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After Rocky 2 Years, McFaul Quits as Ambassador

By Ezekiel Pfeifer

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U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul. **Igor Tabakov**

Michael McFaul, who has served as U.S. ambassador to Russia over a two-year period marked by heightened tensions between Washington and Moscow, announced in a blog post Tuesday that he would be leaving his position as ambassador and returning to academia later this month.

McFaul, 50, said the decision was related to his desire to be reunited with his family, who moved back to the U.S. last summer.

"This is my last blog as the U.S. ambassador to the Russian Federation," McFaul wrote on his LiveJournal page on Tuesday afternoon. "Soon after the Olympics, I plan to rejoin my family in California. After more than five years working in the Obama administration, it is time to go home."

The announcement comes as the world spotlight is on Russia ahead of the start on Friday of the Winter Olympics in Sochi. The Kremlin is hoping to impress the world with its $51 billion effort to host the Games even as it faces scrutiny over its human rights record, particularly as relates to the treatment of the LGBT community.

McFaul will travel to Sochi later this week and meet the U.S. Olympic delegation, which will include several prominent gay athletes but not U.S. President Barack Obama, whose absence is considered by many to be a snub of President Vladimir Putin.

McFaul, the architect of the much-vaunted, and later denigrated, Russia “reset” policy, brought a consistent optimism to the job of helping to align U.S. and Russian foreign policy positions on thorny issues including the civil war in Syria, bilateral arms reductions, and sanctions on Iran.

Upon his arrival as ambassador in January 2012, he was almost immediately undermined in his attempts at diplomacy by a public relations assault by Kremlin-friendly media. In the midst of unprecedented street protests in Moscow by anti-government activists, McFaul met with some of the protest leaders and with nongovernmental groups, drawing the ire of pro-Kremlin pundits and lawmakers. He soon complained that he thought his phone and e-mail account had been tapped.

Ilya Ponomaryov, an opposition State Duma deputy with A Just Russia who participated in McFaul's meeting with Russia's opposition leaders in January 2012, said Russia had "failed to use [McFaul's] full potential of a person close to Obama."

"He was inadequately assessed by the Russian government as an expert in Orange Revolutions, which he was not at all," Ponomaryov said by phone Tuesday. "He was a Cabinet scientist tasked with a reset."

The early stumbles underscored McFaul's lack of credentials as a diplomat. Prior to taking a job as a policy adviser to the Obama White House in 2009, he taught political science at Stanford University and was a long-time Russia expert, having studied in the Soviet Union in the 1980s and writing numerous scholarly papers related to Soviet and Russian policies.

The war of words between McFaul and Kremlin allies lasted the first five months of 2012. Then Putin retook the presidency in May after having run a campaign in which he played on anti-American sentiment, openly accusing the State Department of aiding the anti-Kremlin protests. A few months later, Russia announced it was kicking out the Moscow office of the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, partly over accusations that it was meddling in domestic politics.

Triggering a peak in U.S.-Russia tensions during McFaul's tenure, U.S. Congress in late 2012 passed the Magnitsky Act, which authorizes sanctions against Russians implicated in human rights violations. Russia responded with a ban on U.S. adoptions of Russian children, a major blow for U.S. families who were in the midst of the adoption process.

“I ... am proud of the work we had to do to manage some difficult issues in U.S.-Russia relations over the past few years,” McFaul said Tuesday, mentioning the adoptions and Russia's granting of asylum last year to U.S. leaker Edward Snowden, which angered the U.S..

“I leave Russia with a strong feeling of satisfaction for how our administration handled these issues without compromising our interests or values.”

Pro-Kremlin political analyst Sergei Markov said several different trends had worked against McFaul during his time as U.S. ambassador.

"He turned up in an unlucky period. The reset, which he had worked on, was finished when he came," Markov said by phone.

Markov said that at the time McFaul took the ambassadorship, Russians had started consolidating around conservative values, which took the form of the law banning the promotion of gay relations among minors, among other things. He also said that Russian and U.S. diplomacy developed in “opposite directions": while Russian officials started to "respect the state more" after Putin came back to the Kremlin, Obama declared that "diplomats should serve the people first of all.”

McFaul's term also started in the midst of parliamentary and presidential elections in Russia, and he was "accused of interfering in the elections" while in reality he played no role in them but was picked as a "whipping boy," Markov said.

McFaul defended his record on improving bilateral business ties and counterterrorism efforts, and on promoting the now-stalled “reset,” the purpose of which had been to find common ground between the U.S. and Russia on issues like arms reductions.

He recalled the implementation of the New Start treaty and a bilateral visa deal that allows citizens of each country to receive three-year visas, and noted that last year the U.S. issued a record 250,000 nonimmigrant visas to Russians, a 15 percent increase over the previous high mark.

“Since we set out to reset relations with Russia five years ago (yes, I am not afraid to use the word 'reset'!), we have achieved a lot,” McFaul said.

U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes praised McFaul for his contributions to U.S. diplomacy, saying he had been “tireless” in advocating for American values.

"President Obama is deeply grateful for Ambassador McFaul's extraordinary service over the last five years,” Rhodes said in an emailed statement. “From the White House to Spaso House, Mike helped shape policies that advanced America's interests."

McFaul became an avid Twitter user over his time as ambassador, and the Russian Foreign Ministry seemed to take that into account Tuesday by responding to his announcement with a tweet: “Goodbye, Mikhail!”

He did not name a possible successor or a timetable for a permanent replacement to take over. The job is one of the more sensitive and vital U.S. diplomatic posts, given Russia's prominent role in international affairs.

McFaul said that despite the travails he faced while in Moscow, he would miss Russia and his job as ambassador.

“I love representing my country as a diplomat. I love living in Russia, which has given me a chance to rekindle my deep appreciation for Russian culture and history,” he said.

“I will leave Russia reluctantly. I love this job. It is a tremendous honor to represent my country here,” he wrote. “This is hard, really hard.”

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