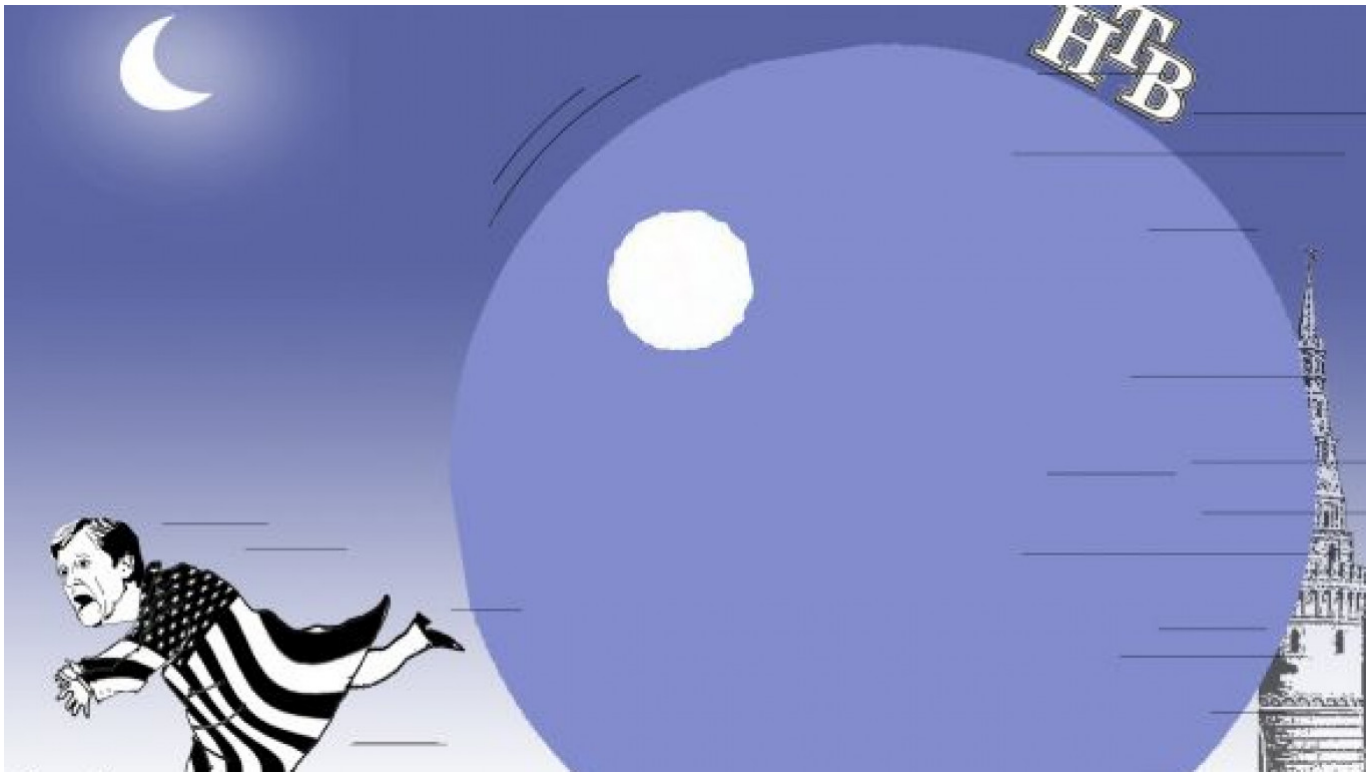
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Kremlin Sees Obama as Weak

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul has encountered a much chillier reception than he apparently anticipated when he agreed to come to Moscow. Rather than accolades, respect and words of endearment from the Russian authorities, the man who is an architect of U.S. President Barack Obama's "reset" with Moscow instead found himself the object of a Kremlin-sponsored media campaign aimed at discrediting, pressuring, provoking and defaming him.

Fed up with all of this, McFaul issued a strong statement against NTV — the channel controlled by Gazprom, a state-owned company with close ties to President-elect Vladimir Putin — and famous for its aggressive "exposés" about the Russian opposition and the supposed U.S. subversive activities aimed at destabilizing Russia.

In particular, McFaul expressed indignation over the airing of "The Anatomy of Protest," a pseudo-documentary hatchet job created by the channel's journalists and based on deliberate misrepresentations in the best case and blatant lies in the worst. Among other things, the program made the patently false charge that Washington directly funds Russian protests and the opposition.

McFaul, who has been hounded by NTV journalists wherever he goes, was particularly perplexed as to how the journalists were aware of the time and location of each of his scheduled meetings, enabling them to bombard him with questions, cameras rolling, as he got out of his car and walked to these meetings. McFaul suggested that NTV learned of his work schedule by tapping his telephone and e-mail.

Of course, NTV representatives angrily repudiated the suggestion that the channel had engaged in illegal surveillance, claiming instead that it relied on a "wide network of informants" for its information. It was not a very convincing argument considering that the only people with access to the ambassador's schedule are his personal aides and the rights activists and opposition members with whom he had scheduled meetings — none of whom is likely to be part of NTV's trusted "network of informants."

McFaul noted that any other leading capital in the world would consider such treatment of a U.S. ambassador unthinkable. He specifically pointed out that "only in Russia" was such behavior possible. Meanwhile, the U.S. State Department issued statements in defense of its ambassador.

But all of this did not stop Obama from being kindly disposed toward President Dmitry Medvedev during a security conference in Seoul. During a conversation that was caught on a hot mic, Medvedev promised to deliver Obama's kind words and intentions to Putin, the man who effectively pulls the strings at Gazprom and its media subsidiaries.

But in reality, many of McFaul's problems in Moscow are rooted in Obama's policy toward Russia.

The Kremlin sees the Obama administration as weak and indecisive, making it a perfect, nonthreatening partner that can be bullied and provoked using the same tools Moscow routinely employs against opposition leaders and civil and human rights activists at home. This was the approach that the Kremlin used against the Estonian ambassador to protest the relocation of a monument to Soviet soldiers from downtown Tallinn. By Moscow's reasoning, if such tactics are permissible when dealing with "weak" Estonia, why not use the same methods against a "weak" United States? Why should Putin and his cohorts show respect for the U.S. ambassador? On the contrary, it is better to put him in his place.

McFaul's situation was complicated by the fact that he arrived in Moscow in the midst of the most perilous political crisis of Putin's rule — at a time when mass street protests over election fraud had severely aggravated the Kremlin's paranoid fears of a color revolution. Fearing the potential might of the protest movement, the Kremlin renewed its crackdown on nongovernmental organizations, focusing on those that receive their funding from Washington. At the same time, Kremlin propagandists were in desperate need of a "foreign enemy," and the United States was a logical choice since it has historically played this role quite effectively.

This explains why, for example, a routine meeting at the U.S. Embassy between several opposition leaders and Deputy Secretary of State William Burns was depicted by the state-controlled media as if the United States were entering another Munich Pact — only this time not with Hitler but with leaders of the Russian opposition and human rights groups.

McFaul was further hurt by the fact that he is a well-known academic expert on democracy and the transition of authoritarian regimes to democracy. As a scholar, McFaul clearly opposes autocracy and is an ally of the democratic movement. As a diplomat and key figure in Obama's Russia policy, he supports the realpolitik practiced by former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. As an architect of the reset policy, McFaul found himself vulnerable to Moscow's provocations and pressure given Washington's conciliatory stance toward Russia.

Former ambassadors carefully maneuvered between the Scylla of an authoritarian Kremlin and the Charybdis of U.S. democratic values. The Kremlin disliked the strong Alexander Vershbow, ambassador to Russia from 2001 to 2005, and also attempted to exert powerful pressure on him. But Vershbow openly criticized Putin's authoritarian ways, finally leaving Moscow with his head held high. The Kremlin's Nashi youth movement harassed former British Ambassador Antony Brenton because he dared to take part in a forum sponsored by the loathed opposition group The Other Russia.

McFaul should be aware that the authorities have tapped the phones and are reading the e-mails of the U.S. Embassy as well as the political opposition, just as he should be aware that top officials in the Kremlin and those trained by the KGB only understand the language of firmness and strength. At the same time, they hold in contempt anyone who shows even the slightest sign of weakness and compliance.

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