



### Obama and Russian pluralism: dialogue instead of doctrine

Time will show if the ‘reset’ in the Russian-American relations will come as a political and ideological reality during the Obama’s presidency, softening the ‘dialectics of resentment’ we have identified in *When Empire Meets Nationalism*<sup>1</sup>. Yet, as soon as this new buzzword appeared a few months ago, many were very critical of this move, notably because the American President refused to lecture Russia on democracy and Human Rights.

If you believe George W. Bush rhetoric, democracy promotion was once at the core of American diplomacy. Some followers of the 43<sup>rd</sup> President consider that although he has made mistakes, G. W. Bush was a genuine advocate of democracy. The neo-conservative mantra considers that the West has a unique mission to redeem people from their repressive government. By contrast, the current Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, did not mention democracy promotion among the new government priorities – underlying rather the necessity to protect and advance America’s security, keep the allies secure, promote shared prosperity and protection of Human Rights.

Is Obama sacrificing values in order to ensure strategic interests – treaty-based strategic nuclear arms control, Afghanistan and a structure for bilateral cooperation? This view of a trade-off between values and interests is based on false premises. First, it is not certain that the neoconservative movement is really dedicated to democracy promotion beyond rhetoric – see how they boycotted the Hamas after this party won the elections in January 2006, or its will to rely on Turkmenistan in Central Asia, arguably the most authoritarian State in the region (including Russia). At best, it is for them a way to enhance American national interests. Second, in Russia as in the Middle East, the perspective of a militarized promotion of democracy has encouraged authoritarian leadership to rearm rather than to democratize. It is a complete misunderstanding of how democracy can be rooted in countries where initial conditions are rather shaky.

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This being said, has Obama dropped the cause of democracy in general, and in Russia in particular? By preferring dialogue over doctrine<sup>2</sup>, he will in fact prove no less effective than the neoconservative record in this domain – and maybe even more efficient. This is why people concerned by Russia's decline of pluralism should understand the real effects of the "lecture-rather-than-listen" attitude, while assessing the rationale of the 'reset' policy in this context.

*The case of Russia and democracy promotion*

The least we can say is that democracy promotion was not successful in Russia after 1991; it is conventional wisdom that Russia has 'derailed' from its liberal democratic path the West envisioned for Moscow in the aftermath of the USSR collapse.

The Russian democratic movement was maybe not killed principally because of Russia's lack of democratic tradition, but rather because the democratic forces have been associated with the "disastrous 1990s", an equivalent of the 1930s to Western Europeans. In Russia, the very term of 'democracy' should be cleansed from the chaos of the 1990s. During the first year after the demise of the USSR, Russian leadership stumbled from one political crisis to another, and could not prevent the country from losing its international status. Russia's loss of population (5.8 million people from 1993 to 2007) is probably among the greatest in history for reasons other than war, famine and disease. The decline of standard of living went hand in hand with the collapse of life expectancy, while criminality developed steadily.

In this case, it is not difficult to see why Vladimir Putin has been so popular over the last few years: he was largely associated with a period of recovery (well served by external factors). Although he has fed the public space with new concepts of democracy – such as '*upravliaemaia demokratiya*' ('managed democracy') or '*suverennaia demokratiya*' ('sovereign democracy'), Putin's main objective was to stabilize the country, not to democratize it<sup>3</sup>. In his quest for stabilization, he has recentralized power and reduced pluralism: he has weakened the checks on executive power, restrained the strength of institutions such as the regional powers (governors are no longer elected), the media, the oligarchs, the Duma, the Federation Council, political parties independent from the Kremlin,

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or civil society. While a functioning state is a necessity for democratization, the authorities should be bounded by law (notably concerning the rights of its citizens). If democracy is conceived as the political regime of uncertainty, based on predictable rules rather than outcomes decided from above, then, the reduction of uncertainty means a reduction of pluralism. However, this trend toward the decrease of civil liberties is shared by the ‘Patriot Act’ enacted under George W. Bush, whose advisers claim today for more freedom... abroad.

*Obama’s way to change dynamic: enhancing the demand-side*

If democracy promotion relies on a supply-side rationale, it is unquestionable that democracy is built by local actors, or, to put it in a nutshell, “*democratization has to be basically demand-driven, not supply-stimulated*”<sup>4</sup>. As such, democratization depends on many factors – among others, the relative strength of genuine local pro-democratic forces, the presence, or absence and the level of material and cultural facilitators, the existence and size of middle class, the international context, etc.

Of course, not every politician who speaks of human rights and democracy is necessarily a hypocrite; however, the neoconservative movement, as a pseudo-imperial movement, is generally associated with it – with some arguments. It is not clear from the Russian side why the then vice-President Cheney, in his muscled ‘Vilnius discourse’ (May 2006), harshly criticized Russia for its lack of democracy while just after this he went to Kazakhstan in order to cheer Nursultan Nazarbayev<sup>5</sup>, with whom he seemed to have been very friendly<sup>6</sup>. It is typically what the Russian leadership calls ‘double standard’.

In this context, the room for manoeuvre for Obama is rather limited, given that the Bush years were mainly counterproductive for the promotion of democracy in Russia. His adviser on Russia, Michael McFaul, director of the Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law at Stanford University, has written several books on democratic transitions and is among the best scholars on this country.

Obama’s vision could be considered through the objective of “*depriving authoritarian forces of an enemy*”, to reverse Georgy Arbatov’s formula when he was asked what he would do

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after the USSR collapse. Vladimir Ryzhkov, a Russian deputy from 1993 to 2007, observes that *“Obama’s open and friendly style stood in stark contrast to the demonized image of the United States that Kremlin propaganda has promulgated for many years. Obama’s visit made a very strong impact on Russia, the results of which will last a very long time. It will be difficult for the ruling elite to deny the fact that the world had changed and that the United States had also changed. America has become more dynamic, wiser and more attractive, and the old, worn-out anti-U.S. propaganda that the Kremlin has relied on for the last eight years will no longer work”*<sup>7</sup>.

Instead of praising Putin while staring “into his soul” as his predecessor, Obama met with actors of civil society and opposition during his second day in Moscow. Many actors, including civic associations, non-governmental organizations or independent research institutes, are keys to encourage liberalization in non-liberal democracies. By hearing openly the message of the Russian opposition on the country’s democratic deficit and lack of transparency, Obama tends to go beyond the classical inter-state meetings. As Kasparov, former chess world champion and now United Civil Front leader, put it, *“Russian-American relations are not only about relations between the White House and Kremlin. But it is about Russian and American people. It is NGOs, it is about other elements of the civil society, and he was very much on that message, and he reiterated the importance of these contacts during the conversation with members of the opposition”*<sup>8</sup>.

Respect for Russian sovereignty and international status is a way to curb Russian domestic anger against the USA. At this point, the concept of ‘sovereignty’ should be carefully understood; after all, it is one of the most debated in politics and political science. It is equated in Russia with the status of ‘Great Power’, and while the 1990s are seen as an era deprived of sovereignty, the Putin era is considered as a return to sovereignty – and great power status. However, as regards its international implication, the ‘reset’ phase should not be made at the price of a Russian sphere of influence.

Another way to enhance the demand-side consists in trying to separate Medvedev from Putin, the former being unanimously considered as more liberal than the latter. Obama underlined the fact that Medvedev wants to improve the status of civil society, and encourage openness

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and pluralism in both the business and social spheres – moves not done by his predecessor. In particular, he softened the country's NGO law just one week before the arrival of Obama – a move which has undone previous regulations implemented by Putin in 2006. In April 2009, Medvedev also gave an interview to the most independent publication in Russia, *Novaya Gazeta*, considered as highly critical of the Kremlin.

In this perspective, Obama deliberately chose to emphasize the role of Medvedev over Putin, even before his arrival in Moscow. *"I think that it's important that even as we move forward with President Medvedev that Putin understand that the old Cold War approaches to U.S.-Russian relations is outdated. I think that Medvedev understands that I think that Putin has one foot in the old ways of doing business and one foot in the new."*<sup>9</sup> During his trip to Russia, Obama spent most of its time with Medvedev, staying only a few hours to exchange views with the Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin. Until recently, many analysts would suggest that Putin remains in charge of Russia, particularly on tactical and strategic issues, since, as Olga Kryshtanovskaya put it, *"Medvedev has no resources and no team to lead; 85 percent of all key posts are held by Putin's people. Medvedev's a general with no army"*<sup>10</sup>. In this sense, the tandem Medvedev – Putin would be nothing else than a "bad cop – good cop" division of labor<sup>11</sup>. However, other analysts think that the interests of the two men should inevitably collide to some extent – e.g. on the nomination of people in the Russian Far East, in the North Caucasus or elsewhere. Another illustration can be found in the recent 'clash' (the term is used by the *Financial Times*) on WTO issues<sup>12</sup>.

In any case, Medvedev still needs to assert his authority if he wants to challenge the harsher aspects of the Putin era – and launch successful reforms in economic policy, foreign policy or Human Rights. At the end of the day, although the Obama's attempt to separate Medvedev from Putin by enhancing the former might not bear fruit in the short term, it is a more realistic way to concretely promote political pluralism than just lecturing Russia.

<sup>1</sup> See notably the conclusion: Didier Chaudet, Florent Parmentier, Benoît Pélopidas, *When Empire Meets Nationalism. Power Politics in the US and Russia*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2009, pp.173-182.

<sup>2</sup> On this point, see: Mariano Aguirre, “Democracy-promotion: doctrine vs dialogue”, *opendemocracy*, 14 July 2009, available at: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/idea/democracy-promotion-doctrine-vs-dialogue>

<sup>3</sup> On the multiplication of the definitions of democracy in the academic debate, see David Collier, Steven Levitsky, “Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation with Comparative Research”, *World Politics*, Vol. 49, n°3, April 1997, pp.430-451.

<sup>4</sup> Rein Müllerson, “Democracy: History, not Destiny”, *opendemocracy*, 27 November 2008, available at: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/idea/democratisation-history-policy-destiny>

<sup>5</sup> This fact has been well observed by Vera Rihackova, “Cheney’s Speech in Vilnius – Why the EU Should Act Differently?”, *Europeum*, 2006, available at: [http://www.europeum.org/doc/arch\\_eur/comment\\_rihackova.pdf](http://www.europeum.org/doc/arch_eur/comment_rihackova.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> It seems that, indeed, their meeting has been very warm. So much that according to several well-connected Kazakhstanese officials and Westerners, after their official duties, they used a well-known pub after-hours, and continued their discussions while drinking cocktails they made themselves. This information comes from one of the authors of *When Empire Meets Nationalism*, Didier Chaudet.

<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Ryzhkov, “Obama Surprises Russia”, *The Moscow Times*, 10 July 2009, n°4185, available at: <http://www.moscowtimes.ru/article/1016/42/379421.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Peter Fedynsky, “President Obama Reaches Out to Russian Opposition”, *Voice of America*, 8 July 2009, available at: <http://www.voanews.com/english/2009-07-08-voa20.cfm>

<sup>9</sup> Chris McGreal, “Barack Obama: Putin has one foot in the past”, *The Guardian*, 2 July 2009, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jul/02/obama-putin-us-russia-relations>

<sup>10</sup> Fred Weir, “Who Is Really Running Russia? Medvedev Pushing Reform in Post-Putin Russia”, *abcnews*, 26 July 2009, available at: <http://abcnews.go.com/print?id=8164959>

<sup>11</sup> Jesse Heath, “Are Medvedev and Putin Playing Good Cop – Bad Cop”, *The Russia Monitor*, 11 July 2009, available at : <http://www.therussiaobserver.com/2009/07/are-medvedev-and-putin-playing-good-cop.html>

<sup>12</sup> Stefan Wagstyl, “Medvedev Clashes with Putin”, *Financial Times*, 10 July 2009, available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f1159162-6d67-11de-8b19-00144feabdc0.html>