

Putin Aide Says U.S. Holds Key to Improving Ties

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Strained U.S.-Russian ties will not improve unless Washington stops openly criticizing Moscow's human rights record and supporting President Vladimir Putin's foes, the top foreign policy official in the Russian parliament said.

Relations between the Cold War-era rivals took a dive after Putin's return to the Kremlin in May, undermining a 2009 initiative by U.S. President Barack Obama and Russia's then-president, Dmitry Medvedev, a more liberal Putin protege, to "reset" ties.

Alexei Pushkov, head of the international affairs committee in parliament's lower chamber and a Putin ally, said the ties were "negatively stable" now and the "reset" could be considered over without an initiative on the highest political level to save it.

"The priority is political realism. Ideology matters should be secondary. I tell you, issues over ideology and values can destroy anything," Pushkov said in an interview.

"If the United States believes that as part of bilateral relations between two countries it can be supporting the Russian opposition, this clearly does not help Russian-U.S. ties," he added, speaking next to a framed picture of him with Putin. "The U.S. should not be part of Russia's internal political process."

Pushkov was speaking before a meeting in Munich on Saturday between Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and U.S. Vice President Joe Biden, who were due to discuss bilateral ties.

Washington and Moscow have recently scrapped bilateral deals after Moscow was enraged by the U.S. Magnitsky Act, named after an anti-graft lawyer who died in a Russian prison. The bill bans visas and freezes assets of Russians deemed rights violators.

"The reset was based on an agreement by both sides ... that all the issues of democracy, human rights, Russia's internal developments, will be discussed in a non-public format," said Pushkov, who has also run a TV show.

"As far as I understand, this was a tacit understanding," he also said, adding that outgoing Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other Washington officials violated that.

Moscow retaliated against the Magnitsky Act with its own blacklist of U.S. officials. It also banned Americans from adopting Russian orphans and outlawed U.S.-funded NGOs that it said meddled in political activities.

"Can Putin and Obama save the reset? Yes, they can. Will they do it? I don't know. The conditions for this are negative. And the likelihood of that, I think, is not high," Pushkov said.

On Wednesday, Moscow lifted a law enforcement deal with Washington. Before that it had told the aid body the U.S. Agency for International Development to leave Russia, saying it was interfering in domestic politics.

"Moscow made a decision to remove from relations with the U.S. those elements that we do not like. We used to accept these aspects of bilateral ties for the sake of a bigger cause, better relations," Pushkov said.

Putin invited Obama for bilateral talks in Russia, but on Friday Putin's spokesman said nothing had been fixed yet.

Pushkov said cooperation over Afghanistan, an agreement to ease the visa regime, continuation of the remaining working groups set up under the reset and a treaty on nuclear arms reduction were under no threat. But he said that Moscow would respond in kind to any extension of the U.S. blacklist and that economic relations could suffer if things got worse, overshadowing the benefits both countries would likely see from Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization.

Washington and Moscow are also at loggerheads over the war in Syria, where more than 60,000 people have died in 22 months. But Pushkov said the two UN Security Council permanent members would have to come to an agreement over Syria eventually.

"No side can gain a clear victory, so we will have to find some sort of common decision," he added.

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