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US Election Campaign: Shaping Policy on Russia

Donald Trump has secured the nomination of the Republican Party to become the next US president.

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It has been a controversial campaign and the US policy on Russia is in the process of being shaped. While the media focused on Melania Trump's plagiarism and other oddities during the Republican National Convention, something very important happened to provide a clue to the GOP presidential candidate's stand on the issue. The Republican Party officially altered its platform on Ukraine and Russia.

Trump's team proved its grip on the Republican Party is tight enough to make the entire institution adopt a new view on a major foreign policy issue. Trump-supporting delegates attending the GOP platform meeting in Cleveland insisted that the wording in the initial proposal be altered. They wrote a new amendment ruling out sending US weapons to Ukraine and made sure the new Republican platform does not include a provision calling for giving weapons to Ukraine to fight Russian and rebel forces, despite the fact that this view is widely supported by the GOP's establishment.

The previous platform advocated «providing lethal defensive weapons» to Ukraine, reflecting the virtually unanimous position of the GOP foreign policy elite and national security leaders. Donald Trump won again.

Trump is a sober-minded politician known for his non-ideological, deal-making nature. Unlike other prominent Republicans, he harbors none of Russophobia. Trump realizes that sanctioning and the attempts to «isolate» Russia are bad for business and thriving business is what makes a nation great. He's a pragmatic global dealmaker who keeps in mind the interests of an average Joe, not global imperial ambitions that make the US overloaded with international commitments and overstretched. Trump has exposed that the Republican party's rank-and-file members are much less interventionist than previously thought. They don't want confrontations or military operations abroad – the lessons and losses of Iraq and Afghanistan are too fresh. Trump has repeatedly said that radical Islamism and terrorism is a greater threat to Europe than Russia. He said he would «get along very well» with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Mike Flynn, foreign policy advisor to Trump, has suggested that Moscow and Washington join forces to counter Islamic State in the Middle East.

The change of wording at the GOP program is telling but it does not signify the change of policy yet.

There is another important development that went down almost unnoticed by media.

On July 14, members of the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs passed a bill to tighten sanctions against Russia.

It contains new innovations to provide support for Ukraine. The Stability and Democracy for Ukraine Act strictly binds the powers of the American President to lift sanctions against Russia with the status of Crimea.

The bill forbids NATO members from exporting arms containing US technology to Russia. It requires a regular report on foreign financial institutions «*illicitly controlling Ukraine state-owned assets – namely Russian banks in Crimea*». The proposed legislation extends the existing Magnitsky Act to new territories, including Crimea, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria.

If the document is approved, the head of the United States will be able to lift the measures against Moscow only in two cases: after confirmation of the «*restoration of Ukraine's sovereignty over Crimea*» or if it is proved that «*the decision on the status of the Peninsula was under international control and recognized the democratically elected Ukrainian government*». The bill also seeks to establish an international consortium to draw private investment in Ukraine by minimizing political risk to would-be private investors.

The proposed act poses a serious threat to the Russia-US relationship. While Washington repeatedly states that the lifting of sanctions depends on the implementation of the Minsk

agreements, Moscow believes it's ridiculous to link the sanctions with the implementation of the Minsk agreements, because Russia is not a party to the conflict and not the subject of the agreements on the settlement in Ukraine. If the bill becomes a law and Donald Trump wins the November election, he'll have no choice but to comply with the new legislation's provisions.

Indeed, there are conflicting trends in the US policy on Russia.

On July 20, important news related to the Russia-US relations was largely kept out of media headlines. Russian and US experts and military agreed to meet in Geneva, Switzerland to discuss the Syrian issue.

«We proceed on the basis that the military and political experts will launch intensive work in Geneva in the coming days in furtherance of the US Secretary of State John Kerry's visit to Moscow», the source said.

This is one of the results of the talks held in Moscow as part of the visit of the Secretary of State John Kerry on July 14-15.

During the visit, he was received by Russian President Vladimir Putin, held talks with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. It was stated on the ministerial meeting that the sides agreed on specific steps to make the work on Syria more effective. No specific details of the agreed plan were provided. If the plan goes through, it will unite Russia and the US in the fight against the common enemy. But military cooperation and sanctions are hardly compatible. Evidently, there are conflicting trends that are shaping the US policy on Russia as the election race continues.

We've yet to make precise how the Democratic convention to take place in Philadelphia on July 25-28, 2016 will define its stance on Russia. One thing is certain – a large sector of American society stands for normal relations with Moscow. The alterations inserted into the GOP program serve as an irrefutable evidence to confirm this fact.