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RUSSIA AND THE U.S. ELECTIONS

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<http://www.fpri.org/byauthor.html#satter>

Russian president Putin clearly prefers President Obama over Mitt Romney in the U.S. presidential election. But no matter who wins, all indications are that U.S.-Russian relations are likely to get worse. The reason has nothing to do with future U.S. policy. It reflects instead the Russian regime's need to consolidate its internal position by rallying the population against a supposed threat from the West.

There have been a number of indications of the future anti-Western direction of Russian policy in recent weeks. On September 27, Sergei Naryshkin, the Speaker of the State Duma announced that he is skipping the meeting of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, October 1-5. Naryshkin, who had been scheduled to give a major speech, said the reason was that some "Russophobic" delegations would probably not listen to his "key strategic proposals." In fact, he probably skipped the meeting because he did not want to listen to a discussion of Russia's adherence to its obligations as a member of the Council of Europe, including respect for human rights, pluralistic democracy and the rule of law.

Naryshkin's gesture comes after the Putin regime decided to end two decades of work by the U.S. Agency for International Development in Russia. USAID had devoted 60 per cent of its \$50 million annual budget in Russia to support for civil society programs, including Golos, the group that documented falsification in the recent Russian parliamentary and presidential elections. Because of the absence of alternative funding sources in Russia, the expulsion will cripple human rights organizations making it much more difficult for them to monitor the regime's activities.

Alexei Arbatov, the director of the Institute for International Security in Moscow, in an interview September 27 with Radio Liberty, said that Russia is shifting its attention from Europe to the Asian Pacific Ocean region. "The Russian leadership is making it understood," he said, "that Europe is not so important for them and... it does not intend even to listen to European criticism."

As far as the U.S. is concerned, Putin has made clear that he supports Obama. In an interview with the state controlled television network Russia Today before the annual Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Vladivostok in September, Putin described Obama as "a very honest man." He said that they had talked on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Los Cabos. "And though we talked mostly about Syria, I could still take stock of my counterpart. My feeling is that... he sincerely wants to make many good changes. But can he do it? Will they let him do it?"

Putin demonstrates a far less friendly attitude toward Romney who he accused of using inflammatory rhetoric for political advantage. He compared Romney's statements describing Russia as the U.S.'s number one geopolitical foe to inciting racial tension domestically. "It has the same effect on the international area," Putin said, "when a politician, a person who aspires to led a nation... proclaims someone to be an enemy."

The Russian preference for Obama, however, means less than it appears. At the present time, Russia and the U.S. are locked in conflict over the Syrian situation and are at odds over Russia's support for Iran and opposition to U.S. plans to create a defense shield in Eastern Europe. In the case of all of these issues, even if Obama would be more accommodating than Romney, Russian positions are likely to prove so unacceptable that no matter who is in power, they will be rejected by the U.S.

In the case of Syria, Russia is continuing to sell arms to the Assad government and has repeatedly rejected sanctions. Putin said that Western efforts to oppose Assad risked creating chaos. "The most important thing is that our partners cannot stop themselves," Putin said in a meeting with residents in the Ryazan region. He said the West has already created chaos in many places and wants to do the same in Syria.

The same lack of cooperation is evident in the Russian position on Iran. After long working against UN sanctions, Russia is criticizing U.S. unilateral sanctions that target banks, insurance companies and transporters that help Iran sell oil on international markets. These have contributed to a fall in Iranian exports to major consumers of one million barrels a day and put serious pressure on the Iranian economy. "We cannot agree to the extraterritorial use of U.S. law and this is actually what is happening in this very case," said Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov recently. "We consider such methods a gross violation of fundamental principles of international law." He added that, as before, Russia sees "no signs that there is a military dimension to Iran's nuclear program. No signs."

Finally, there is a conflict over U.S. plans for a defense shield in Europe against missiles launched from Iran which Russia opposes as a threat to its own nuclear deterrent. A plan to locate a defensive system in Poland and the Czech Republic was abandoned under Russian pressure. The U.S. announced that it would rely on shorter range mobile missiles rather than on fixed site interceptors and there is now a plan to base anti-missile batteries in Romania and on U.S. Navy warships. Putin, however, has indicated that this is also unacceptable and promised to strengthen Russia's defenses in response.

In fact, the proposed U.S. anti-missile system is not a threat to Russia's ICBM fleet which is designed to strike over the North Pole. Russia's own defense experts have made this clear to the Russian leadership. If developed into a ramified network, however, the defensive missiles could be used to protect against Russia's tactical nuclear weapons, which are used not to deter the U.S. but for intimidating Russia's immediate neighbors. It is for this reason that Russia has threatened to deploy not new ICBMs in response to a U.S. defensive shield but the highly versatile short range Iskander missile that can strike Eastern Europe.

President Obama has treated the "reset" policy with Russia as one of his most important foreign policy achievements. It has been credited with leading to Russia's willingness to allow U.S. troops and cargo to transit Russian territory en route to Afghanistan and to securing a new strategic arms reduction treaty. The war fought by NATO forces in Afghanistan, however, is in Russia's own interest and the new treaty compels Russia only to retire warheads that have outlived their service life. On more contentious issues, there has been almost no progress at all.

The reason is that Russian foreign policy stems from deeply internal causes. The Putin regime is corrupt and lawless and it wants to remain in power forever. Discontent within the country is therefore inevitable and the regime has a need for an external foe. As internal opposition to Putin increases, this need can only grow.

In December, for the first time since the early 1990s, there were mass demonstrations of protest in Moscow. In response, Putin alleged that demonstrators in Moscow were acting on orders of the U.S. State Department. At a rally, February 26, Putin referred to an ongoing battle for Russia against foreign enemies. "We won't allow anybody to meddle in our domestic affairs. We won't allow anybody to deny our will. The battle for Russia continues and we will win!"

In an article in the newspaper, Rossiskaya Gazeta dedicated to military modernization and Russia's national security, Putin wrote, "we must not tempt anyone with our weakness." Apparently placing little faith in rational

discourse, Putin said that only a well prepared military would provide the conditions “for our partners to heed our country’s arguments in various international settings.”

The view that is being inculcated in Russia was well expressed by John Robles, a commentator on the web site of the radio station, The Voice of Russia, which defended the Putin regime’s decision to end the mission in Russia of USAID. “The government has determined,” Robles wrote, “that USAID has been attempting to influence Russia’s internal political processes. It said that the organization has been listed for years as a CIA front and far from being “an innocent ‘humanitarian’ group” is really involved in buying influence. It is a U.S. tool to “undermine, coerce, usurp and force countries to bend to the American will.”

The article summed up with an eerie encapsulation of what now, despite the “reset” policy, is probably very near to the official Russian position. “Slowly,” it said, “Russia is waking up and realizing that it is an enemy and not a friend who wants to surround us with missiles and dictate to us who our enemies should be, who our friends should be and who our rulers should be. It is an enemy who supports those who divide society, blaspheme our religion and undermine our government and our elected leaders.”

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