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Why Putin Wants Obama to Win

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The 2012 U.S. presidential election presents a contrast to the 2008 election in terms of their perceptions by the Russian elite.

In 2008, then-President Dmitry Medvedev expressed a desire to work with a "modern" U.S. leader rather than one "whose eyes are turned back to the past." He was referring to Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama. But influential Russian elites voiced their support for the Republican candidate, John McCain, despite McCain calling President Vladimir Putin a KGB spy who has no soul and calling to expel Russia from the Group of Eight leading industrial nations.

Even though McCain was more critical of the Kremlin, some members of Putin's entourage favored McCain because they believed he was more predictable than Obama. They insisted that Russia was doing well economically, whereas the United States was losing one position in the world after another. Therefore, when confronted with the U.S. threat, Russia might only get stronger and consolidate its status as a great sovereign power. The elite's main concern is with rebuilding power and geopolitical influence. If McCain were in the White House, the thinking went, Putin would have a convenient anti-Russian bogeyman whom the Kremlin

could exploit for domestic political reasons, giving it another pretext to ratchet up its anti-Americanism, increase defense expenditures and crack down on the opposition.

Yet it seems that the Kremlin's support for U.S. hawks is shifting. In March, Medvedev took issue with U.S. presidential candidate Mitt Romney's characterization of Russia as the "No. 1 geopolitical foe." He said the view "smelled of Hollywood stereotypes" and suggested that it was rooted in the Cold War.

But it wasn't only Medvedev and his pro-Western supporters who became critical of the Republican's views. Although President Vladimir Putin recently thanked Romney for his openness regarding the "No.1 foe" comment, he also indicated that it would be hard for the Kremlin to work with Romney as president, especially on sensitive security issues such as the missile defense system. During Putin's interview with RT state television, he also called Obama an "honest man who really wants to change much for the better." This comment was widely viewed as Putin's most direct endorsement of Obama in the presidential race.

The change in Russia's perception can be explained by the sobering effects of the global financial crisis and progress that Russia and the United States have made since 2009. The crisis ended Russia's era of 7 percent average annual growth from 1999 to 2008. Russia, which is overly dependent on energy exports, was hit particularly hard by the 2008 crisis. Its gross domestic product fell about 8.5 percent in 2009, while China and India continued to grow, albeit at a slower pace.

It took Russia's leadership some time to adjust its foreign policy to the new global conditions. Obama's decision to improve relations with the country and establish strong ties with Medvedev despite Russia's war with Georgia in August 2008 was essential. The diplomacy of pressing the "reset" button with Russia proved important for alleviating the Kremlin's fear of NATO expansion and the region's destabilization in response to Washington's strategy of regime change in several countries.

Since 2009, the two sides have cooperated by signing and then ratifying the new START treaty, imposing tougher sanctions on Iran and working to stabilize Afghanistan. Not only did the Kremlin provide overflights and overland transportation, but it also recently approved NATO's use of the Ulyanovsk airport as a transit point for soldiers and cargo to and from Afghanistan. Russia also renewed a strong interest in developing economic relations with the United States and completed negotiations over its membership in the World Trade Organization.

The progress in U.S.-Russian relations since 2009 does not mean that Russians are entirely satisfied with their relations with the U.S. Russia remains critical of the U.S. proposal to develop the missile defense system jointly with the Europeans without Russia's participation. At the end of 2010, Moscow had to swallow its pride by shelving Medvedev's proposal to create a pan-European security treaty after getting an ice-cold reaction from the U.S. and NATO. Furthermore, NATO remains supportive of Georgia's eventual membership in the alliance, a particularly sore point in U.S.-Russian relations. Finally, the Kremlin's stubborn support of Syria in the United Nations Security Council remains an irritant for Obama and even more so for Romney.

Despite all the Kremlin's frustrations, it remains hopeful that Obama will be re-elected

and that he will help to move U.S.-Russian relations forward. The stronger dialogue and engagement that may result from an Obama presidency is an opportunity to weaken nationalist phobias in both Russia and the U.S. This opportunity must be seized.

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