



## **A New Approach to a New Russia**

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### Analytic Overview

Russia's political trajectory has long been a U.S. national security concern, but the ability to affect this trajectory has greatly diminished over time as U.S. soft power has eroded. By 2007, inside Russia, those hostile to the United States take satisfaction at what one expert referred to as our "fallen giant" status. In contrast, Westernizers—those who want Russia to be part of the Atlantic community—view the decline as worrisome and find themselves increasingly isolated. Most distressing, experts report that anti-Americans and pro-Americans share today the same view about the current American role in the world: aggressive, counterproductive, destructive, and arrogant.

The decline of U.S. smart power in Russia began in the Clinton administration after a series of missteps engaging both the government and the public, as well as specific foreign policy decisions. President Clinton's over-personalized relationship with Boris Yeltsin, a president viewed by the Russian elite as submissive and subservient to American interests, had an especially negative and lasting impact. Official U.S. government praise for fledgling new Russian institutions, such as political parties and elections that barely functioned or failed to address local needs caused more damage to U.S. credibility. NATO expansion and the use of force in Kosovo turned the elite sharply away from the United States. As one observer commented, "the day you bombed Belgrade, that's the day it all changed."

Current and former U.S. government officials claim Bush administration counterterrorism policies and abuses related to the war in Iraq cost the United States precious leverage concerning abuses by Russian authorities in Chechnya. One senior American diplomat lamented, "Abu Ghraib has had an effect. And certainly the Russians love to say we told you so .... They talk a lot about how Iraq is exactly what 'we had in Chechnya.'" Meanwhile, Chechnya became a pretext for the Putin government to shrink public political space including for example, control of critical, independent television. Russian elites and the public view U.S. government condemnation of human rights abuse in Russia as extremely cynical; one observer commented, "no one really believes that official Washington cares about human rights in Russia." Indeed, human rights activists in Russia have begun to state this publicly for the first time.

As U.S. smart power has precipitously declined, the Putin administration has embraced a hyper-sovereign conception of the state in which democratic norms acquire an alien and

hostile association. Evidence suggests the Putin administration is trying to mainstream this view inside international organizations. The Russian government has launched an effort to change the rules and norms governing OSCE election observations. Perhaps more disturbing, in the UN Security Council, the Russian Federation, along with China, has attempted to block international responses to grave human rights violations in Darfur and in Burma. If U.S. smart power does not improve, there is a danger that Russia and China will “set the table” on international human rights issues over the next decade.

At home, Russian administration officials and President Putin himself regularly attempt to invoke anxiety among the population concerning the “dangers” of foreign influence, suggesting that Russia is becoming encircled by enemies. Some experts predict the negative messages about the United States will proliferate and intensify the closer we come to March 2008, when leadership change in Russia is scheduled to take place.

Not surprisingly, negative images of the United States are shared by elites and the larger public. Most experts consulted believed this image is the most negative it has been in 20 years. A spring 2007 CSIS survey of 1,800 Russian youth suggests just how widespread the views are: Nearly 80 percent agreed that “the United States tries to impose its norms and way of life on the rest of the world,” and only 20% agreed with the statement that the United States “does more good than bad.” Most damning for U.S. smart power, three quarters of respondents fully agree or partially agree that the “United States gives aid in order to influence the internal politics of countries.” They view the United States as a far greater threat to Russia than Iran or China.<sup>1</sup>

### Recommendations

Just as the current administration has been marginalized inside Russia because of efforts that both relate to and go beyond Russia, the next administration must understand its Russia policy as having both bilateral and multilateral aspects. Moreover, the new U.S. policy should reach beyond the narrow band of elites in Moscow.

#### *The New Bilateral Approach: Listen to Russians!*

The next administration must adopt radically different approaches to engaging Russia with a particular focus on how the U.S. government approaches foreign assistance. This new approach should be the equivalent of rebooting the system, or as one expert suggested, “a sort of American *perestroika*.”

In terms of assistance strategies, instead of Beltway bandits, Congressional or Executive politics, the new approaches must be shaped by local needs and designed to encourage Russian civil society to engage local populations rather than foreign donors. At the same time, given Russia’s strategic importance, but in stark contrast to the current administration, such engagement must be adequately funded. At the moment, budgets

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah E. Mendelson and Theodore P. Gerber, “Young Russia’s Enemy No. 1,” *Washington Post*, August 3, 2007, p. A 15.

have been slashed, and there is little oversight. A handful of individuals in Washington have control over funds that have on occasion gone to support work with political groups of marginal if no support in Russia. This approach leaves human rights defenders that do have the possibility of more genuine local support vulnerable to the criticism by President Putin and others that foreign assistance is designed to get civil society closer to foreigners than to the local population.

There is no intrinsic reason why this should be the case. Smart assistance should as often as possible address what local populations want supported. With this as a guiding principle for assistance, local NGOs can orient toward the public. CSIS surveys from 2005 and 2007 suggest that despite the relentless Kremlin campaign against foreign assistance, young Russians are not hostile to U.S. government funded initiatives concerning health, the environment, and even human rights. They do not, by large majorities, however, approve of funding for public protest of the government. Listening to and honoring the views of the Russian public will make U.S. tax payer dollars more effective. This approach does not mean abandoning the focus on human rights. It means potentially deepening the impact.

The instruments and organizations through which assistance has been delivered need overhaul after 17 years. Some observers suggested that the existing machinery, including USAID, should be scrapped for “new foundations with new faces,” an endowment perhaps that views assistance in a fresh way.

As part of this new strategy, and in contrast with the Bush administration relying mainly on high level emissaries such as Henry Kissinger, contacts between the United States and Russia need to be multiplied. A more engaged strategy will help avoid the over-personalization of presidential politics that marked both the Clinton and Bush administrations. The new approach should support concrete cooperation between different parts of societies (mayors, congressional ties, university presidents) on a range of issues of common concern, for example, public health, counterterrorism, youth alienation or even urban decay, where stakeholders may share best practices. One expert described these as “social projects with a human touch.” At government levels, the contact should be broadened beyond the White House. In recent years, Congressional contacts with the Russian Duma and Federation Council have all but dropped off and need to be restored—not because these are important centers of power in Russia but because there is widespread misperception of Congress’s relationship with the White House and this is another ingredient feeding misperceptions.

The next president should make a speech indicating that he or she recognizes the differences between our countries but recognizing that we are not in existential conflict. The next president should build a policy that is more than just about the White House-Kremlin relationship. The successor of President Putin should be encouraged to come to the United States to do the same, with the understanding that the Kremlin will not control contact with ordinary Americans. A particular focus on youth exchange must be highlighted to reverse the trend revealed in the current generation of 16 to 29 year old

Russians. Additionally one could imagine a public-private twinning program for schools in the United States and Russia over the internet.

*The New Multilateralism: Opt Back In To the International Community*

The next administration will be more effective engaging Russia on a number of issues if it opts back into the international community in a comprehensive manner. The fact that the United States has opted out of international legal frameworks has enabled, according to numerous experts, the Russian drift toward authoritarianism. The next administration should call on all branches of the United States government and members of civil society to do what we can to reclaim our role as generators of human rights norms, not as abusers. The next administration must show Russia and the world that we are re-embracing international human rights and humanitarian law, not only because it is the right thing to do but also because it makes us safer. Radical shifts in policies concerning counterterrorism will help reestablish this credibility.

Fundamental to this new multilateralism will be to work closely with European allies in order to speak with one voice on a number of issues relating to Russia. One Russian expert noted, “if Americans cannot agree with their natural allies (Europe), how do they think they are going to get agreement with Russia?” Within the first 100 days, the next president ought to appoint a senior U.S. envoy to the European Union, with one of his/her tasks to convey goals and strategies of the new U.S. policy on Russia.

Message and Marketing

Within the first 100 days, the next president should meet with the Russian president but also engage the Russian public at a town meeting in a city other than Moscow. The president should announce a series of citizen to citizen initiatives concerning health, education and human rights challenges that confront both countries. The message should be: we need you! to help solve vital problems confronting both our countries. Major challenges lie with the Russian authorities but by having the meeting occur early in the term, perhaps as a first foreign trip, this approach might send a favorable signal to the Kremlin and to ordinary Russians that Russia is being again taken seriously. The American public is likely to understand engagement and assistance strategies based on listening and responding to local needs, rather than only or mainly to Washington’s needs.