

U.S. Ambassador Tefft Unfazed by 'Inevitable' Slump in Russia Relations

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New U.S. ambassador to Russia John Tefft attends a ceremony to hand over credentials to Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Kremlin in Moscow on Nov. 19, 2014.

John Tefft, the new U.S. ambassador to Russia, says that Western sanctions may be rolled back if Russia implements the terms of a Ukraine peace plan that it co-signed, according to comments published by Kommersant on Monday.

Tefft, who served as the top U.S. envoy in Georgia and Ukraine before being appointed ambassador to Russia this year, also told the newspaper that periodic upheavals in U.S.-Russian relations appeared to be inevitable.

"Throughout my career I have repeatedly witnessed highs and lows in our relations," said Tefft, who in the late 1990s worked as deputy chief of mission at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow.

"There were also historical moments — agreements and treaties that strengthened peace and

global security. I am aware that in such long and complicated relations as the dialogue between the U.S. and Russia, turbulence is inevitable," he said.

But he dismissed Moscow's claims that the roots of the Ukraine crisis lay in NATO's eastward expansion and reiterated U.S. assurances that sanctions would be cut back if Russia fully implemented agreements made at peace talks in Minsk on ensuring a lasting truce between Ukraine's government forces and pro-Moscow separatists.

Tefft's predecessor, Michael McFaul, and Stephen Sestanovich, a former top U.S. policymaker on Russia, argued in an article in the Foreign Affairs magazine this month that attempts to attribute Russia's annexation of Crimea and meddling in eastern Ukraine to NATO's expansion flew in the face of years of preceding developments in international politics.

The claims of NATO's supposed fault "fail to explain why Russia kept its troops out of Ukraine for the decade-plus between NATO's expansion, which began in 1999, and the actual intervention in Ukraine in 2014," they said in the article.

McFaul added that in the five years that he served in U.S. President Barack Obama's administration, the issue of NATO expansion was not brought up by the Russian side.

"Even months before Putin's annexation of Crimea, I cannot recall a single major statement from a senior Russian official warning about the dangerous consequences of NATO expansion," McFaul said in the article. "The reason is simple: For the previous several years, NATO was not expanding eastward."

Tefft also said he did not consider NATO to be a threat to Russia, Kommersant reported.

"I know that some in Russia think differently, but the point is that NATO is a defense alliance," he was quoted as saying. He added that NATO expansion in Europe during the previous decade had actually strengthened security on the continent and benefited Russia along with its Western neighbors.

Tefft also said that the U.S. government understood the close historic, cultural and ethnic ties between Russians and Ukrainians, but that such ties did not excuse Moscow's policy on Ukraine.

"The U.S. understands that. We know history," Tefft told Kommersant. "But if countries begin to simply seize others' territories, we will fall back to the realities of the 19th-20th centuries."

The U.S. ambassador also said he was encouraged by comments made by Russian President Vladimir Putin last week that Moscow was "ready for practical cooperation with our American partners" on issues of international security such as combating terrorism threats.

"This is also our position as well," Tefft told Kommersant, adding that the current "extremely difficult" period in U.S.-Russian relations was the result of "fundamental" disagreements on Ukraine.

The U.S. and other Western nations accuse Moscow of violating the Minsk agreement by failing to remove its fighters and weapons from Ukraine and failing to secure its border to block military supplies to pro-Russian separatists, among other issues.

"Many of the 12 items of the Minsk agreements have not been fulfilled yet," Tefft was quoted as saying. "People are still shooting. The OSCE has published data on the presence of heavy Russian weaponry in the conflict zone. This needs to be stopped."

"The agreement should be implemented in full," he said.

Obama and European leaders said previously that sanctions against Moscow could be lifted once the Minsk agreement has been fulfilled and a lasting truce between separatists and the Ukrainian government has been achieved.

Ukraine and Western governments also accuse Russia of blocking the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) from expanding its observer missions at Russian checkpoints.

Daniel Baer, the U.S. ambassador to the OSCE, told the organization's Permanent Council in Vienna last week that "if Russia fully implements its commitments, including those made in Minsk, sanctions could be rolled back."

"If, instead, Russian authorities continue their aggressive and escalatory actions and violations of international law, we are prepared to deepen existing sanctions and consider imposing additional costs on Russia," Baer said, according to a transcript posted on the mission's website.

Tefft declined to predict how long the sanctions might remain in place.

"The answer to that question depends on the actions of the Russian authorities," he told Kommersant. "They need to make decisions that can change this situation."

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