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America's New Cold War with Russia

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With the full support of a feckless policy elite and an uncritical media establishment, Washington is slipping, if not plunging, into a new cold war with Moscow. Relations, already deeply chilled by fundamental disputes over missile defense, the Middle East and Russia's internal politics, have now been further poisoned by two conflicts reminiscent of tit-for-tat policy-making during the previous Cold War.

In December, Congress, in a fit of sanctimonious lawmaking and indifference to larger consequences, passed the Magnitsky Act. In effect a blacklist without due process, it will punish Russian officials (and perhaps their family members) alleged to be guilty of "gross violations of human rights" in their own country. However odious such individuals may be, Russia's political class was bound to resent yet another haughty American intrusion into its political and legal affairs. A no less capricious Russian Parliament quickly responded by banning American adoption of Russian orphans, long a highly sensitive issue, which will go into full effect in 2014. Little opposition was voiced in either legislature.

There was, however, a significant difference. Under President Vladimir Putin's "authoritarian regime," the Russian media were filled with heated controversy over the adoption ban, including denunciations of Putin for signing it. In the "democratic" US mainstream media, on the other hand, there has been only applause for the Magnitsky Act and President Obama's decision to sign it. Nor is this the first time leading American newspapers and television and radio outlets have been cheerleaders for a new cold war.

Although the US political-media establishment routinely blames Putin, the movement toward cold war, instead of partnership, with post-Soviet Russia began almost a decade before he came to the Kremlin—in the 1990s, in Washington, under the Clinton administration. Indeed, President Clinton initiated the three basic components of what has remained Washington’s Russia policy ever since, from George W. Bush to Obama: expanding NATO (now including missile defense installations) to Russia’s borders; “selective cooperation,” which has meant concessions by Moscow without meaningful US reciprocity; and interference, in the name of “democracy promotion,” in Russia’s domestic politics. For twenty years, this Cold War approach has had overwhelming bipartisan support among the US political elite and mainstream media.

Consider the most recent episode, Obama’s 2009 purported “reset” of relations with Moscow, or what was called “détente” in another Cold War era. Obama wanted three concessions from the Kremlin: assistance in supplying NATO forces in Afghanistan, harsher sanctions against Iran and Russia’s abstention on the UN Security Council vote for a no-fly zone over Libya. The White House got all three. In return, Moscow wanted a formal end of NATO’s expansion to the former Soviet republics, a compromise on European missile defense and a cessation of direct American involvement in Russian political life. Instead, it got an escalation of all three offending US policies, again with virtually unanimous bipartisan and media approval.

Things weren’t always like this. From the 1960s to the 1990s, fierce debates raged between Americans proposing colder war and those advocating détente. Both sides had substantial support in the administrations and Congresses of those years, and both appeared regularly on leading op-ed pages and on national television and radio. The democratic process was working, itself a rebuff to a Soviet system that prohibited such public debates.

But no longer. Obama has surrounded himself with Russia advisers, including the current secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, wedded to the twenty-year-long approach. As for Congress, it has long since become a bipartisan bastion of Cold War lobbyists, hearings, resolutions and legislation, with barely a handful of House representatives—too few of them liberal or progressive Democrats—protesting this reckless folly. Even the grassroots “peace” and “anti-nuke” movements of a previous era have all but vanished.

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The media, considering their essential role in national security discussions, have been especially culpable, violating their own professional canons in coverage of Russia-related matters. Newspaper editorials now range from endorsing the administration’s inherently Cold War line to complaining that it is too “soft” on the Kremlin. Dissenting opinions rarely, if ever, appear on influential op-ed pages or on national television or radio. (Cable, even MSNBC, and “public” broadcasting are no different.) Editorial bias has even spilled over into news reporting. In particular, the media’s relentless demonization of Putin, often unfactual or illogical, has nearly displaced serious, multidimensional analysis.

The media’s focus has also been selective. Coverage of last year’s Moscow street demonstrations against Putin was exhaustive, but US correspondents have ignored an extraordinary new kind of protest in the same capital. From December 18 to December 27, students and faculty of the

Russian State University of Trade and Economics (RGTEU) defied a ministerial takeover of their institution—its head, Sergei Baburin, a prominent political figure, was ousted by the ministry—by occupying the large complex day and night, suspending the action only for the Russian holidays and pending an appeal to Putin. If their protest spreads to other universities, Russia could experience its first large-scale student strike in many decades, with major political consequences.

Why have American media failed to report this development? Is it because the university students and faculty, unlike several leading street protesters, do not have personal ties to the US press and to Washington officials? Or because they, also unlike many of last year's street demonstrators, are not avowedly pro-Western but nationalist-oriented? Or because the university rebellion is directed not against Putin (its slogan is "Putin—we believe in you. Putin—save RGTEU") but against the government of Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, once a White House favorite? Or is such complexity simply too much for the orthodox media narrative of post-Communist Russia?

Nearly thirty years ago, more pluralistic American media coverage of Soviet Russia helped President Ronald Reagan meet its leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, halfway in a joint effort to abolish the Cold War forever. (They thought they had succeeded.) Both leaders encountered powerful opposition in their respective parties and media, but they also found significant support. Too much may have changed—in the quality of leadership, in the political elites of Washington and Moscow, and in US media practices—for it to happen again.