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America's New Cold War With Russia

By Stephen F. Cohen

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With the full support of a feckless policy elite and an uncritical media establishment, Washington is slipping, if not plunging, into a new cold war with Moscow. Relations, already deeply chilled by fundamental disputes over missile defense, the Middle East and Russia's internal politics, have now been further poisoned by two conflicts reminiscent of tit-for-tat policy-making during the previous Cold War.

In December, Congress, in a fit of sanctimonious lawmaking and indifference to larger consequences, passed the Magnitsky Act. In effect a blacklist without due process, it will punish Russian officials (and perhaps their family members) alleged to be guilty of "gross violations of human rights" in their own country. However odious such individuals may be, Russia's political class was bound to resent yet another haughty U.S. intrusion into its political and legal affairs. A no less capricious State Duma quickly responded by banning U.S. adoption of Russian orphans, long a highly sensitive issue, which will go into full effect in 2014. Little opposition was voiced in the U.S. and Russian legislatures to their respective bills.

There was, however, a significant difference. Under President Vladimir Putin's "authoritarian regime," the Russian media were filled with heated controversy over the adoption ban,

including denunciations of Putin for signing it. But in the "democratic" U.S. mainstream media, there has been only applause for the Magnitsky Act and President Barack Obama's decision to sign it. Nor is this the first time leading U.S. newspapers and television and radio outlets have been cheerleaders for a new cold war.

Although the U.S. political-media establishment routinely blames Putin for the lack of partnership, the movement toward a cold war with post-Soviet Russia began almost a decade before Putin came to the Kremlin — that is, in the 1990s under the administration of U.S. President Bill Clinton. Indeed, Clinton initiated the three basic components of what has remained Washington's Russia policy ever since, from President George W. Bush to Obama: expanding NATO (now including missile defense installations) to Russia's borders; "selective cooperation," which has meant concessions by Moscow without meaningful U.S. reciprocity; and interference in Russia's domestic politics that Washington tries to package as "democracy promotion." For 20 years, this Cold War approach has had overwhelming bipartisan support among the U.S. political elite and mainstream media.

Consider the most recent episode: Obama's 2009 purported "reset" of relations with Moscow, or what was called "detente" during the Cold War. Obama wanted three concessions from the Kremlin: assistance in supplying NATO forces in Afghanistan, harsher sanctions against Iran and Russia's abstention on the United Nations Security Council vote for a no-fly zone over Libya. The White House got all three. In return, Moscow wanted a formal end of NATO's expansion to the former Soviet republics, a compromise on European missile defense and a cessation of direct U.S. involvement in Russian political life. Instead, Russia received an escalation of all three U.S. policies with virtually unanimous bipartisan and media approval.

Things weren't always like this. From the 1960s to the 1990s, fierce debates raged between Americans proposing a colder war and those advocating detente. Both sides had substantial support in the administrations and congresses of those years, and both appeared regularly on leading op-ed pages and on national television and radio. The democratic process was working, which itself was a rebuff to a Soviet system that prohibited such public debates.

But no longer. Obama has surrounded himself with Russia advisers, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, wedded to the 20-year-long approach. As for Congress, it has long since become a bipartisan bastion of Cold War lobbyists, hearings, resolutions and legislation with barely a handful of House representatives protesting this reckless folly. Even the grassroots "peace" and "anti-nuke" movements of a previous era have all but vanished.

The U.S. media, considering their essential role in national security discussions, have been especially culpable, violating their own professional canons in coverage of Russia-related matters. Newspaper editorials now range from endorsing the Obama administration's inherently Cold War line to complaining that it is too "soft" on the Kremlin. Dissenting opinions rarely, if ever, appear on influential op-ed pages or on national television or radio. (Cable, even MSNBC, and "public" broadcasting are no different.) Editorial bias has even spilled over into news reporting. In particular, the media's relentless demonization of Putin, often illogical or distorted, has nearly displaced serious, multidimensional analysis.

The media's focus has also been selective. Coverage of last year's Moscow street

demonstrations against Putin was exhaustive, but U.S. correspondents have ignored an extraordinary new kind of protest in the same capital. From Dec. 18 to 27, students and faculty of the Russian State University of Trade and Economics defied a ministerial takeover of their institution. Its head, Sergei Baburin, a prominent political figure, was ousted by the ministry after students occupied the university day and night, suspending their protest only for the Russian holidays and pending an appeal to Putin. If their protest spreads to other universities, Russia could experience its first large-scale student strike in many decades, with major political consequences.

Why have the U.S. media failed to report this development? Is it because the university students and faculty, unlike several leading street protesters, do not have personal ties to the U.S. media and to Washington officials? Or because they, also unlike many of last year's street demonstrators, are not avowedly pro-Western but nationalist-oriented? Or because the university rebellion is directed not against Putin — on the contrary it urged Putin to step in and save the university — but against the government of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, once a White House favorite? Or is such complexity simply too much for the orthodox media narrative of post-Communist Russia?

Nearly 30 years ago, the U.S. media coverage of Soviet Russia was more pluralistic and helped President Ronald Reagan meet its leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, halfway in a joint effort to abolish the Cold War forever. (They thought they had succeeded.) Both leaders encountered powerful opposition in their respective parties and media, but they also found significant support. Since then, too much may have changed in the quality of leadership, in the political elites of Washington and Moscow and in U.S. media practices for this to happen again.

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