

U.S.-RUSSIAN RELATIONS AND THE  
DEMOCRACY AND RULE OF LAW DEFICIT

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A CENTURY FOUNDATION REPORT

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This report is one in a series commissioned by The Century Foundation to explore issues of interest to American policymakers regarding Russia, aimed at identifying a framework for U.S.-Russian relations and policy options for the new administration and Congress that could help right the two countries' troubled relationship at a crucial juncture. The reports in the series explore significant aspects of U.S.-Russian relations, outlining a broad range of reasons why Russia matters for American foreign policy and framing bilateral and multilateral approaches to Russia for U.S. consideration. A high-level working group, co-chaired by Gary Hart, former U.S. senator from Colorado, and Jack F. Matlock, Jr., former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, has provided direction to the project and offered recommendations for action that the United States might take.

The views expressed in this report are those of the author. Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Century Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, every U.S. administration has considered Russia's political trajectory a national security concern.<sup>1</sup> Based on campaign statements and President Barack Obama's early personnel choices, this perspective likely will affect policy toward Russia in some way for the foreseeable future.<sup>2</sup> While the Obama administration plans to cooperate with Moscow on a number of issues, it will find that Russia's current deficit in the areas of democracy and the rule of law complicate the relationship and may, in some cases, undermine attempts at engagement. The organizers of the Century Foundation Russia Working Group have labeled this policy problem "coping with creeping authoritarianism."

Results from nearly a dozen large, random sample surveys in Russia since 2001 that examine the views and experiences of literally thousands of Russians, combined with other research and newspaper reporting, all suggest the current democracy and rule of law deficit is rather stark.<sup>3</sup> The deficit does not diminish the importance of Russia in international affairs, nor is it meant to suggest the situation is unique to Russia. The internal conditions of many states have negative international security implications. As Europeans repeatedly pointed out during the administration of George W. Bush, U.S. departures from the rule of law made the United States increasingly problematic as a global partner, whether through the use of force in Iraq or the manner in which the United States pursued and handled terrorist suspects.

In fact, coping with authoritarian trends in Russia (and elsewhere) will involve changes in U.S. policies that have, on the surface, nothing to do with Russia. Bush administration counterterrorism policies that authorized torture, indefinite detention of terrorist suspects, and the rendering of detainees to

secret prisons and Guantánamo have had numerous negative unintended consequences for U.S. national security, including serving as a recruitment tool for al Qaeda and insurgents in Iraq.<sup>4</sup> Less often recognized, these policies also have undercut whatever leverage the United States had, as well as limited the effectiveness of American decision-makers, to push back on authoritarian policies adopted by, among others, the Putin administration. At its worst, American departures from the rule of law may have enabled abuse inside Russia. These departures certainly left human rights defenders isolated.<sup>5</sup> Repairing the damage to U.S. soft power and reversing the departure from human rights norms that characterized the Bush administration's counterterrorism policies will provide the Obama administration strategic and moral authority and improve the ability of the United States to work with allies. It also can have positive consequences for Obama's Russia policy.

The changes that need to be made in U.S. counterterrorism policies, however politically sensitive, are somewhat more straightforward than the adjustments that must be made to respond to the complex issues concerning Russia. The Obama administration must determine how best to engage Russian leaders and the population on issues of importance to the United States, given Russia's poor governance structures, the stark drop in oil prices, Russia's continued aspirations for great power status, and the rather serious resentment by Russians concerning American dominance and prior policies. The policy puzzle, therefore, is how to do all this without, at the same time, sacrificing our values and undercutting (yet again) U.S. soft power.

This report assesses the political dynamics that have shaped Russia's authoritarian drift, briefly addresses a few of the ways in which they matter for U.S. policy, and suggests several organizing principles to help the Obama administration manage this critical relationship. Possible approaches include working closely with Europe on a joint approach to Russia, accurately anticipating the unintended consequences of U.S. policy in one realm (such as Kosovo) for Russia policy, and embracing the rights of states to choose their

own security alliances. A final important principle relates to U.S. engagement with Russians beyond the Kremlin. President Obama should speak directly to the Russian people, engaging in a manner that respects their interests and desires, but also reflects the core values of the Obama administration; that is, “reject[s] as false the choice between our safety and our ideals.”<sup>6</sup> The Obama administration also should endorse a platform and a process for a renewed dialogue between U.S. and Russian civil society.

## THE VIEW FROM THE KREMLIN

Two interactive dynamics over the past several years have shaped the dominant approach by the Russian government to the outside world: the United States declined as a world power, and at the same time, the Russian state accumulated massive wealth from high gas and oil prices. Following what many in the Russian elite view as the “humiliation” of the 1990s, by 2008, Russia was no longer a status quo power. Instead, revisionist in nature, Russian authorities focused on the restoration of great power status.<sup>7</sup> Fueled by petrodollars, the government tackled this project in numerous ways, including military exercises around the globe, soft power projects such as a twenty-four-hour-a-day English language cable news station, “think tanks” in New York and Paris, and perhaps most important, gas and oil distribution systems meant to make Russia a central player in energy security for decades to come.<sup>8</sup> This restoration project undoubtedly will be slowed by the current financial crisis and drop in oil revenues, but the building blocks remain in place.

As the restoration project evolved, the Putin administration increasingly challenged aspects of the post–World War II and post–cold war legal, security, and economic architecture, and suggested the need for new arrangements. Many in the Russian elite seemed to view the changes that have occurred in Europe over the past twenty years, such as the enlargement of the North

Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU), as illegitimate, driven not by the choices of local governments or populations, but by the will of Washington. Nostalgia for the Soviet era, a related sentiment, is widely shared, and is an important source of former president and now Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's popularity.<sup>9</sup> Some experts even suggest that many in Russia's governing structures believe that Europe whole and free—that is, post-cold war Europe—is not in the security interest of Russia. The Carnegie Moscow Center's Lilya Shevtsova has labeled this view “great power nationalism” and observes that the “Putin-Medvedev-Lavrov doctrine” derives from the premise that Russia seeks to contain the West—while the West is busy trying not to offend Russia.<sup>10</sup> Some other studies suggest that Russian policymakers have attempted, in fact, to divide the United States from Europe, and generally have preferred bilateral to multilateral engagement.<sup>11</sup> At the United Nations, Russia, together with China, repeatedly has challenged international responses to gross human rights violations in Burma, Darfur, and Zimbabwe, and it has engaged in systematic efforts to undermine the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) election monitoring efforts and the Council of Europe's human rights monitoring.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, Russian leaders seem to believe the current European security arrangements are soft commitments, ripe for renegotiation and restructuring. President Dmitri Medvedev has, in fact, called for a new “collective security arrangement,” at the same time reintroducing the concept of spheres of influence.<sup>13</sup> All of these actions taken together, along with the decline in U.S. soft power, have looked at times as if some in the Russian government were trying to reset the table on human rights and international law, exporting its democracy and rule of law deficit abroad.

How best can the United States, together with Europe, respond to this situation? Two additional dynamics are relevant: Russian internal weaknesses, both political and economic, but also the degree to which the Russian authorities' assessment of the condition of the international system is correct. For

example, in August 2008, Russian government officials fecklessly deployed human rights and international law rhetoric to justify the Russian use of force in South Ossetia—was that just a murky reflection of the current deeply inconsistent international order?<sup>14</sup> Will that calculation be challenged by the Obama administration? How can it do so effectively? Will we see a new era of more robust international organizations, underpinned by respect for human rights and international law? If not, will we be in for a period of serious instability in Europe, along Russia's borders?

## **RUSSIA'S DEMOCRACY AND RULE OF LAW DEFICIT**

What makes these questions so pressing is the reality that American and European political strategy dating back to the early 1990s of integrating Russia into the Euro-Atlantic community and thus encouraging democratic development has largely failed. By 2009, Vladimir Putin's policies have systematically closed off nearly all legitimate structures for voicing opposition. Many nongovernmental organizations are under daily pressure from the authorities.<sup>15</sup> The parliament is dominated by a government-run party, United Russia, and outcomes of local and national elections are controlled by the authorities. The government controls national television. The few critically minded journalists that exist routinely are threatened or are under constant surveillance by the authorities, and twenty murders of journalists since 2000 have gone unsolved.<sup>16</sup> One small newspaper known for its criticism of Kremlin policies has seen four of its journalists killed in recent years. At a minimum, the authorities have presided over an era of impunity, and at worst, some fear government authorities may have been directly involved in these deaths.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, the democratic political opposition is extremely marginal and dysfunctional—irrespective of whatever government pressures are brought to bear on it. Russia has no leading liberal figures that might emerge as national

leaders at present. In years past, the fighting among liberal parties was legendary, and led to multiple fratricidal losses in single-mandate districts, as liberal parties ran against one another—back when there were competitive elections for parliamentary seats.<sup>18</sup> Today, it is unclear when or how the democratic opposition will repair itself.

Yet, as political space has shrunk steadily in the past ten years, the majority of Russians do not appear to mind. In terms of the younger generation, the conventional wisdom that wealth would lead to a demand for democracy has not been borne out; only about 10 percent of survey respondents could be considered strongly supportive of democracy, while most are ambivalent. In the early 1990s, many in the West assumed that the older Soviet generation would be replaced eventually by a younger, pro-Western, pro-democratic generation. Experts and policymakers alike assumed this succession would be a natural course of events, like gravity. A similar conventional wisdom about the younger generation in Russia continues. It holds that iPods, lattes, skateboards, and other artifacts of Western consumer culture will translate into a desire for independent media, justice, and human rights. In 2005 and 2007, in an environment of steadily shrinking political space, a study based at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) explored how young Russians viewed Soviet history and Stalin. Our nationally representative surveys of 16-to-29-year-old Russians suggested that, despite economic prosperity, most young people gravitated enthusiastically to Vladimir Putin's ideological platform of revisionist history and nostalgia. The narrative advanced by the government concerning recent history quite simply resonated with this younger generation. In both surveys, a majority believed that Stalin did more good than bad and that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century. These findings undoubtedly reflected coordinated strategic communications efforts by government authorities, including support of a teacher's guide rewriting Soviet history, downplaying the deaths of millions of citizens, and effacing historical memory. These actions facilitated

Russia's authoritarian trend.<sup>19</sup> In sum, the Russian middle class and support for authoritarian governance coexist.

The tacit bargain of the past decade, however, in which dissenters were punished but Russians' pocketbooks grew, may now be threatened by the international economic crisis. Oil prices plunged from a high of \$147 a barrel in July 2008 to about \$40 a barrel in December 2008. If the price of oil stays low, the lubricating effect of oil and gas revenues may well dry up, laying bare Russia's dysfunctional state institutions and challenging the authorities' ability to govern. Economic hardship and poor governance seem, at least anecdotally, to correlate with an increase in public protest and nervousness on the part of the ruling authorities.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps, in the long run, the mix of economic hard times and poor governance will stimulate a greater demand for democracy and the rule of law in Russia, as citizens grow unhappy with state institutions that do not function and link that dysfunction to poor governance. In the near term, we can expect growth in nationalism and xenophobia.<sup>21</sup>

To be sure, the democracy and rule of law deficit and the growth in nationalism pose problems primarily for Russians. In the twenty-first century, independent investigative journalism and the legitimate use of courts for prosecution are necessary to fight corruption. Today, Russia is plagued by corruption, and the Russian authorities dominate both television and court decisions.<sup>22</sup> Independent newspapers and Internet sites exist, but journalists who have engaged in investigative journalism have been killed or live under threat.<sup>23</sup> In a state where the rule of man predominates, the population experiences the police as predatory rather than protective. Torture in police stations is said to be common and police officers who have been rotated through Chechnya are said to be especially abusive.<sup>24</sup> In a 2004 CSIS survey of 2,400 Russians ages 16 to 65, 41 percent of respondents feared arbitrary arrest by the police.<sup>25</sup> In a 2007 CSIS survey of 2,000 Russians ages 16 to 29, 62 percent of respondents fully or partially distrusted the police.<sup>26</sup> While one cannot make direct comparisons for methodological reasons, it is worth

bearing in mind a recent study of attitudes toward police in China, where only 25 percent reported distrust.<sup>27</sup>

Undoubtedly, the democracy and rule of law deficit varies regionally, but it is particularly worrisome in the southern regions of Russia. The government's approach to what it perceives as widespread radical Islamic sentiment in the North Caucasus has increased violence rather than contained it. Between May 1 and August 31, 2008, there were at least 282 incidents, and between September 1 and December 31, 2008 there were at least 333.<sup>28</sup> When the situation is at its most dire, the Russian government appears not to control this part of its territory. Many experts worry that there will be war in the North Caucasus in 2009, or possibly that, south of the border, a Russian-Georgia war will break out again.<sup>29</sup> That prognosis may be overly gloomy, but violence is clearly on the rise and the socioeconomic conditions in the region are dire.

## WHY IT MATTERS

What does any of this have to do with the Obama administration? The democracy and rule of law deficit in Russia has a range of security and human rights implications for the United States and our allies in Europe. For example, the Obama administration comes to office with a number of arms control goals. These plans may be complicated by the absence of Russian military reform that, in turn, correlates with abuse inside the army. (They are also complicated by continued government reliance on nonconventional forces: in September 2008, President Medvedev committed to modernizing the nuclear arsenal.<sup>30</sup>) Serious, joint counterterrorism efforts with the United States, Europe, and Russia are likely to remain illusive as long as the police and security services are corrupt and abusive, and the media, a potential source to expose that corruption, is largely controlled by the government. Even at the nongovernmental, track-two level, it is now difficult to have the sort of transatlantic

policy dialogue on terrorism that has been common among other nations and societies since 2001.<sup>31</sup> The most dire evidence suggests that security service personnel or contractors have been deployed abroad, in European cities, to eliminate Kremlin enemies. In the most famous example, British authorities have sought the extradition from Moscow of former KGB bodyguard and current Duma member Andrew Lugovoi for the murder by Polonium poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko in London in November 2006.<sup>32</sup> Kremlin proxies, such as Chechnya's Ramzan Kadyrov, may have agents doing the same on his behalf on the streets of Austria, also with apparent impunity.<sup>33</sup>

At a minimum, the Russian authorities seem to have drawn a red line at additional enlargement of Euro-Atlantic organizations. Instead of allowing states and societies to decide for themselves what alliances and security or economic arrangements they want, Russian officials speak of “zones of interest” and “neutral” spaces—presumably such as Ukraine. In the worst case scenario, the Kremlin might decide to probe the resolve of existing NATO and EU security commitments. Presumably, this realization led General James Craddock to request that NATO begin defense planning for the Baltic states.<sup>34</sup> Some believe, although the evidence is not clear, that the May 2007 cyber attack on Estonian government agencies, banks, newspapers, and other organizations was a first probe by the Russian government.<sup>35</sup> In the August 2008 war in Georgia, for which all sides deserve some blame, experts saw evidence of additional Russian government cyber attacks and a prime example of blatant disregard for international law as the Russian government sought to change an internationally recognized border by force.<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile, existing Euro-Atlantic organizations are negatively and directly affected by Russia's democracy and rule of law deficit. In recent years, the European Court of Human Rights has heard far more cases from Russia than any other country, effectively substituting for Russia's domestic judiciary. Some European human rights lawyers argue that this situation is severely undermining the court's efficacy and ability to handle cases from a

broad range of countries. Moreover, the Russian government increasingly has failed to compensate victims or their families, apparently now risking its expulsion from the Council of Europe.<sup>37</sup> According to numerous OSCE officials, the Kremlin has waged a systematic campaign to undercut the organization's various monitoring efforts.<sup>38</sup> The emergent norm of international election observation has been undermined by the Kremlin's attempts to legitimize fraudulent elections at home and in neighboring states, supporting a wave of authoritarian governments in this region.<sup>39</sup>

## AN OBAMA STRATEGY

The unprecedented economic crisis and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan dominate the initial agenda of the Obama administration. Worries over another Israeli-Palestinian war, relations with Iran, nuclear proliferation, and the status of al Qaeda are somewhere next on the list of serious security challenges. Russia is, of course, on the list, as was made clear by Vice President Joseph Biden's speech in Munich, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's meeting with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Geneva, the April London meeting and the July Moscow summit with President Obama and President Medvedev. The Obama administration appears keen not to let U.S.-Russia policy drift as it did in the Bush administration, and the Obama team is moving quickly to establish the organizing principles that would drive policy and guide how it copes with the political realities of Russia today, and seeking opportunities to change the relationship.

As a guide to coping with creeping authoritarianism, and for planning purposes, the Obama administration reasonably can (1) assume that Russia will continue, in the near term, on an authoritarian trajectory while at the same time, try to encourage President Medvedev toward more openness and engagement; (2) consider that Russia's political regime may grow more brittle and

thus potentially more fragile, rather than more robust and invulnerable; (3) propose and prepare for joint cooperation with Moscow on a number of issues, but anticipate that these plans could be overwhelmed by internal dynamics in Russia; and (4) understand and prepare for that which is difficult to anticipate, such as the depth and length of the economic crisis, and the potential divisions within Russian leadership that might emerge over a range of issues such as whether and how to cooperate with the United States and how to address the effects of the crisis, including the use of force against civilians to stop public protest.<sup>40</sup>

The ability of any U.S. administration to shape what happens inside Russia has long been exaggerated and misunderstood. The impact of foreign assistance clearly matters to those individuals who receive funds and technical training, but recent evidence suggests that how the United States conducts itself in the world has far more weight in terms of its ability to bolster or undermine democracy, human rights and the rule of law in other countries.<sup>41</sup> For example, U.S. noncompliance with human rights norms and laws has enabled, although not caused, Russia's authoritarian drift. Therefore, a robust and comprehensive effort to opt back in to international legal frameworks will have important knock-on effects for our relations with Russia, in addition to bolstering our ability to work with allies. The United States needs to shape the larger policy context in a positive, rather than a negative, way.<sup>42</sup> An array of new U.S. policies unrelated to Russia (such as closing Guantánamo, ending detention without charge, and halting unlawful interrogation of terror suspects) can help restore U.S. soft power, as well as repair the international architecture that Russia (correctly) views as weak and that it (regrettably) seeks to replace. If the United States once again is associated with justice instead of injustice, it will do much to shore up human rights activists inside Russia. It will also challenge core assumptions that have taken hold within the Russian elite about the hypocrisy and weakness of democracy and human rights norms within the international system.

The most successful approach for the new U.S. policy on Russia would be one that is formed as much as possible in consultation with Europe. In other words, the path to Moscow should be through London, Paris, and Berlin, as well as Warsaw, Stockholm, and Tallinn. Specifically, an early priority for the Obama administration, in addition to time-sensitive issues such as NATO summits and expiring arms control treaties, ought to involve synchronizing approaches with Europe to minimize divisions over Russia and make clear to the Russian government that the Euro-Atlantic alliance is robust. There are serious splits in Europe over Russia, and therefore, this task will require a senior member of the administration to shepherd (if not bird-dog) the policy process. Given the relatively small cost to Russia of the August 2008 South Ossetia war, the Russian government may believe that there is no coherent West.<sup>43</sup> That calculation needs to be corrected, and this can occur in several ways. For example, measures might include the forging of a new EU-U.S. joint agreement on counterterrorism; the articulation of a shared view of what human rights means practically in the twenty-first century, from a state's responsibility to protect against genocide to provisions against poverty, or simply an articulation of legitimate state-craft and policy—applying equally to the United States and to other countries.<sup>44</sup> The use of force to change international borders, for example, ought to be universally condemned. The Obama administration along with European governments likely will open discussions with the Russian government on the “collective security arrangements,” but they must do so in a way that does not diminish support for existing Euro-Atlantic institutions and does not mislead the Russian government into thinking NATO commitments are somehow wobbly. If and when such a meeting takes place, the nongovernmental community, as Defense Secretary Robert Gates noted was the case at the Helsinki talks, ought to be included in some fashion.<sup>45</sup>

This proactive agenda with the Europeans should include working with NATO to draw up robust defense plans for new NATO members and assurances of NATO's Article V commitments. At the risk of stating the obvious,

if the Obama administration continues the policy that U.S. national interests are served by the existence of NATO as a military alliance, then the security of new NATO members needs to be bolstered. It should be done in a way that does not increase threat perceptions by Russia, and this will prove difficult, but it also must be crystal clear to all parties that the rules that govern membership in NATO are well understood and institutionalized. This proactive agenda also ought to include renewed support, budgetary if possible, for the OSCE. The Helsinki architecture is in need of repair and has long been neglected by Washington. The Obama administration also might consider supporting an international investigation into war crimes in the Russia-Georgia conflict—including whether genocide and ethnic cleansing occurred—by militias and armies associated with all sides and bringing to justice those who committed crimes.

An important aspect of effectively coping with authoritarian trends in Russia will involve Obama administration officials reading Russians correctly—by accurately assessing where their values, views, and interests intersect with and diverge from ours, and most important, anticipating how U.S. policies in one area affect or trigger Russian responses in others. For example, some experts speculate, much to the displeasure of former Clinton administration officials, that NATO's use of force in Kosovo partly led to the Russian General Staff planning a second war in Chechnya. The argument is that, when NATO used force, the General Staff decided that it had a green light to do so in Chechnya. We may never have definitive proof of this, but we do know the conduct of the second Chechen war in late 1999 demonstrated that the Russian government did not worry at all about its targeting of civilians or the International Committee of the Red Cross.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, years later, the West's recognition of Kosovo's independence triggered planning for Russian action in South Ossetia.<sup>47</sup> President Obama's team must anticipate as much as possible the consequences of actions and non-actions, and to the greatest extent possible, be transparent in its decision-making.

## TACTICS FOR THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

The election of Barack Obama, the first African-American president, in itself challenges the view that many Russians have of the United States.<sup>48</sup> While most of the world was moved to tears and jubilation, on November 5, Medvedev delivered an anti-American screed that included a threat to place missiles in Kaliningrad. When asked about the timing, he claimed weeks later at a Council on Foreign Relations meeting to have forgotten about the U.S. election.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps an equally plausible explanation (making the rounds in Washington policy circles) was that the Kremlin speech writers crafted the speech believing John McCain would win the presidency.

Unlike the Bush administration, which talked about liberty but institutionalized indefinite detention without charge, President Obama, on his second full day in office, signed executive orders halting torture, calling for the closing of Guantánamo, and closing secret prisons. While progress toward that goal has been uneven, the Obama administration is finding its voice on issues of human rights and democracy, as was made evident by the President's speech in Cairo in June. The Obama administration need not nor should not downplay or ignore state-sponsored or state-tolerated abuse of human rights in Russia. Similarly, if senior Russian government officials make statements that are clearly anti-American in nature, as they have done several times since 1999, for example implying foreign assistance is a means of intelligence gathering, these must be refuted instead of ignored or, in essence, rewarded with special presidential summits, as occurred under George W. Bush. On every trip to the region, President Obama should meet not only with government officials, but also with human rights defenders and other members of civil society. He should address directly the Russian public on a range of issues, including our own struggle with justice and racial equality.<sup>50</sup> There is no need to lecture Russia on democracy and human rights. He can be effective simply talking about the American journey.

The U.S. policy and intelligence failure of overlooking or misreading the events and conditions that led to the South Ossetia war must not be repeated. The administration ought to prioritize analysis of the Caucasus—North and South. Similarly, the Obama administration ought to consider developing internally a specific set of metrics to gauge the opening or continued closing of politics in Russia. Is there serious movement to bring the murderers of Paul Klebnikov, Anna Politkovskaya, Stanislav Markelov, and Anastasia Baburova, among others, to justice? Is the number of journalists and lawyers killed decreasing or increasing? Is the judiciary increasingly independent or not? Are Kremlin critics allowed to return to television? Can lawful opponents gather freely without arrest? Is the number of political opponents seeking asylum abroad increasing? Are foreign nongovernmental organizations being shut down? Is the law on nongovernmental organizations reformed? An empirically based assessment will help administration officials identify opportunities as well as monitor continued challenges. A promising sign in recent weeks has been the noninterference by Russian authorities in the planning of a U.S.-Russian “Civil Society Summit” to be held during the July visit of President Obama to Moscow. Whether and how that meeting unfolds—and what level of engagement we see from both governments during the part of the meeting to which government representatives are invited—will provide a potential metric concerning the opening or closing of political space in Russia today, as well as the interest of the Obama administration in the conditions experienced by Russian civil society.<sup>51</sup>

We do not yet know what sort of foreign assistance the United States will be in a position to support as a result of the economic crisis or what policy the Obama administration will pursue. The administration is said to be engaged in a strategic rethink of its “democracy assistance” to Russia.<sup>52</sup> Whatever U.S. funds are spent in Russia, Obama administration officials ought to demonstrate first that they are listening to Russians, and then allocate support in response to the needs and desires of Russian citizens, not according to those of Washington

insiders. For example, on health issues, rather than focus mainly or exclusively on HIV/AIDS in Russia, as was the case for much of the Bush administration, the Obama administration should address the larger health crises, including noninfectious diseases, as recommended by a survey of Russian doctors.<sup>53</sup> If public opinion data suggest that Russians view certain types of assistance as too political or undesirable, the Obama administration ought to refrain from that sort of assistance. While the Kremlin has waged a loud campaign characterizing such assistance as linked to espionage (and simultaneously failing to meet the health and welfare needs of its citizens), CSIS public opinion data suggest that Russians actually view foreign support to combat human rights abuses, repair environmental damage, and address health crises as neutral or positive. These three issues all converge in the North Caucasus; however difficult, perhaps the Obama administration ought to prioritize support to that region.<sup>54</sup> Programming foreign assistance based on the views of the Russian public will make U.S. taxpayer dollars more effective. This approach does not mean abandoning the focus on human rights; it means potentially deepening the impact.

An Obama administration that uses diplomacy and places a premium on the Euro-Atlantic relationship, while also responding (where it can) to the needs of Russian citizens and the (often distinct) desires of Russian leaders can challenge, if not alter, the calculations of the West as hypocritical. Even when events of the day have a way of undermining the most well thought-out plans, enabling authoritarians should never be the effect of U.S. policy. Many throughout the world will be looking for the Obama administration to (re) make the United States into a symbol of justice, especially for those who live mired in injustice. Aside from being the morally right thing to do, it is strategically smart. If the United States once again is associated with justice, it will challenge core assumptions that have taken hold globally about the weakness of democracy and human rights norms. If the Obama administration fails in this—our own restoration project—the Russian elite's assumptions about the

international system, and how borders can be changed by force with impunity, may lead to future instability and conflict. Pessimism, disappointment, and cynicism may come eventually, but the early days of the Obama administration are off to a promising start in terms of the restoration project. Experts will be waiting to see both that the Obama administration delivers on the new policies and their effects on U.S. engagement with Russia.

## NOTES

1. That said, the expert community, and indeed the Century Foundation Russia Working Group, is divided as to whether and how Russian internal dynamics matter for U.S. foreign policy. For the range of views, see Henry A. Kissinger, "Finding Common Ground with Russia," *Washington Post*, July 8, 2008, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Putin's Choice," *Washington Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (Winter 2008): 95–116.

2. See "Meeting the Challenge of a Resurgent Russia," Organizing for America, available online at [http://origin.barackobama.com/issues/foreign\\_policy/#onrussia](http://origin.barackobama.com/issues/foreign_policy/#onrussia); Michael McFaul and Sarah E. Mendelson, "Democracy in Russia—A U.S. National Security Issue," *Demokratizatsiya* 8 (Summer 2000): 330–53.

3. The surveys were conducted by the author together with the Levada Analytic Center and Professor Theodore P. Gerber (University of Wisconsin-Madison). The research was supported by numerous grants.

4. Alberto J. Mora, "Statement of Alberto J. Mora," Testimony before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, Hearing on the Treatment of Detainees in U.S. Custody, June 17, 2008, 5, available online at <http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2008/June/Mora%2006-17-08.pdf>; Sarah E. Mendelson, *Closing Guantánamo: From Bumper Sticker to Blueprint* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS Press, 2008), 5, available online at [http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/080905\\_mendelson\\_guantanamo\\_web.pdf](http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/080905_mendelson_guantanamo_web.pdf).

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6. "President Barack Obama's Inaugural Address," The White House, January 20, 2009, available online at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/inaugural-address/>

7. On the revisionist nature, see Ivan Krastev, "Russia and the Georgia War: The Great-Power Trap," European Council on Foreign Relations, August 20, 2008; Stephen Sestanovich, "What Has Moscow Done," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2008, 13; Ron Asmus, "Dealing With Revisionist Russia," *Washington Post*, December 13, 2008.

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