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How Biden Will Impact Russian Domestic Policy

What action the Russian authorities take largely depends on the early actions and statements of the Biden administration

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Mark Makela / Getty Images via AFP

Soon after the U.S. presidential election, an old photograph started doing the rounds on Russian social media. It showed Andrei Gromyko, chairman of the presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R., greeting Joe Biden, then a senator, during the latter's January 1988 Moscow trip as part of consultations for the ratification of the INF Treaty.

"The first person to congratulate Joe Biden on his electoral victory was Andrei Andreevich Gromyko," read the caption. It was, of course, a joke about the age of the president-elect: Biden turned 78 this month (the same age as Gromyko was during that meeting). But there's some serious meaning to the photo, too.

Soviet leaders talked to a wide variety of figures from the U.S. establishment, and held serious and often productive conversations with them. That's not something that representatives of the Russian elite can boast of today. It's doubtful whether there's even a theoretical chance of Biden coming to Moscow once again for talks on arms control.

"Mr. Prime Minister, I'm looking into your eyes, and I don't think you have a soul," Biden claims he told Vladimir Putin during another visit to Moscow in between the latter's presidential terms in 2011. The Russian leader is said to have replied, "We understand one another."

This exchange is very important: nothing sentimental, nothing personal, no mysterious Russian soul; just business. Perhaps this no-nonsense approach could become the foundation for a new type of U.S.-Russian relations, despite the gloomy forecasts? Yet foreign policy largely depends on the vector of domestic policy, and in that respect, it's hard to identify grounds for optimism.

In his policy essay in Foreign Affairs published in April this year, Biden doesn't focus too closely on Russia, though he refers to Russian aggression and the need to keep NATO's military capabilities sharp. There is also an encouraging vow to pursue new arms control arrangements with Russia.

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The future president writes that "we must impose real costs on Russia for its violations of international norms and stand with Russian civil society, which has bravely stood up time and again against President Vladimir Putin's kleptocratic authoritarian system."

Biden's comments are likely to activate at least two leitmotifs of Russian propaganda. First, the predictable resumption of active cooperation between the United States and European countries within NATO is a good excuse for the Russian propaganda machine to whir into life on the subject of war. Inevitably, the Russian public will start to be sold the threat of military aggression by the United States and its allies against Russia.

That threat doesn't have significant mobilizing potential: since 2018, the foreign policy and military agenda has failed to boost the authorities' ratings. This is linked to the fact that as far as most Russians are concerned, their country has already regained its might. In addition, the unpopular move to raise the retirement age back in 2018 sharply focused public opinion on the domestic and socioeconomic agenda. Still, new evidence of aggressive U.S. policy will never go amiss with the anti-American-minded part of society.

The other propaganda response will concern civil society. Any deterioration in relations with the West always has a negative impact on Russian civil society, as the state doubles the pressure on it. Even verbal support from the future Biden administration for Russian civil organizations could provoke new legislative initiatives limiting their activity, not to mention groundless legal cases against them. Just a week after the U.S. election, the Russian government introduced a bill to the Duma that would impose new restrictions on the work of NGOs and create additional grounds for closing them down.

Perhaps that's just a coincidence, but the bill targets "foreign financing" (a concept that is being expanded even further in scope), as well as cooperation by noncommercial bodies with "undesirable organizations." This kind of lawmaking is already a regular occurrence in Russia, and now, as a result of Biden's emphasis on the human rights agenda, Russian administration of law and legal amendments will become even more repressive — as a response to perceived interference in Russia's internal affairs using NGOs and individuals labeled as foreign agents.

A September poll by the Levada Center showed that 70% of Russians who believe that modern Russia has enemies named the United States as one of them (no other country came close to that percentage). Multiple focus groups convened by the Levada Center, which partners with the Carnegie Moscow Center on some research, show that the average Russian has an ambivalent attitude toward the United States, combining a feeling of superiority with an inferiority complex. Unlike Russia, the United States is soulless. At the same time, however, it's an economic powerhouse that can be learned from, so it's worth cooperating with it.

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If Russian propaganda chooses to focus on the negative consequences of Biden's victory, it will fan the flames of anti-American sentiment. What action the Russian authorities take largely depends on the early actions and statements of the Biden administration. If Biden's team shows a rational approach to possible areas of cooperation, that will at the very least delay any large-scale anti-American propaganda campaign.

A calm and pragmatic tone in initial statements and contacts is also capable of reining in legal cases and legislative initiatives targeting Russian civil society.

History shows that public opinion can easily warm to a former enemy in the event of official relations between the two countries improving.

This happened during the détente of the 1970s, which would not have happened without the Soviet Union and the United States adopting negotiating positions that were above all pragmatic. In his 1970 report to Congress on foreign policy, President Richard Nixon proposed adopting a "fair and businesslike manner" in talks with the Communist countries, and acknowledged that both the Soviet Union and the United States had "recognized vital mutual interest in halting the dangerous momentum of the nuclear arms race."

Back then, other tactics that paid off included back channels, as described in detail by Henry Kissinger.

They made it possible to reach the Agreement Concerning Cooperation in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space for Peaceful Purposes, culminating in the joint Apollo-Soyuz mission and the handshake in space. Direct historical extrapolation is, of course, entirely provisory, but it does give an idea of possible tools for cooperation, and is testimony to the positive impact of pragmatic cooperation on détente amid a tense domestic atmosphere.

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