



PLOUGHSHARES FUND

Meeting of the SuPR (Sustainable Partnership with Russia) Group

December 6-7, 2011

Washington DC

Approaching Election Year: How to Muddle Through?

A Policy Memo

Igor Zevelev

SuPR Group Member

Partnership with Russia may prove sustainable if the “reset” in Russian-American relations survives the election period of 2012. Both American and Russian policy makers should keep an eye out for some of the key issues characterizing the bilateral relationship so as not to allow short-term factors to undermine the tangible policy achievements brought about over the past three years.

There will be major challenges to the “reset” in 2012:

- Since the “reset” can be characterized as a “move or die” phenomenon, a mere pause may prove to be a mortal blow to the entire dynamic. The US-Russia partnership needs impulses from the top political leadership of the two countries in order to continue. Understandably, Obama and the Russian leaders will be preoccupied with domestic politics during the election period.
- The politicians during the election season are concerned mainly about their domestic audiences at the expense of the international ones. The candidates absorb the concerns of their societies and build coalitions. They cannot afford committing to anything that may have harmful effects at home. No politician can look “soft” on national security issues during the campaign. This often leads to aggressive foreign policy pronouncements and threats to protect what is perceived as national interests. Electioneering often trumps strategy and leads to jingoism. There will be plenty of inflammatory rhetoric; primarily from the opposition candidates in both the US and Russia, and this may put Obama and Putin on the defensive.

- The Obama administration is vulnerable to the criticism over the “reset.” The Republicans’ attacks usually focus on the undemocratic nature of the political regime in Russia and the dubious benefits of the new START treaty that may potentially limit the freedom of maneuver in developing nuclear strategy and missile defense. It is not easy to convince an average American that the US national interests, including strategies towards Afghanistan and Iran, require Washington to be fully engaged with Moscow, despite of all its alleged flaws.
- Putin’s imminent return to the Kremlin is viewed by many skeptics in the United States as a threat to bilateral cooperation and blow for the “reset.” Indeed, the worldviews of Medvedev and Putin have appeared to differentiate a bit in 2009-2011, with Medvedev more in the liberal camp and Putin who cherishes his “tough guy” image is definitely in the “great power balancer” camp.
- Finally, the biggest challenge to the “reset” is the scenario that includes social unrest in Russia and the attempts to suppress it by force. Though it does not look likely, the mass protests immediately after March 4, 2012 cannot be ruled out. In this case, Washington may face a difficult dilemma: acknowledging the election results or siding with the protesters.

Both American and Russian policy makers, in spite of the election period challenges, must focus on consolidating the progress that has already been made, and expanding this progress to gain new momentum in cooperation after elections pass. Even this meager agenda is already a difficult one to follow, but it is a realistic and practical plan for the following reasons:

- The change in Russian attitudes towards the United States had nothing to do with the fact that Putin, with his allegedly hawkish agenda, was no longer at the steering wheel of Russian policy. Rather, the change came about because the Obama administration had taken into account Russia’s interests and because the global economic crisis made Moscow less prone to confrontational foreign policy. Moreover, Putin is not necessarily one-sidedly anti-Western, and there was a brief period in which he propagated his own version of the “reset” in Russian-US relations in 2001-2002.
- In the United States, the Obama administration is unlikely to take initiative and take any steps that would derail the “reset.” However, there will be growing pressure from the Republican side, especially in the wake of March 2012 presidential elections in Russia, which they will certainly portray as not free and unfair. At the same time, most Republican presidential candidates understand that in the event of their success, they will have to pursue a relatively restrained foreign policy, no matter what his or her election campaign rhetoric is. The reduction of strategic commitments in response to a decline in American relative power is inevitable. This may eliminate potential flashpoints in Russian-American relations, especially in the post-Soviet space.
- Balancing China’s global clout by fostering partnerships with existing and rising great powers will be one of the major challenges to United States foreign policy in the 21st century. The best strategy for engagement with China may be for the US to invite a number of other international actors to the “negotiating tables” of world affairs. The China factor will increasingly shape the US

attitudes and policies towards Russia. The United States should view Russia as a potential balancing partner against an ever-growing China. This may be one of the key ways to reinvigorate the “reset.”

These factors will prevent Russian and American leaders from radically revising the major assumptions that led the two countries to the “reset” in the first place. At the same time, it is not practical to expect the new Russian president and Obama, stuck in the quagmire of political battles at home to take any new significant steps in the US-Russia bilateral relationship in 2012. This must be a year of practical work at other levels: ministerial, legislative, and at the level of civil society. The following steps may help the United States and Russia to endure the difficult election year and ultimately serve the two powers’ long-term goals:

- The Bilateral Presidential Commission, which Presidents Obama and Medvedev established in July 2009, must pursue new joint projects and actions that strengthen strategic stability, international security, economic well-being, and the development of ties between the Russian and American people. A structured mechanism to advance the highest-priority bilateral objectives through 20 working groups and numerous sub-working groups chaired by senior government officials from a variety of agencies and ministries must be fully engaged throughout 2012.
- The legislative bodies of the two countries will bear special responsibility during the period of change in the executive branches. The new Russian Duma elected on December 4, 2011 might take the lead. Russian lawmakers must approve Russia’s WTO membership in early 2012. The U.S. Congress would still need to work out an agreement to eliminate the Jackson-Vanik Amendment. In general, the Russian legislature has not left a significant mark on Russian-American relations. Nothing comparable to the path breaking Nunn – Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program has ever come out from the State Duma or Federative Council. The year of 2012 may be the right moment to change the historic pattern.
- Enhancing continuing dialogue and engagement between the two countries’ civil societies through the US-Russia Civil Society Partnership Program (CSPP) and various exchange programs (the Open World, Fulbright, Future Leaders, etc.) The Russian side has to expand similar government-supported and independent programs that would allow the American public, first and foremost youth and professionals, to get to know Russia better.