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Reset Regret: Moral Leadership Needed to Fix U.S.–Russian Relations

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The discussion about democracy, human rights, and the rule of law has careened through at least three phases in U.S. relations with Russia, each one resulting in sometimes jarring shifts in Washington's approach to Moscow.

In order to reaffirm America's interests, when dealing with Russia, the U.S. should concentrate on the values of freedom and justice. The Administration needs to stop its policy of "pleasing Moscow" and instead add pressure on Russia to start a "reset" of its own policies that currently disregard human rights, democracy, and good governance. The U.S. should deny visas to corrupt Russian businessmen, examine their banking practices and acquisitions, and target Russian police and prosecutors who fabricate evidence, and judges who rubber stamp convictions, which is what the bipartisan S. 1039 "Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act" aims to do.

Three Phases of U.S.–Russian Relations.

When the Soviet Union fell in December 1991, Washington rushed to Boris Yeltsin's assistance. The world expected that Russia would eventually grow to be more like the United States or Western Europe. By the late 1990s, however, Russia was rapidly regressing from Western political models. Beginning around 2000, the two sides returned to a relationship based on strategic security concerns resembling the old Cold War paradigm.

Moscow and Washington quickly exhausted this security agenda for U.S.–Russian rapprochement, however, and the pendulum swung back. During the

rest of the decade, while Russia rejected American efforts to promote democracy in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, and Iraq, Washington grew alarmed at the increasing authoritarianism of Vladimir Putin. George W. Bush's proclamation of America's duty to press for democratic values around the globe further alienated the Kremlin.

Obama's "Reset." The "reset policy" toward Russia, announced by the Obama Administration in February 2009, saw yet another shift. This rebalancing was part of the White House's broader "new realism" in U.S. foreign policy, a bizarre hybrid that combined a reluctance to defend human rights in Russia, China, and Iran with apologies for alleged "crimes" caused by American exceptionalism. This pseudo-realism has adulterated fundamental American interests and abhors the use of force to protect them.

One could argue that that brand of "realism" had already shown its shortcomings in the 1980s, when it ignored the moral revolutions that ended the Cold War. The Obama Administration failed to realize that there is no escape from moral reasoning in politics, even in world politics. The Cold War proved that the prudent use of the entire toolbox

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of American power was not only necessary but also vital, since it aimed at securing the morally worthy goal of peace through strength.

Underlying the Obama Administration's "reset" of relations with Russia was its promotion of democracy and human rights even as it sought engagement on the two countries' common interests. The state of democracy inside Russia is, in fact, being addressed by Washington and Moscow: Michael McFaul, the President's Senior Director for Russia on the National Security Council, is the U.S. leader of a bilateral working group on civil society in partnership with Vladislav Surkov, Putin's and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's political architect.

The High Costs of the "Reset." While the gains from the "reset" relationship have been exaggerated, the cost in terms of the U.S. moral authority has been high. The Obama Administration has explicitly disavowed linkages within its Russia policy components, such as punishing Russian misbehavior in one area by withholding concessions in another.

There is good reason to believe, moreover, that Russian leaders do not take White House efforts at promoting human rights seriously. They know that the U.S. Administration is chained to the "reset" and will do little more than verbally object to the Kremlin's abuses of human rights and the rule of law. The talk of democracy is "for domestic [U.S.] consumption," said one official Russian visitor to Washington last fall. Such American softness is one reason why Medvedev told the *Financial Times* on June 18, "Let me tell you that no one wishes the re-election of Barack Obama as U.S. president as I do."

Free from concern about a serious U.S. response, corruption and abuse of power in Russia continue to rise.

- In June, the Russian Justice Ministry denied registration to the Party of People's Freedom, a new party created by prominent opposition leaders, an early indication that December's parliamentary elections will be neither free nor fair.
- In May, prosecutors opened a criminal investigation into anti-corruption whistleblower Aleksey Navalny for what he said was revenge for exposing alleged fraud at Russian state companies.

- In December 2010, former oligarchs Mikhail Khodorkhovsky and Platon Lebedev were sentenced, in their second trial, to additional lengthy terms in Siberian prisons on charges of embezzlement and money laundering. On May 31, the European Court of Justice ruled that officials had seriously violated Khodorkhovsky's rights during his arrest and trial detention.

A Moral Black Hole. The roots of the Russian elite's discontent lie in imperial nostalgia, phantom pains of autocracy, and questionable morality. The end of communism resulted in a moral black hole—a deep spiritual and identity crisis among the elites. Corruption, alcoholism, and blurred lines between organized crime and authority reflect general alienation, recklessness, and fatalism.

Nations fail, St. Augustine argued, because peoples fail. A healthy society can correct a deficient state, but even the best-designed states will founder if they are based upon a deficient civil society.

This degradation bears directly on Russia's conduct of its foreign policy. Those who keep calling for an engagement that will eventually transform Russia cannot see that it is the West, not Russia, that is being transformed by this contact.

What Is to Be Done? It is, thus, in the American national interest to attend to broader international concerns such as freedom and justice when dealing with Russia. The current regime stands squarely against these objectives and, therefore, against U.S. interests.

In order for the U.S. to be in a stronger position than it is today, the White House needs to shift from seeking to "please the Russians" to a more vigorous promotion of its values that pressures Moscow to "reset" its policies concerning human rights, democratization, and good governance and to distance itself from rogue states. Key levers in this effort include denying visas to corrupt Russian businessmen and examining their banking practices and acquisitions. The U.S. should also target police and prosecutors who fabricate evidence and judges who rubber stamp convictions. This is what the bipartisan S. 1039 "Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act," co-sponsored by Senators John McCain (R-AZ),

Mark Kirk (R–IL), Joseph Lieberman (I–CT), and Ben Cardin (D–MD), aims to achieve.

Initially, Russian reaction to such a shift in U.S. policy would cause heartburn. Nevertheless, America already has many allies within the country. As the Institute of Contemporary Development, a prominent Russian think tank chaired by Medvedev, stated earlier this year, “The challenge of our times is an overhaul of the system of values, the forging of new consciousness... The best investment [the state can make in man] is Liberty and the Rule of Law, and respect for man’s dignity.”

If Washington persists and stays strong, the Kremlin is likely to relent and eventually acquiesce. Russia’s current rulers recognize and respect power and policies based on strength, not weakness.

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