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In Putin We Trust?
By Lawrence J. Haas

With Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to expel the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, from his country, perhaps Washington can finally set aside its ill-founded belief – through presidencies of both parties – that U.S. leaders can build productive ties to Moscow's strongman.

Our leaders do this from time to time – convince themselves they can change the ways of an authoritarian ruler and, through a mix of logic, sweet talk, and carrots, convince him to do what we'd like.

For decades, for instance, presidents of both parties nourished hopes of convincing Syrian dictator Hafez al-Assad (who leveled a town and killed thousands of innocent people in a collective punishment for a terrorist attack in 1982) and then his son Bashar (who's now slaughtering his own people) to turn to the West and make peace with Israel.

More recently, the focus of our affection has been Putin, the ex-KGB official who has increasingly returned Russia's once-burgeoning democracy to an authoritarian state with declining regard for human rights and political freedoms.

Early in his term, President George W. Bush famously said of Putin, "I looked the man in the eye. I found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy. We had a very good dialogue. I was able to get a sense of his soul; a man deeply committed to his country and the best interests of his country."

Then came President Barack Obama, who sought to "reset" Washington's ties with Moscow after the friction of the later Bush years and nourish a warmer relationship through which the two governments could work more cooperatively.

Ah, hope. Ah, naivety.

Putin's no advocate of democracy and human rights, no fan of the United States, and no likely partner on the world stage.

In 2005, he called the Soviet Union's collapse "the greatest geopolitical disaster of the last century." Two years later, he blasted the U.S. at an international security conference in Munich for its "almost uncontained hyper use of force in international relations" that "bring[s] us to the abyss of one conflict after another."

On the domestic front, Putin has shown little patience for any potential challenges to his authority.

Since his return as president in May after four years as prime minister, “there has been an across-the-board crackdown on civil society and the opposition. Beyond the show trial of members of the punk rock band Pussy Riot, authorities have raided the homes of government critics and their family members, conducted criminal investigations and prosecutions of opposition figures and their spouses, and used brutal force against protesters,” Freedom House President David J. Kramer wrote in the *Washington Post*.

Under Putin, Moscow has boosted penalties for public disorder, libel, and slander, and Russia’s parliament recently passed a law that will force all nonprofit groups that receive money from outside of Russia to register as foreign agents.

Nevertheless, even after Putin’s decision to send USAID packing, Washington is apparently staying the same tired course, holding its tongue in the misbegotten hope that we can still work with him.

We have lodged no formal protest of his action, which ends two decades of USAID work in post-Soviet Russia, which will force more than a dozen U.S. diplomats to head home, and which will severely undercut the democracy-building efforts of such non-governmental organizations, or NGOs, as Golos, an election monitoring organization that has worked closely with USAID since 2002.

“This is a sovereign decision that any country makes, whether they want to have U.S. assistance through AID,” State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said, making it all sound so routine and acceptable.

And what has all this public tongue-biting and private cajoling brought us?

In response to Moscow’s loud complaints, Obama reconfigured U.S. plans for a missile defense system, which was designed to protect our European allies against the threat of an Iranian attack, in hopes of securing Moscow’s support for tough U.N. Security Council sanctions against Iran.

Nevertheless, while continuing to complain about our missile defense system and threaten retaliation, Moscow has joined with Beijing to persistently thwart U.S. efforts to impose the tighter sanctions that might – might – prompt Tehran to reconsider whether its nuclear pursuit is worth the effort.

Meanwhile, despite endless U.S. cajoling, Putin has refused to pressure Syria’s al-Assad to end his slaughter, leaving Washington with the look of a declining power and with a foreign policy toward Syria that it has essentially subcontracted to a Russian autocrat.

In holding our tongues, we have broken faith with the tens of thousands of Russians who have taken to the streets over the last year to protest Putin’s crackdown and demand more freedom.

We really need to give up the ghost on this one.

Vladimir Putin’s a thug. Let’s stop pretending otherwise.

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