

Can Russian-US Relations Improve?

Mark N. Katz

Russia's annexing of Crimea despite US and Western objection practically ended the Obama administration's hopes since entering office for a "reset" in US-Russian relations resulting in cooperation between the two countries on various foreign policy and other issues. Crimea, of course, is not the only issue Washington and Moscow disagree on, but Putin's forceful action to seize it for Russia—as well as the prospect he might undertake similar actions elsewhere in Ukraine and perhaps even other countries—has raised the prospect of an expansionist Russia which seeks to enhance its own security through undermining that of others. Add to this the already existing differences between the United States and Russia on several other issues—including Georgia, Syria, the role of NATO, and relations between former Soviet republics and the West—and it seems a new Russian-US cold war is emerging.

Despite all this, the Obama administration's early conviction that US-Russian cooperation was possible was not necessarily unrealistic. Indeed, cooperation with Moscow has been pursued by every US administration since the end of the Cold War. And their hopes were based on an assessment that the United States and Russia have numerous common interests, including the threat of jihadism in all its various manifestations (including al-Qaeda and the Taliban), the implications of a rising China, the goal of preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, the desire to defuse tensions on the Korean Peninsula, continued progress in Russian-US nuclear arms control as well as nonproliferation in general, peace and prosperity in Europe and worldwide, and Russia's growing integration into the world market.

Are Russian differences with the United States and its allies now so great that meaningful cooperation (much less an alliance) between Washington and Moscow is impossible? Or can Washington and Moscow

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successfully work together on issues of common concern despite their differences on others? And if Washington and Moscow cannot resolve their differences, can they at least contain them?

The argument made here is that the United States and Russia share enough common interests they should be able to work together to advance them, but this will not be possible so long as Vladimir Putin—and Putin’s brand of authoritarianism—continues to dominate Russia. True partnership between the United States and the West on the one hand and Russia on the other will only occur when Russia undergoes a process of democratization, marketization, and Westernization similar to that which Eastern Europe experienced after 1989.¹ Whether Russia can do this, of course, is far from certain. What is certain is that Russia will definitely not do so as long as Putin remains in control (whether or not he formally holds the presidency). Yet even if Russia undergoes a dramatic, positive transformation, the United States and Russia will continue to have differences. It will be far easier, however, to contain—and perhaps even resolve—these differences if such a transformed Russia becomes a democracy than it is now.

This article briefly examines whether differences between Washington and Moscow over various issues either would have occurred or would have been handled differently if Russia had democratized. It also analyzes why Russian-US differences have been especially sharp under Putin and explores what the United States might do to encourage the prospects for democratization in Russia.

The United States and a Democratic Russia

Russian figures—including Putin himself—have frequently cited a series of actions by the United States and its allies that they claim are responsible for the deterioration of Russian-US relations since the end of the Cold War and that justify Moscow’s negative view of US foreign policy. Their complaints include: NATO expansion, US and Western actions vis-à-vis the former Yugoslavia—especially recognition of Kosovo’s independence, US plans for deploying ballistic missile defenses in Europe aimed at countering a potential missile threat from Iran and possibly other hostile actors, the US-led intervention in Iraq, support for the “color revolutions” in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004), intervention by the United States and its allies in Libya (2011), support by some US

allies (if not so much the United States itself) to the Syrian opposition (2011–), and US and European actions with regard to Ukraine and Crimea (2013–14).

To what extent, though, would Moscow have objected to any of these actions if it had successfully undergone democratization, marketization, and Westernization like so many Eastern European countries as well as the three Baltic States did after the Cold War? This question, of course, cannot be answered definitively. Thinking about how a democratic, market-oriented, Westernized Russia would have reacted to these various events is useful because it can elucidate which actions by the United States and its allies might have been objectionable to a democratic as well as to an authoritarian Russia and which actions that Putin, in particular, has taken umbrage to may not have been so troubling to a Westernized Russia. Such an exercise can help identify the similarities and differences between how a democratic Russia might see its national interests in comparison to how the Putin administration has done so.

NATO expansion does not seem like it would be an especially troubling issue for a Westernized Russia. Indeed, such a state might well seek to join NATO—and could well be accepted. NATO membership would be an outward sign that the established democracies of NATO regard a democratic Russia part of the West. While the newer Eastern European democracies undoubtedly would have apprehension about Russia joining NATO due to their past experience with both Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, NATO could serve as a forum for reconciling Eastern Europe with a Westernized Russia. It is possible, of course, that a democratic Russia would not choose to join NATO or that Eastern European governments might block it from doing so. It appears highly unlikely, however, that a democratic and Westernized Russia would regard NATO expansion as a threat in the way the Putin administration does (or claims to do). A democratic Russia might also see reassuring Eastern Europe about post-Soviet Russia's intentions toward them as more in Moscow's interests than the Putin administration has.

US and Western actions in Yugoslavia—particularly helping Kosovo to secede from Serbia—probably would have been strongly opposed even by a Westernized Russia. The basis of this opposition would have been Russian affinity for Serbia stemming from Tsarist times and the fear that Western support for Muslims in both Bosnia and Kosovo against Slavic Serbians might encourage Muslim nations such as the Chechens to secede

from Slavic Russia or even serve as a precedent for Western support for such efforts. In addition, a democratic Russia probably would not extend diplomatic recognition to Kosovo—just as democratic governments in Spain, Slovakia, Cyprus, Romania, and Greece (among others) have not done so. Nevertheless, a Westernized Russian government would not have been supportive of Serbia's authoritarian leader, Slobodan Milosevic, as both Boris Yeltsin and Putin were. Indeed, a reformed Russia might have urged caution upon Belgrade for fear the United States and NATO would intervene otherwise. Similarly, while a democratic Russia would not have recognized Kosovo as independent, it would probably have been far more supportive than Putin has been of US and European efforts to reconcile Serbia and Kosovo.

US ballistic missile defense deployments in Europe, on the other hand, would probably not elicit much, if any, negative response from a Western-oriented Russia. This is because (1) a Western-oriented Russia and the United States would probably have made much greater progress in their bilateral nuclear arms control efforts than has actually been made, as neither would see the need to maintain a large nuclear arsenal aimed mainly at each other as they currently do; (2) a democratic Russia would be far more likely to share US and European concerns about potential nuclear threats from Iran, North Korea, and possibly others, since Russia itself is equally vulnerable; and (3) a Westernized Russian government simply would not share the Putin administration's somewhat hysterical view that US plans for a limited ballistic missile defense deployment in Europe aimed mainly at Iran is actually aimed at undermining Russian security.

The US-led intervention in Iraq without UN Security Council (UNSC) authorization would undoubtedly have been opposed by a democratic Russia—just as it was by many long-standing democratic US allies, including France and Germany. On the other hand, a Western-oriented Russia probably would not have helped the Saddam Hussein regime evade the Security Council sanctions against Baghdad that had been enacted (with Mikhail Gorbachev's approval) after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. It also seems unlikely a democratic Russia would have made the cynical effort to take advantage of poor Iraqi relations with the United States and Europe to increase Russian influence in Baghdad that Moscow attempted in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The democratic “color” revolutions of the mid 2000s, however, would not have been opposed by a Western-oriented Russia, either because they would not have been necessary (since the existence of a democratic Russia would have encouraged the development of democracy in other former Soviet republics) or because a democratic Russia would have welcomed a transition from authoritarianism to democracy in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. It is also highly doubtful a democratic Russia would have objected to new democratic governments in Georgia and Ukraine seeking improved ties with the West, gone to war with Georgia and brought about Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s secession from it, or worked for the subversion of democracy and restoration of authoritarianism in Ukraine, as Putin did.

Intervention in Libya by the United States and some of its European and Arab allies in 2011 may not have been approved of by a democratic Russia, but this would probably not have been strongly opposed either. A democratic Russian government may have questioned whether external intervention was an effective means of helping Libya transition from Gadhafi’s authoritarian rule to democracy, but it probably would not have opposed the ambition (so far unmet) of democratizing Libya. Even if a democratic Russian government had been supportive of Gadhafi, it would not have stuck with him to the bitter end like Moscow actually did, unnecessarily complicating Russian relations with Libya’s new government.

Similarly, while a Western-oriented Russia may not have approved external support for opposition forces in Syria since the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011, it would not have provided the Assad regime with arms or prevented UNSC resolutions from being passed opposing it, as Putin has done. A democratic Russia might instead seek to help resolve the conflict by attempting to persuade Assad to step down and go into exile. But since Iran would staunchly support Assad anyway, it is uncertain whether the existence of a democratic Russia would have much changed what has actually unfolded in Syria.

The annexation of Crimea by Russia appears to enjoy strong Russian public support. But it is highly doubtful a Western-oriented Russia would have approached this matter in the same way. To begin with, a democratic Russia would not have opposed the downfall of Ukraine’s elected but increasingly authoritarian President Yanukovich at the hands of the democratic opposition. This either would not have happened, because Ukraine had already become democratic or because a

democratic Russian government would welcome a democratic transition in Ukraine. A democratic Russian government, though, may have felt impelled to respond to calls (if they had arisen) from the Russian majority in Crimea—as well as Russian public opinion—to seek the transfer of Crimea from Ukraine to Russia. It is doubtful a Western-oriented Russian government would pursue this goal in the abrupt and forceful manner in which Putin did. It would instead either seek reconciliation between the Russian and Ukrainian communities inside Crimea and the rest of Ukraine so as not to raise the contentious issue of redrawing Soviet-era borders, or seek a referendum on transferring Crimea to Russia in a slower, more deliberate manner which included international supervision of the vote on this question to enhance the legitimacy of a possible transfer.

What a democratic, Western-oriented Russia might actually do in any of the occasions, of course, is unclear. However, what does emerge from this exercise is a sense that a democratic, Western-oriented Russia either would have cooperated with Washington in several cases where Putin in particular opposed US foreign policy, and that instances of disagreement between a democratic Russia and the United States would not have been as intense as they have been under Putin.

The Problem with Putin

This raises the question as to why Putin in particular has opposed US foreign policy so often and so strenuously. Putin himself has repeatedly answered this question in many speeches in which he has intimated or affirmed a belief that Washington seeks either to promote a democratic revolution in Russia, encourage the further breakup of Russia, or even dominate the world.

At the time of the Beslan school hostage crisis at the beginning of September 2004, the United States and many of its allies expressed outrage at the attackers, sympathy for the victims, and support for the Russian government. But, in his 4 September 2004 speech to the nation about the crisis, Putin seemed to suggest that the West had actually supported the attack: “Some would like to tear from us a ‘juicy piece of pie.’ Others help them. They help, reasoning that Russia still remains one of the world’s major nuclear powers, and as such still represents a threat to

them. And so they reason that this threat should be removed. Terrorism, of course, is just an instrument to achieve these aims.”²

In his speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy in February 2007, Putin complained that “Russia—we—are constantly being taught about democracy. But for some reason those who teach us do not want to learn themselves.” He also stated, “One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way.”³

In his August 2008 interview with CNN’s Matthew Chance just after the Russian-Georgian War, Putin blamed US and Western support for Kosovo’s secession from Serbia for promoting secessionist efforts against Russia in the North Caucasus: “When we tried to stop the decision on Kosovo, no one listened to us. We said, don’t do it, wait; you are putting us in a terrible position in the Caucasus. What shall we say to the small nations of the Caucasus as to why independence can be gained in Kosovo but not here? You are putting us in a ridiculous position.”⁴

When demonstrations in Moscow and elsewhere in Russia occurred as a result of popular skepticism about the announcement that Putin supporters had won a majority (albeit a diminished one) in the December 2011 Duma elections, Putin claimed that US secretary of state Hillary Clinton had instigated them through giving a “signal” to his opponents: “They heard this signal and with the support of the US State Department began their active work.” Putin further claimed the United States was doing this because Russia is “the largest nuclear power. And our partners have certain concerns and shake us so that we don’t forget who is the master of this planet, so that we remain obedient and feel that they have leverage to influence us within our own country.”⁵

In his 18 March 2014 speech justifying Russian actions in Crimea, Putin declared that “Our Western partners, led by the United States of America, prefer not to be guided by international law in their practical policies, but by the rule of the gun. They have come to believe in their exclusivity and exceptionalism, that they can decide the destinies of the world, that only they can ever be right.” He then made numerous complaints against the United States and the West (military action in Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya; support for the color revolutions and the Arab Spring; NATO expansion and deployment of military infrastructure “at our borders”; ballistic missile defense plans; and continuation of controls on Western technology and equipment exports to Russia

despite these having been formally eliminated). Finally, he asserted once again that the United States and the West are seeking to destabilize Russia: “Some Western politicians are already threatening us with not just sanctions but also the prospect of increasingly serious problems on the domestic front. I would like to know what it is they have in mind exactly: action by a fifth column, this disparate bunch of ‘national traitors,’ or are they hoping to put us in a worsening social and economic situation so as to provoke public discontent?”⁶

Given the obvious depth of Putin’s distrust of US and Western intentions, it appears highly unlikely any US-sponsored diplomatic initiative to improve relations with Russia (assuming one could even be launched in the wake of the recent crisis over Crimea and Ukraine) would succeed. Indeed, Putin appears to have regarded the Obama administration’s “reset” effort as in reality an attempt to increase US presence and influence in Russia to more readily undermine his regime and Russia’s territorial integrity. Putin, then, may actually prefer that Russian-US relations be unfriendly or even hostile since this allows him to more easily limit or even reduce US presence and influence in Russia as well as claim that his domestic opponents who want democracy and improved Russian relations with the West are US agents.

What Can the United States Do?

What this suggests, then, is that relations between Moscow and Washington cannot improve so long as Putin remains in power, since he fears that improved Russian-US relations could strengthen his domestic opposition while he sees tense or even hostile US-Russia relations as enhancing his ability to keep it in check. And Putin—or someone like him—could remain in power for many years to come.

By contrast, a democratic transformation in Russia could lead to a much improved relationship with the United States. Indeed, such a transformation in Russia would be highly beneficial for Russia itself. Similarly, the United States has a strong interest in promoting the democratization, marketization, and Westernization of Russia—which will necessarily entail the downfall of Putin and Putinism.

Needless to say, this will not be easy. Indeed, there is strong reason to doubt the United States can do anything to hasten the end of Putin’s authoritarian rule and the transformation of Russia. In fact, Putin’s

popularity has increased precisely because the Russian public strongly supports that to which the United States and the West so strongly object: the annexation of Crimea.⁷ Because of these circumstances, especially, a US effort to support Putin's democratic opponents would allow Putin to discredit them as foreign agents working against the interests of the Russian people. Nor does it seem likely many US democratic allies (much less its nondemocratic ones) would be all that supportive of any effort toward democratization in Russia—especially those who depend on Russian gas supplies which they fear Putin would either curtail or cut off.

Despite all this, three important reasons suggest the United States should at least attempt to promote democracy in Russia. First, while the probability of success might appear quite low, low-probability events do occur—and the payoff in this case would be quite high. Second, Russian-US relations have deteriorated in part because Putin is apparently convinced that Washington is already trying to undermine him through promoting democracy in Russia; therefore, it would appear the United States has little to lose through actually attempting to do so. Third, while there are many formidable obstacles to the democratization, marketization, and Westernization of Russia, one important factor helping to promote these aims can be exploited by all seeking positive change in Russia: Putin himself has a proclivity toward counterproductive behavior and reasoning. Some examples include (1) his insistence that demands for democratization in Russia and former Soviet republics are primarily Western, not locally, inspired; (2) his apparent belief that he can promote secession from neighboring states, such as Georgia and Ukraine, but somehow keep Russia immune from secessionism; (3) his inability to recognize that the difficult environment foreign investors face means Russia does not receive nearly the amount of Western capital it desperately needs; (4) his argument that a US use of force has been illegitimate which somehow justifies Russian use of force is not going to be persuasive to governments close to Russia fearful of Putin's intentions or to investors in countries seeking stable investment environments; and finally, (5) his apparent complacency that Russia can avoid any serious costs for its intervention in Crimea—and perhaps elsewhere—because the United States, and moreover, its West European allies, are unwilling to incur any costs themselves to punish Russia.

What could and should the United States consider doing in the current situation? In response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and potential for

intervening elsewhere in Ukraine as well as in Transdnistria (a Russian-backed region that claims to have seceded from Moldova), the United States can do several things. Options include: deploy additional forces to new NATO members in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states that are fearful of Russia; increase or initiate both economic and military support to non-NATO states such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia; work with US allies on halting any and all sales of arms and military technology to Russia; and dialogue with any state neighboring Russia (such as Finland, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and even Belarus) that wishes to do something about its security concerns since Russia annexed Crimea.

While taking such steps is important to give Putin pause about the consequences of further expansion, they will not do much, if anything, to promote positive internal change in Russia. This will require other policies which may only succeed in the long term. Although criticized as not being robust enough, the policy of sanctioning Russian oligarchs and their corporations who support Putin is actually highly important. They must realize Putin's expansionist external and authoritarian internal policies are harmful to their own financial interests, but that the United States and the West will work to protect them and their interests if they withdraw their support. These oligarchs, of course, would not be able to do this in the near term, even if willing, since Putin can easily seize their assets in Russia and imprison or have murdered anyone who he even suspects of disloyalty. However, the desire to get out from under Putin's thumb and improve their own financial prospects may motivate some of these powerful oligarchs to desert Putin and support a democratic transition in Russia when the opportunity arises.

More general economic sanctions on Russia limiting Putin's ability to fund expansionism through export earnings, especially from petroleum, would also be highly desirable. The reality, however, is that several European states are highly dependent (or even not so dependent) on Russia and are simply not going to join in an economic sanctions effort that harms their own often fragile economies. Instead of engaging in a transatlantic argument (which only Putin would benefit from) over how much, or even whether, to sanction Russia, what Washington should do is to encourage the emergence of market-driven forces that allow Europe to reduce its dependence on Russian petroleum supplies, or at least pay less for them.

One possibility that should be considered is to end all remaining export limitations on US petroleum, since production has increased dramatically in recent years due to new extraction technologies. Some experts claim this move will not lead to much additional supply of US petroleum to the world market for some time and that it still might be cheaper for European countries to import petroleum from Russia.⁸ Nevertheless, such a move would make clear that (1) Europe has other options besides Russia for petroleum; (2) whether Europe buys it or not, the availability of US petroleum on the world market will tend to dampen prices (thus negatively affecting Russian export income); and (3) if Moscow actually did cut off petroleum supplies to any given European country, the United States could help alleviate its shortfall.

Another way Washington could encourage market-driven forces that allow Europe to reduce its dependence on Russian petroleum is through increasing the availability of petroleum from other sources. Taking steps to settle Libya's multifaceted internal conflicts would allow increased Libyan oil exports as well as development of its natural gas reserves. Further, if an Iranian-US rapprochement could be reached, this would clear the way not only for the resumption of Iranian oil exports to Europe and development of Iran's enormous natural gas reserves, but also allow Caspian Basin oil and gas that Washington has blocked from going through Iran to reach the world market—thus reducing Russia's revenue from the transit of so much of the region's petroleum exports and its political leverage over the Caspian Basin petroleum-exporting countries. Europe's dependence on Russian petroleum could thus be substantially diminished.

Finally, if Putin undertakes further incursions into Ukraine, and if (unlike in Crimea) Ukrainian forces resist, then the United States and its allies would have the option of providing support for the Ukrainian resistance effort to prevent Moscow from establishing full control in these regions. This would present Putin with a difficult choice: either withdraw or become bogged down in an extended conflict. Withdrawal could make Putin look weak domestically, embolden his domestic opponents, and precipitate a regime crisis. Keeping Russian forces in Ukraine, however, might allow Putin to avoid the negative consequences that a withdrawal might quickly bring about but could be worse for him in the long run. If Russian forces became bogged down in an extended conflict, this could prove increasingly unpopular with the public the longer

it continued. In addition, Putin could well find that an unsuccessful and unpopular military adventure in Ukraine could embolden not just his democratic opponents, but also secessionist efforts in the North Caucasus and elsewhere in Russia. The task of fighting an unpopular, extended conflict could serve to undercut support for Putin within the Russian armed forces and perhaps even lead elements within them to support his opponents.

Policymakers in Washington, though, need to exercise caution in pursuing these policies. An essential ingredient for the successful democratization, marketization, and Westernization of Russia is increased Russian public support for these. Overly punitive US policies toward Russia could backfire and allow Putin the opportunity to blame the United States for any and all difficulties the Russian people face as a result. In addition to taking measures to reduce European dependency on Russian petroleum and impose political and economic costs on Putin for actions which threaten other nations, the United States should launch a serious public diplomacy effort seeking to explain to the Russian public (1) how Putin's authoritarian internal and belligerent external policies are resulting in Russia becoming less prosperous and more isolated, (2) how the Russian people are not well served by leaders who claim to defend the rights of Russians abroad but who treat Russians at home so very poorly, (3) how a cooperative, democratic Russian government would be much more successful in resolving Russia's differences with—as well as increasing exports to and investment from—the West than Putin's belligerent, authoritarian regime, and (4) how isolation of Russia from the West may serve Putin's domestic political interests but will reduce the prospects for Russia to obtain Western assistance when it faces rising threats from radical Islamists and an increasingly powerful and assertive China. Indeed, a Russia isolated from the West will be far more vulnerable to these forces than a Russia that is increasingly integrated with the West.

Russia will not undergo a positive transformation just because the United States wants it to do so, but only when sufficient demand for this is present inside Russia itself. What the United States can do is take steps that undermine Putin's ability to convince many within Russia that his authoritarianism and expansionism is beneficial and in their interest. 

Notes

1. Democratization, marketization, and Westernization would entail regularly held, free, and fair elections contested by two or more political parties not controlled by the state; rule of law upheld by an independent judiciary; professional (i.e., nonpolitical) military and security services; a private sector regulated but not substantially owned or controlled by the state; a free press that is not shackled by censorship or fear-induced self-censorship; equal freedom for all religions (not just those favored by the state); and a flourishing civil society independent of state control.
2. "Address by President Vladimir Putin," President of Russia official web portal, 4 September 2004, http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2004/09/04/1958_type82912_76332.shtml.
3. "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," President of Russia official web portal, 7 February 2007, http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138_type82912type82914type82917type84779_118123.shtml.
4. "Transcript: CNN Interview with Vladimir Putin," *CNN.com*, 29 August 2008, <http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/europe/08/29/putin.transcript/index.html>.
5. "Putin Accuses Clinton of Encouraging Protesters," *USATODAY.com*, 8 December 2011, <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/story/2011-12-08/Clinton-Putin-Russia/51729210/1>.
6. "Address by President of the Russian Federation," Official Site of the President of Russia, 18 March 2014, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/6889>.
7. Elena Minina, "Why Do Russians Support Intervention in Ukraine?" *Al Jazeera*, 29 March 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/03/why-do-russians-support-interv-2014328174257483544.html>.
8. For a discussion of this issue, see "Lift US Oil Export Ban to Counter Russia: Continental CEO," Reuters, 26 March 2014, <http://www.cnbc.com/id/101526482>.

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