
UKRAINIANS NERVOUS TRUMP, PUTIN COULD DECIDE ON CRIMEA QUESTION

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The meeting between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin has many concerned in Kyiv. Many fear there is a chance the leaders will come to an agreement on the annexation of Crimea without involving Ukraine.

Observers had long speculated over what US President Donald Trump might discuss with Russian President Vladimir Putin when they meet, but only once it was officially confirmed did Trump comment on the agenda.

Syria and the US elections will be discussed in Helsinki on Monday – and so will Ukraine.

Ukraine's Crimean peninsula was annexed by Moscow, in violation of international law, after the Maidan protests in 2014, and a bloody war has been raging in the east of the country for four years. But with the continuing war in Syria as well as the recent indictment of 12 Russian hackers, just how much time the leaders will devote to Ukraine is unclear. Russia has maintained that Crimea is "an indivisible part of Russia."

Statements Trump has made on Crimea have also given Kyiv cause for concern. Questioned recently about the possibility of Washington adjusting its stance on the Crimean question, he answered, "We'll see."

Clinging to straws from Washington

For Kyiv, the US positions on Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine are of vital importance. The US has imposed wide-ranging sanctions on businesses and individuals in Russia in response to fighting in eastern Ukraine. Washington was the very first country to impose such penalties in March 2014, immediately after the annexation of Crimea. Even more than European states, Kyiv has become increasingly concerned that Ukraine may be discussed in Helsinki without Ukrainian participation.

In Kyiv, Ukrainians are hoping for continued support from the United States.

People remember Trump's campaign appearances in 2016 when the then-candidate announced his desire for a "very, very good relationship" with Putin. Although Trump's rhetoric towards Moscow has become much more restrained since an investigation was launched into how Russia may have influenced that election campaign and election, he still regards "friendship with Russia,

China and others" as "good." Trump repeated this view before his recent departure for Europe, where his main meeting was with his European partners at the NATO summit in Brussels.

Hoping for no agreement with Putin

Kyiv has even taken certain preventative measures to deter Trump from making any hasty agreements with Moscow. The president of the Ukrainian parliament, Andriy Parubiy, expressed the hope that the United States would not change its position on the Ukraine question, and referred to the "corresponding support on the part of Congress and the White House."

At the same time, according to Reuters news agency, Ukraine has been unofficially trying to gauge the mood in the White House ahead of the summit. They reportedly had sought confirmation from their US colleagues that Trump would always keep Ukrainian interests in mind during the meeting with Putin.

More help for Kyiv than under Obama

Some Ukrainian observers, however, take a more relaxed view of the forthcoming US-Russia leaders' summit. Despite his supposedly Putin-friendly attitude, it was Trump, not his predecessor, Barack Obama, who approved the first shipments of lethal weapons to Ukraine. Kyiv has deployed Javelin anti-tank missile systems to reinforce its army in the fight against Russian-backed rebels in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine.

Who thinks what? Taking a look on the Trump-Putin relationship

Nonetheless, some in Kyiv doubt Trump has good intentions. Mykola Beleskov of the Institute for Euro-Atlantic Cooperation in Kyiv is one of them. He said he believes the decisive argument behind the decision to supply arms to Ukraine may not have been goodwill on the part of the US president but the potential profit for the arms industry, which is estimated to have made \$47 million (47 million) from the deal.

The US role in the search for a peaceful solution to the conflict in eastern Ukraine has also increased under Trump. One year ago, Washington named Kurt Volker its special representative for Ukraine. The career diplomat is known for among other things being especially critical of Russia. Since taking up his new position, Volker has not only visited Ukraine several times, he has also met Putin adviser Vladislav Surkov. Surkov is regarded as the Kremlin's representative for Ukrainian issues.

Cautious flirtation with Putin

Even if Volker's diplomatic efforts have not, so far, produced tangible results and the search for a solution to the Donbass war is still stalled, no one in Kyiv believes the Putin-Trump meeting will have dramatic consequences.

According to Mykola Kapitonenko from the Center of International Studies in Kyiv, even Trump's vague remarks about the Crimean question may be no more than Washington taking a cautious approach to Moscow to see what price Putin would be prepared to pay to improve relations with the United States.

In addition, Kapitonenko said, as far as the Russia sanctions are concerned, Trump's hands are largely tied. The sanctions are already in force, and according to US law, they can only be lifted with the approval of Congress.

"In the Kremlin, they understand that very well," Kapitonenko said. "So they don't immediately take Trump's 'flirtation' at face value."

Kaynak/Source: