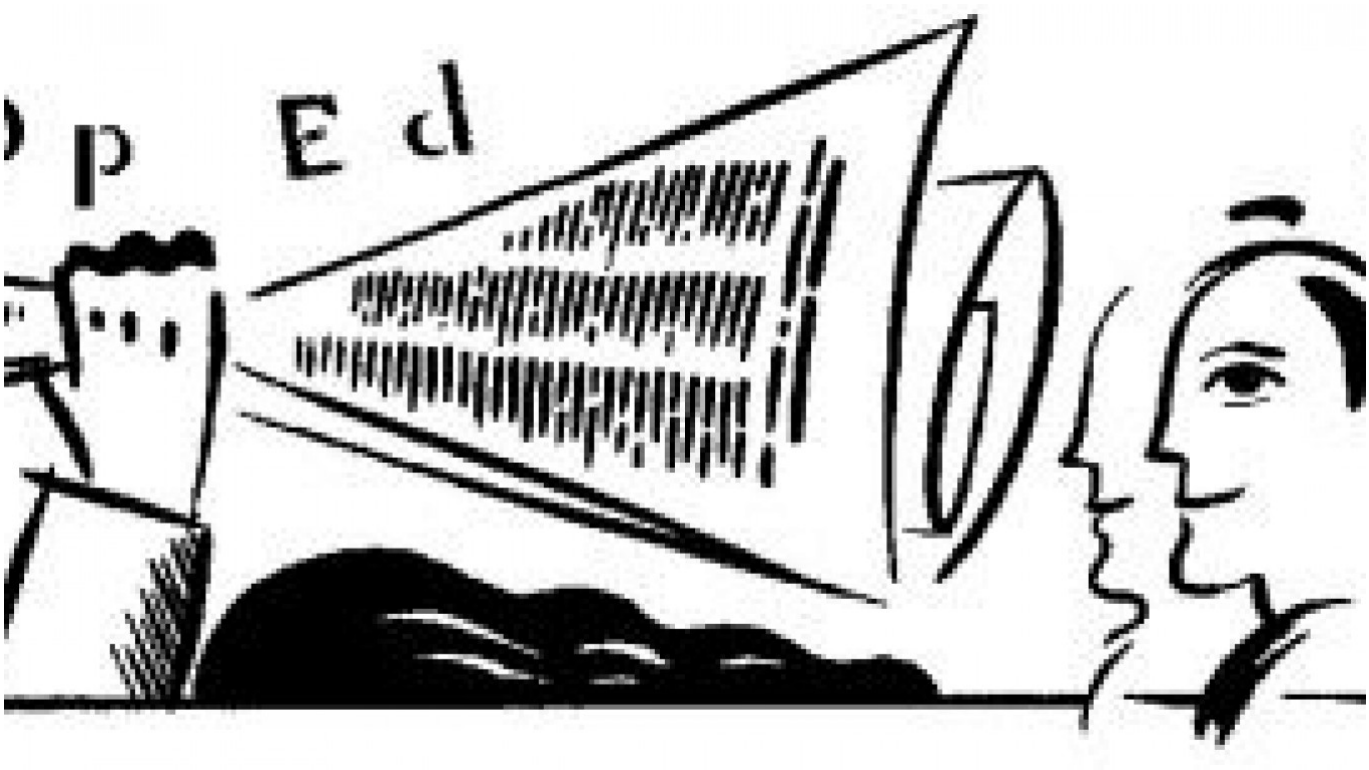
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Don't Expect Reset 2.0 During Obama's 2nd Term

By Fyodor Lukyanov

January 26, 2013



U.S. President Barack Obama's re-election in November generated hope for progress in U.S.-Russian relations. Only two months later, not a trace of that hope remains. What's worse, the two opposing sides now believe that, in principle, they cannot achieve the effective, rational and pragmatic cooperation that is necessary for normal relations.

From Moscow's point of view, Washington's behavior is either two-faced or just plain absurd. If the U.S. needs Russia's assistance to deal with a whole range of important issues, then why did it pass the Magnitsky Act at the very moment when those talks should have begun? Obama would probably say: "My hands were tied on this one. There was so much support for the bill in both chambers of Congress that any veto would have been easily overridden." But Moscow's response was: Obama is the president, and if the White House isn't calling the shots, then what is there to discuss in the first place?

Meanwhile, the Obama administration believes it is doing everything possible to maintain a positive dialogue with Moscow, but that the Kremlin sacrifices U.S.-Russian relations

to boost ratings at home. "Of course, we in Washington understand that the anti-U.S. rhetoric might heat up a bit for the sake of elections," they might say, "but Mr. Putin, you were re-elected back in March and the ban on adopting Russian children was passed in December. In any case, what is the connection between a U.S. law aimed at punishing corrupt Russian officials and a law that punishes the thousands of law-abiding, caring U.S. parents who want to adopt Russian children?"

What is most strange is that there is no objective basis for conflicts that would justify a chill in U.S.-Russian relations. Yes, tensions exist on many issues, but that is only natural between two major powers with differing and strategic interests. Above all, the current crisis is a result of a breakdown in mutual perceptions about each other.

Political analyst Ivan Krastyev, who studies Europe's changing views of Russia, noticed an interesting trend: Public opinion is becoming more negative toward Russia, even in countries like France and Germany that have been traditionally sympathetic toward it. But this is not the view of Russia that existed during the Soviet era. It resembles the European attitude of the 19th century, when Russia was seen as necessary part of the political entourage, but also as a country with an alien culture, values, behaviors and ideas. This is not the sharp ideological confrontation of the Cold War. It is a reflection of the way European countries, which consider themselves advanced, democratic societies, view Russia as its reactionary neighbor.

That attitude toward Russia is even more pronounced in the U.S.. In fact, the U.S. considers itself a role model for the rest of the world. In Washington's view, not all countries are able to embrace the American way of life, but they are nonetheless obliged to recognize the superiority of U.S. democratic principles and institutions. If a country does not acknowledge this, it is seen as either misguided or mean-spirited. Since the U.S. is the quintessence of freedom, liberty and democracy, any opponent — and especially an obstinate one — is cast as the axis of evil and tyranny. This type of opposition to the U.S. inevitably assumes an ideological character.

It is only natural that perceptions of Russia are changing. Despite all the endless squabbles with the West over minor points, Russia had never questioned its commitment to becoming a modern state governed by a Western model of democracy. Up until recently, the tensions had more to do with specifics of the chosen route, not the final destination. But with President Vladimir Putin's return to the Kremlin in May, Russia no longer considers it axiomatic that it will follow the path of development advocated by the West. It will be guided by its own understanding of good and evil — that is, by its own set of values and ways to implement them.

Russia's desire to join the "civilized world" as it left behind its Soviet past was a legacy of the early democratic period in the 1990s. That period has ended. With every passing year, the Soviet past is disappearing from daily political life. Nothing more can be gained from it but a futile repetition of old approaches to past problems. At the same time, the concept that "civilization" is found only in the West has also been placed in serious doubt.

What should Russia's national identity be based on? It is no accident that Putin wants to rehabilitate historical accounts of World War I, an event treated unfairly in Soviet

textbooks. Many proposals for a new national identity point to the Russian Empire of the 19th-century, a country of great cultural achievements on the path to rapid development until it was interrupted by the upheavals of the early 20th century.

Any country that looks far back for inspiration and national identity cannot help but become a bastion of conservatism and tradition. The debate over the church's role in society, the battle against blasphemy and immorality and disdain for the moral decline and excessive tolerance seen in the secular West are outward signs of this conservative trend. The problem is that traditionalism is unable to propel Russia into a new stage of development. So it is just another stage of transition, not the final one.

Meanwhile, relations with the West — and especially with the U.S. — are cooling considerably. After all, the West is itself experiencing a crisis and growing instability. Perceiving a threat to liberal values, the West will cling all the more tenaciously to these values in the hopes of preserving that model of society for itself, and as the key to preserving its global dominance.

The U.S. has always viewed Russia as its conceptual antithesis — even when the United States was not a global hegemony, such as in the 19th and early 20th century. But there is a limit to U.S. flexibility. Freedom and democracy have become dogma for the United States, and in some ways this dogma is even more rigid than communism was for the Soviet Union. This alone explains why a second "reset" in U.S.-Russian relations is highly unlikely. The only consolation is that, in today's world, no status quo lasts for long.

Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of Russia in Global Affairs, is chairman of the presidium of the Moscow-based Council on Foreign and Defense Policy.

Related articles:

- Medvedev Plays Down Magnitsky Concerns
- Russia Is Sued Over U.S. Adoptions Ban
- In Protest, U.S. Quits Working Group

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/01/26/dont-expect-reset-20-during-obamas-2nd-term-a20971