The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Let Down by U.S. Decline

By Alexei Bayer

June 24, 2012



Russia's pro-democracy activists, human rights campaigners and corruption fighters are disappointed in U.S. President Barack Obama. On the sidelines of the Group of 20 summit last week, Obama met with his Russian counterpart for the first time since Vladimir Putin began his third time as president. They discussed repression in Syria but Obama failed to say anything publicly about fraudulent elections in Russia and increasing repression against those who exercise their constitutional right to protest. Moreover, the White House opposes the Magnitsky bill in U.S. Congress, which would impose international sanctions on Russian government officials implicated in corruption, murder and other serious crimes.

The lack of an authoritative global voice in support of democracy and rule of law in Russia is certainly bad for Russians, but it is bad for Americans, too.

The United States is a nation in decline not only because its economy is weak, unemployment is high and standards of living are falling. The underlying failure is, above all, moral. Amoral behavior began abroad with an unprovoked war of aggression against Iraq, illegal torture of foreign nationals — for which no one has been held accountable — and extrajudicial

killings by unmanned drones.

Americans are bitterly divided, and their politicians are unwilling to break legislative gridlock even in the face of a national economic calamity. What's more, the richest elites, acting out of selfishness and greed, spend massive amounts of money to undermine and weaken their own national state. The United States is the only rich country in the world that denies adequate health care to millions of its citizens: there is a sustained political campaign to repeal the national health insurance law passed by the Obama administration two years ago before it comes into effect in 2014. Even old-age pensions are not immune: there is movement in Congress to privatize Social Security and to cut other benefits for the elderly. That is moral failure on a massive scale.

Great U.S. leaders of the past understood the importance for the country to be a moral beacon for the rest of the world. Presidents John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan used the phrase "a city upon a hill" to refer to the United States, and neither hesitated to stand up to the Soviets when they bullied the citizens of their empire. Kennedy roused Europeans with his "Ich bin ein Berliner" declaration, and Reagan famously appealed to then-Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall. Reagan called the Soviet Union what it was — "the Evil Empire" — and Obama should not shrink from calling Putin's Russia what it is, a mafia state.

Many foreign policy experts fear that open criticism of Moscow would set back Obama's "reset" policy, making it more difficult to get Russia's cooperation on Syria, Iran and other international issues and bringing back the Cold War. In reality, however, little would change. Although Russia is a member of the Group of Eight leading industrial nations, it refuses to work with its partners, and its official media is no less anti-American today than the Pravda of old. The government blames the U.S. State Department for engineering recent protests, and America is being portrayed as an enemy of Russia determined to lay its hands on Russian oil, gas and other natural resources.

Obviously, if Obama comes out openly criticizing the Putin government, or if he pushes for the passage of the Magnitsky bill in its current form, the Kremlin will not change its ways and Russian officials won't turn honest. But moral support will be important for the Russian democracy movement. For, Americans, too, it will signal their country's return to the position of moral leadership after the moral drift of the past decade and reluctance to assume leadership during recent events across the Arab Middle East.

Moreover, there is a real danger for Washington in remaining silent. Anti-Americanism is used by the Russian government to deflect Russians' attention away from rampant corruption among the ruling elite, as well as their gross mismanagement of the economy. During the Soviet period, leaders used similar decoy tactics to cover up the failures of communism. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the attitude toward the United States in Russia was generally positive, despite decades of the Kremlin's policy of confrontation and relentless propaganda. But If U.S. leaders continue to maintain their silence on abuses by the Russian government and bureaucracy, there will be little goodwill toward the United States when the Putin regime inevitably comes to an end.

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