communications.) Those hacking attacks resulted in the public release of thousands of stolen emails, many of which included damaging revelations about the Democratic Party and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the party's nominee in 2016 [3]. More reports came in 2018 and later to support these and other claims of Moscow's interference.

Specifically, according to the published comments of several government officials, hackers broke into the e-mail accounts of the Democratic National Committee and Hillary Clinton's campaign chair, John Podesta. The content of the emails was then passed to *WikiLeaks*, an international non-profit organization that had gained prominence in the past for publishing of secret government information, usually stolen or obtained by other means. The content of the Podesta emails was made public during the summer and fall of 2016. US officials stated on many occasions that the hackers were Russian. However, disagreements abound about who ordered, directed, and coordinated these hacking attacks. Political messages were motivated by these disagreements. Clinton's supporters as well as several government sources in the Obama administration claimed that discrediting Clinton during the electoral campaign was the key focus of the alleged Russian operation [4]. In several interviews after 2017 and in her autobiography, Clinton herself described the hacking as a key reason for her loss [5]. Trump supporters, on the other hand, as well as most Republicans, either rejected the allegations about the scope and breadth of Russia's direct involvement (although they acknowledged that the interference took place) or insisted that the hacking had nothing to do with Clinton's losing the presidential bid.

But why the interference theme has gained momentum in the United States? And what kind of motivations have been attributed to the forces (real or alleged) behind the 2016 *meddling* use to mess up with the elections in the United States?

## Motivations Behind the Interference

Although president Putin never publicly took any political party's side in the US election and did not openly support any candidate, most experts in the West believed that he favored Trump over Clinton. A few government sources including US intelligence agencies suggested that Putin was supportive of Trump and wanted him to win presidency [6]. Several arguments supported this view. First, Trump made numerous references and allusions to a possible improvement of relations with Moscow (if that improvement benefited the United States) during his campaign speeches. In 2018, Putin made a remark during a press conference in Helsinki that he had hopes for Trump in 2016 because as a presidential candidate Trump talked about bringing the US—Russia relationship back to normal [7]. Second, on several occasions Trump criticized NATO and its role in international

affairs. Moscow officials consistently opposed this Western alliance and welcomed such Trump's statements. Any internal disagreements and tensions among NATO members would satisfy Moscow's strategic objectives. Third, Trump was not particularly critical of Russia's takeover of Crimea, an act that was one of the key reasons for Western sanctions against Russia. Trump did not vigorously — as it seems from his statements and electoral speeches — support sanctions against Russia. Trump also made several seemingly positive comments about Putin as an individual and as a politician, calling him a “strong leader”.

It has also been reported in the United States that neither the Kremlin nor the media in Russia were particularly happy with Hillary Clinton or the outgoing Obama administration's policies toward Russia. The proposed “reset” in the relations between the two countries was an obvious failure, which Moscow blamed on president Obama and his government in Washington [8]. It was reported in the media that in Russia different national polls, at different times, with different questions asked, showed Russian people's preference of Trump over Clinton. Although many, more than 50% would not express any definite opinion (“hard to tell”) answering a question on whose victory of the two candidates would be better for Russia, Trump was supported by large margins. After his victory in November, almost two thirds of respondents believed his win had been beneficial to Russia [9].

Washington's commentators maintained a different view. Some of them thought that Russian leaders might have been enjoying creating trouble and “messaging” with the US elections. Putin, according to this view, most likely had a personal dislike of the Democrats and their foreign policy. Trump, on the other hand, was generally seen in Moscow as a “chaos candidate” who tried to shake up the bureaucracy in Washington as well as to change western policies toward Russia. From this view, under Clinton, if she were elected president, the relations between Moscow and Washington would have remained bad. They would have been rooted in mistrust and limited by cooperation only on certain issues. The sanctions against Russia would have stayed in place and even worsened. Trump — with all his habitual unpredictable moves and mercurial personality — still appeared to be a candidate better suited to Russia's goals in the international sphere [1].

### **Linking Trump to Russia in 2016 and Later**

It was commonly suggested in the United States (without providing proof by Trump opponents) that candidate Trump was somehow linked to Russia or some Russian “interests”. The *Trump–Russia Dossier* was a key source of the accusations against Trump. Also known as the Steele dossier, it was a private 2016 intelligence report containing allegations of behavioral misconduct and conspiracy between Donald Trump's presidential campaign and the government of Russia. The document was authored by Christopher Steele, a former British intelligence (MI6) operative, for the private investigative firm Fusion GPS. While compiling the dossier, Steele passed unverified information to both British and American intelligence. Numerous sources suggested that this document has been mostly fabricated and paid for by individuals associated with Clinton's presidential campaign. Steele believed, however, that he was not aware the Clinton campaign was the recipient of his research [10]. The Trump–Russia dossier has for years become a source of direct and indirect allegations linking Trump to Russia and questioning his motivations in his foreign policy.

There were other arguments suggesting that Russia was really interested in electing Trump in 2016. Russian communists, were seen in the West as somewhat resembling their predecessors in the Soviet Union when communism was the only legally allowed political party, have historically been very critical of the United States and its policies. They have also been historically against economic cooperation with the West, the free market, and especially Western liberal values. Trump appeared as an unusual candidate. As was expected, Gennady Zyuganov, the leader of the Communist Party, made numerous negative comments about Washington's foreign policy and the 2016 elections as well. In one interview, right after Trump was elected, he called US elections the "dirtiest," referring, among other things, to the harsh rhetoric employed by the candidates (Obviously, Zyuganov has no empirical proof to call the elections this way). He also called Trump diminutively a "nontraditional politician" who had no experience in politics. His election nevertheless had a special significance, in Zyuganov's view, because it was a sound defeat of supporters of globalization who were obsessed with military interventions and profits. Trump, as Zyuganov said, had made several "hopeful" statements but his real politics would have to wait to be properly assessed. President Obama, Zyuganov continued, also seemed like a decent man, but had pulled the United States into numerous military confrontations. He proposed that the most desirable outcome of Trump's policies would be that the US would not engage in Syria and Ukraine and would not "mess" with Europe. Zyuganov did not miss an opportunity to attack NATO and the CIA for their "audacity" associated with occupying and "burn[ing] down" entire countries. If these policies were stopped, presumably by Trump, the world would benefit [11].

Vladimir Zhirinovskiy openly supported Trump. In an emotional and theatrical tirade posted on Facebook and televised, Zhirinovskiy openly asked American voters to cast their votes for Trump and not elect Clinton. In the middle of his passionate declaration he shouted in English, "Long live Trump!" Zhirinovskiy also verbally attacked Clinton. He claimed that the Senator represented an old and corrupt elite and that her Republican opponent, in contrast, was a fresh, independent figure. Trump represented, he argued, hope for "humanity" and for people all over the world, including Russia [12].

Alexey Navalny, who remained a very visible figure in the West and was very popular for years among professional experts studying Russia in the United States, described Trump — after he was elected — as a "self-made" winner, a person who won without getting much support from the establishment. He would be a person, according to Navalny who is known in Russia for his struggle for transparency and against government corruption, who would fight against corruption in the government. Another public figure, Vyacheslav Maltsev, known for his gloomy, pessimistic social forecasts, disagreed with many people's positive assessments of Washington's future foreign policy under Trump. He predicted in 2016 that Trump would likely consider a very confrontational approach with Russia. Maltsev believed that Trump would specifically be very tough on Russians elites [13]. This type of cautious and even pessimistic view of Russian-American relations was rather rare in the Russian media after the 2016 elections. In Russia Trump was generally perceived as a man who wanted to reform and restructure the whole political system in The United States including its foreign policy, which was expected was a good news for Russia. For many commentators and members of the public this would have been an extremely positive development [13].

## The Aftermath

In reality, by January 2017, the level of optimism among Russians about improvements in US—Russia relations has declined from 54% to 46%. This decline may have been caused by a number of events and comments coming from the Trump administration and the Kremlin. Disagreements between Kremlin and the White House continued practically in all areas. Sanctions against Russia remained in place and the new Washington establishment indicated it had no plans to go “easy” on Moscow. Both countries agreed on the necessity to fight Islamic fundamentalism yet they were far apart regarding the actions in Syria and this country’s future. Both countries kept accusing each other of committing atrocities there. Meanwhile, NATO expanded to include Montenegro. In April of 2017, 55 percent of Russians said they had not seen any change in US—Russia relations since Trump’s becoming president. American media reported that about 20 percent said relations had improved, but 17 percent said the relationship had become worse. Positive opinions of Trump among Russians have plummeted from 38 to 13% [14].

During Trump administration’s years, political leaders in Washington became increasingly frustrated by new evidence obtained by intelligence sources pointing to Russia’s attempts to meddle in the 2016 US elections. This frustration was bipartisan. It was not necessarily about Clinton’s loss, but rather about an attempt by a foreign power to undermine American electoral system and democracy [5]. In a highly publicized interview with the former NBC TV anchor Megyn Kelly Putin firmly denied all the allegations [15]. Washington and the vast majority of American commentators were not impressed with his denials. When Trump suggested that he trusted Putin that Russia had no role with the meddling with US elections, criticisms of the Trump’ attitude followed [7]. The criticism was bipartisan. The focus of most criticisms was Trump’s perceived acceptance of Putin’s denial of Russia’s involvement in the 2016 United States elections, which contradicted the findings of various US intelligence sources. Moreover, twelve Russian GRU agents had been indicted a few days as part of the ongoing Special Counsel investigation. On the contrary, it was reported that the reaction of the Russian media on Trump’s comment was very positive [16].

Meanwhile, governments in Moscow and Washington after 2016 remained reluctant about making definitive statements about the direction of their relations [17]. It seems that both sides have confirmed their earlier mutual expectations: first, they did not trust each other; second, neither side wanted to appear weak vis-à-vis each other. Multiple hints in the media about possibilities of improving relations with Russia have, in fact, backfired against Trump in the domestic arena during his tenure. Russia became an inconvenient subject in the United States to talk about. It was a paradox: Any signs of worsening relations with Russia could have been assessed as his incompetence or a strategic foreign policy failure. On the other hand, any signs of improving relations could have also backfired against Trump. What went wrong in Russian-American relations? The answer is: almost everything in the twenty-first century did. Both sides saw the worsening a long time coming.

## On US—Russia Relations: A Historical Snapshot

It is emphasized in western thought that from the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and later, Russian thinkers have debated which developmental path the Russian state should take. Should it be based on a foreign model (such as Dutch, French, or other) or should it



be a completely independent path of development? Studies in comparative politics suggest that such debates are not unusual in other countries. Chinese and Japanese scholars, for example, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have debated the same question: which foreign model should their countries have to choose? In the United States, on the other hand, this type of debates is uncommon. American scholars, for the most part, have been settled on the idea that the United States has had its own, unique path of development. Any ideas of following a “foreign” model have been criticized and usually rejected by scholars and experts across the ideological spectrum.

In the United States as well as in the West in general, Russia's views of its place in the world is described as influenced by two traditions or schools of thought. According to the first view, Russia, imagined as a predominantly traditionalist, authoritarian yet provincial country, isolated from the outside world, feared and mistrusted by its neighbors [18]. The other path led toward partnership with the West, openness to innovations and an emulation of the West's social and political systems as well as its lifestyle. In this case, Russia would possibly lose its cultural specificity. To some in Russia, this could have been a positive, desirable development. To others, this could have been totally unacceptable. Facing this dilemma, most Russian leaders and academics, no matter if they were affiliated with those in power or opposed to them, confronted the predicament of overcoming the country's economic and social backwardness without losing its political independence and rich cultural heritage. This is the foundation for the chronically ambivalent attitude toward the West and the United States. It is commonly accepted in the West that anti-western attitudes became prevalent in the 1990s as Russian-US relations were seen through the lens of increasingly diverse ideologies such as populism, nationalism, and conservatism. This trend is not necessarily unique to Russia. Quite a few politicians, populist parties, and nationalist movements, as we could see such developments after 2016 in different countries, have promoted modern populism and nationalism in the era of globalization.

In the second half of 1990s, several serious signs of tension between the two countries emerged. The United States' military engagement in the former Yugoslavia, the growth of NATO, and Russia's economic difficulties contributed to many people's growing disappointment with the West, which in the eyes of many could have done more to help Russia. Communists, nationalists, and populists in Russia turned to the rhetoric of the Cold War blaming the West for most of Russia's economic and social problems. In their view, help had been offered but not delivered. The financial crisis of 1998 reinforced the opinion of many that Russia was left on its own to struggle with economic difficulties. Many supporters of pro-Western policies lost their government posts as well as popularity. The 2003 war in Iraq, unlike the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, was harshly criticized in Russia. Moscow also expressed concern about what they believed was the United States' intrusion into the internal affairs of former Soviet republics. Russian officials and the media portrayed the unrests in Georgia (in 2003), Ukraine (in 2004), and Kyrgyzstan (in 2005) as sponsored by western governments and nongovernmental organizations acting on their behalf.

In February 2007, Russian president Vladimir Putin delivered a speech at an international Munich conference on security policy, which western experts considered the symbolic beginning of a long-term confrontation between Moscow and the West [19]. He sharply criticized the unipolar model of the world and Washington's role in that system. Putin called the continuing expansion of NATO “a serious provocation” that diminished the existence of mutual trust between Russia and the West. He accused the West of build-

ing new economic and political barriers, and called for a new “reasonable balance” between the interests of all countries, obliquely critiquing US dominance in global affairs. Putin emphasized that Russia would carry out an “independent foreign policy” to ensure security and prosperity “not only for a select few, but for all.” He also blasted international organizations for promoting interests of only “a few dominant” countries, another criticism clearly directed at the West and the United States [19]. For years to come, this speech will likely to be considered as a giant strategic mistake of Russian foreign policy.

The United States seemed to ignore many warning signs of tension coming from Russia. The Bush administration (2001–2008) largely discounted the problems while being preoccupied with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the emerging financial crisis. After Barack Obama became president in 2009 — in the midst of the world financial crisis—he spoke in favor of improving relations with Russia despite Washington’s earlier condemnation of the Russian actions in Georgia. Yet the period after 2012, when Putin returned to power as president, was a serious deterioration in the Russian-American affairs. Moscow and Washington still cooperated in some areas. Yet they competed in many others. Disagreements between the two nations about almost every international issue intensified. The Russian government and media have stepped up their anti-American information campaign, which at times has reached Cold-War levels. In an article in *The New York Times* (most likely written by his domestic surrogates) Putin openly criticized American exceptionalism and Washington’s policies [20]. Washington’s cancellation of a presidential visit to Moscow in September 2013 was a strong indication of the crisis in the Russian-American relations.

The most noteworthy tensions between Russia and the United States emerged over the conflict in Ukraine in 2014 and after and the incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation. The United States and essentially all Western countries condemned or criticized what they saw as Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Russia vehemently rejected the “annexation” label. In March 2014, the United States announced sanctions against several Russian senior officials and took steps to weaken Russia’s formal position in several international organizations. These sanctions have been expanded and extended several times, combined with other economic and financial sanctions imposed by the US Congress, such as in 2018 and 2019. Moscow replied with defiance and introduced its own counter-sanctions against the United States and other western countries. The “political knot” has been tightening [9].

The West was historically been hesitant to embrace Russia as a peer. Russia’s politics and economy were often perceived as rooted in corruption, nepotism, and authoritarian values. Opinion polls conducted in the United States showed that most Americans tended to see Russia positively when the key political events indicated that these two countries were on the path of cooperation. Political clashes would send the views into a negative territory [21]. Because of these and other factors (including strategic political miscalculations, as they are seen in the West) the Russian elites had assumed that they no longer had to rely on the West, which was increasingly viewed by them as decadent, excessively liberal, and decaying [15]. Putin has made a decision to embrace conservative and nationalist values, to “pivot” toward the East, engage China strategically, and de-emphasize the importance of western political and economic system.

Several specific issues remained very important for the US—Russia relations. A special significance had the 2012 *Magnitsky Act*, which was a bipartisan bill passed by the



US Congress and signed by President Obama to penalize Russian officials believed to be responsible for the death of Russian lawyer Sergei Magnitsky in a Moscow prison back in 2009. The *Snowden case* has also stood out. Edward Snowden was an American computer professional, employed by CIA, who in 2013 illegally copied and leaked classified information from the National Security Agency. By doing this, he revealed massive surveillance programs managed by the US government. These programs were in place as part counter-terrorism policies. Snowden, who fled the United States, was charged with espionage and theft of government property. He received a temporary asylum status in Russia (it may change by the time you read these pages). Although Snowden's actions have sparked a major international debate about national security and individual privacy, the United States' was very critical of Russia's cozy relations with Snowden and Moscow's approval of his status as an asylum seeker there.

In 2016 Russia adopted the Law FZ-318 (31 October), which underlined a few conditions for a potentially new stage of cooperation with the United States. Moscow wanted the suspension of the Magnitsky act. Russia also hoped for the suspension of the Ukraine Freedom Support Act of 2014, which was designed, from Washington's view, to assist the government of Ukraine in restoring its sovereignty and territorial integrity after the events in 2014, which were overwhelmingly considered in the West as an act of aggression against a sovereign state. Washington also aimed at deterring the government of the Russian Federation from further destabilizing and invading Ukraine and other independent countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Moscow for years wanted the reduction of the United States' military presence in Europe as well as a financial compensation from the West for the losses associated with the anti-Russian sanctions. Moscow also signaled that many arms control issues have no longer been its priority, at least for some time. In 2019, the United States withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) accusing Russia of violating the agreement in previous decades. Russia rejected such claims. The treaty has no longer legally bound both countries entering the third decade of the twenty-first century.

All in all, the relations between Moscow and Washington by the late 2010s have reached their lowest point since the early 1980s. Embassies had to reduce their staff. Several consulates were closed. Most, if not all, government exchange programs between the two countries were cancelled. Universities, both state and private, have suspended their bilateral educational programs too. Russian citizens had to wait for many months to obtain their visas to visit the United States. Russian mainstream media had a field day attacking America and its policies. Scorning America and Washington policies became a norm in Russian media broadcasts. US media responded in kind. Not surprisingly, American news professionals provided mostly very critical information and analysis about Russia and its policies. Such developments were far from surprising.

### **The Differences in US and Russian Foreign Policy Narratives**

The 2016 case of Russia's meddling with the elections in the United States should be considered in the context of the problems that have emerged and multiplied between the two countries in the second decade of the century. These problems were also rooted in substantial differences between Moscow and Washington foreign policy narratives [9]. Policy narratives in the context of foreign policy are concise, brief accounts of a country's

top priorities in achieving its foreign policy goals. These narratives reveal themselves in policy strategies, immediate and long-term plans, peaceful treaties, negotiation tactics, or anything else. Policy narratives in most cases are not just passing judgments or decisions. They are relatively stable long-term agendas suggested by the government and followed by foreign policy elites. Such plans rely on particular policies, including military, economic, diplomatic, etc., to reach defined or general policy goals. Countries conduct foreign policies — including building bilateral relations with other states—based on such countries' narratives. International events and other countries' actions are judged through the lenses of foreign policy narratives.

In the contexts of such narratives, already by the early twenty-first century, Moscow and Washington have formulated quite different and sustainable visions of the world and their countries' foreign policy strategies. The 2016 *Russiagate* therefore was a convenient case to fit into these narratives.

Although Moscow and Washington both acknowledged that the world has become increasingly globalized, they have different views of the scope and the importance of new emerging centers of power. Although the world was becoming multipolar (polycentric, as it is commonly used in Russia but not in the United States), it has not reached the stage of the presence of “real” multiple powers. Washington's experts maintained for years that the United States still was the strongest military and financial power unmatched by any other country's attempts to become the next superpower, no matter how hard they have tried to convey their desire to become another “superpower”. America's and western dominance in the world should play a stabilizing role in global affairs, according to the Washington's view. When Russia demanded an increased role of international institutions such as the United Nations, Washington was doubtful of the UN's role. Russia believed in its place in G-8 as an equal partner. Western powers too were skeptical of this idea for years while offering special conditions to Moscow's return to the group.

Both sides disagreed with each other's foreign policies and accused each other of using violence and intimidation in international affairs and supporting rouge regimes. Russia in most cases referred to Afghanistan and Iraq. Washington focused mostly on Russian actions in Syria. From the Washington's view, Russia increasingly used violence in places such as Ukraine, Syria, and Africa. In Washington's view, multilateral solutions can work, but not when they serve the interests of one side, such as Russia.

Russia strongly demanded that NATO must halt its eastward expansion; in particular, Ukraine and Georgia must never become NATO members. Western countries, on the other hand, insisted that the decision to join NATO is strictly at the disposal of sovereign countries. NATO has the right to expand as far as it desires, as well as any country has the right to join NATO if it is qualified. No other foreign power has the right to interfere in this process.

One of the most difficult topics has been the sanctions against Russia. In Moscow's view, all the financial and economic sanctions against Russia should be lifted and, possibly, a fair compensation granted. The West should accept a new status of Crimea as a part of Russia and diplomatically assist Russia and other conflicting sides in resolving the crisis in the eastern Ukraine. Washington's narrative has been different. In reference to Russia and Ukraine, international sanctions could be lifted only in case of Russia's complete military withdrawal from Ukraine and Moscow's recognition of Ukrainian authority over several territories in Eastern Ukraine. Moreover, Crimea would be recognized as a part of Russia.

In the context of these policy narratives, this paper's conclusion refers to the "We had it coming" phenomenon in international relations. In colloquial English, this expression means that something unpleasant can — and even will — happen, especially if one deserves it. Along with wide-ranging disagreements about Moscow's role in the 2016 US elections, the relations between Moscow and Washington have been further deteriorating in the second decade of the century and possibly reaching their lowest points since the end of the Soviet Union. Both sides pursued different political agendas in international affairs. Moscow and Washington had competing interests related to natural resources, especially oil and gas. Russia has assigned itself a bigger role in a polycentric world, which Washington was skeptical about. Both countries accused each other of each other's responsibility for the worsening of their mutual affairs. In these contexts, the *Russiagate* became a subject conveniently fitted in the political narratives of both national capitals. In Moscow the belief has been that this case had been totally fabricated and fueled by anti-Russian sentiments in Washington. In the United States, there is little doubt that Russia has meddled with the elections and would do it again. Both sides used the case to advance their strategic domestic foreign policy narratives. Will these narratives change? As optimists say, when the ocean tides rise, they always fall back.

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