

# Why Did Russia Welcome a Republican Victory?

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Russian President Vladimir Putin welcomed George W. Bush's victory in the U.S. presidential race before the announcement of the official results. The contemporary Russian political elite has preferred conservative, more pragmatic Republicans led by George Bush over liberal, less predictable Democrats such as John Kerry. Russia is satisfied with its relations with the United States and is not interested in any changes. Russia under Putin and the United States under George Bush have become partners. Putin was the first among foreign leaders to call Bush following the September 11 attacks to offer Russia's support. Since that time Putin has consistently supported the U.S. efforts at fighting international terrorism in all its forms. Russia and the U.S. act as traditional nation-state actors protecting their national interests and national security. Both leaders define the security of the nation as a first priority. That's why, despite disagreements over the U.S.-led action in Iraq, the bilateral relationship between Washington and Moscow remains firm. There are two key rational elements in this relationship: the need to cooperate on WMD nonproliferation and the fight against terrorism.

## **What Does Putin's Russia Like in the Republican Attitude toward U.S.-Russian Relations?**

### **1. The democratization of Russia is Russia's own responsibility and business.**

During its first term the Bush administration openly discounted Russia's importance. Moscow welcomed such an approach because Republicans were less critical on Russia's domestic issues. Given its financial resources and diplomatic status, the United States was in a unique position to assist the "democratization process" in Russia with financial support. Moscow did not always like such support and welcomed a U.S. administration with limited desire to interfere in domestic issues.

The new Bush administration has a very pragmatic goal in regard to Russia: to develop the new strategic framework in U.S.-Russian relations. There were two main issues: diminishing the role of U.S.-Russian arms-control treaties (ABM, START) and emphasizing the nonproliferation regime. Humanitarian issues like democratic reforms, human rights, and freedom of press are less important to the Republican White House. The development of a democratic and stable Russia, according to the Republican platform, was in the interests of the United States and all of Europe. But at the same time

Republicans understood correctly that only Russians could win the battle for democracy. That was very important for the post-Yeltsin “new” political elite in Russia. Republicans initiated the dramatic cut off of all U.S. sponsored programs in Russia. A good example was Nizhny Novgorod, the third largest city in Russia and center of democratic reforms in the 1990s. By the end of 1990s several organizations had established offices: Open Society Institute (Soros Foundation), U.S. Agency for International Development, American Councils for International Education (ASTR/ACCELS), and the International Research and Exchanges Board’s (IREX) Partner Program. All these offices are closed now.

However, in trying to avoid “enriching the bank accounts of corrupt officials”, Washington has thrown out the baby with the bathwater. As a result many NGOs that existed on western grants ceased their activities. There are no stable institutions of civil society in Russia able to win the fight for democracy. This gives the Kremlin free reign to solve many domestic issues. Russian NGOs are weak and disoriented. Domestic sources for supporting their activities are limited. As a result, the Bush administration’s indifference toward domestic policy in Russia makes it all the easier for official Russia to engage more with the United States. The Kremlin is satisfied while liberals in the West are angry.

## **2. Fighting terrorism is a main priority.**

The pro-Western turn in Vladimir Putin’s foreign policy became a reality after September 11. Russia has emerged as an important and valuable partner in the U.S.-led informal coalition against terrorism on the basis of a common fight with international terrorism. Russia, despite a problematic human rights record pointed out by liberal critics of Putin’s regime, has become an ally of the U.S. in the struggle against terror. Putin has demonstrated a very pragmatic and rational approach, although possessing a slightly different list of terrorist organizations than official Washington. Like Republicans, he sees the world in terms of the balance of power and admires military power. He likes Bush’s pessimism about the efficiency of international organizations in solving security issues. However, Putin is strongly interested in Russia’s integration into the world economy and world financial and economic structures. Russia’s key priorities here are speedy acceptance into regional and international financial arrangements that would entail the reduction of barriers against Russian goods.

Putin has made some very brave steps allowing U.S. troops to be deployed in Central Asia and the Caucasus. This agreement has rendered obsolete the concept of the “near abroad” as an area of Russia’s exclusive sphere of influence. Both the Russian and American governments have proclaimed their readiness to use force with or without allies or institutional approval when national security interests are at stake. Both the Russian and U.S. focus on pre-emption of terrorist threats makes each country in its own way an empire. Both Putin and Bush use the terrorist threat for reorientation of public attention from real social issues to artificially created issues. As a consequence of the war on terrorism, both leaders initiated the centralization of power and increase in defense spending.

### **3. Centralization of power is a key element of domestic policy.**

Both leaders have initiated reforms aimed on centralization of power and limitation of basic civil liberties. Both leaders decided to create new federal structures and institutions responsible for national security and stability. In Russia, it is reflected in Putin's administrative and electoral reforms. In the United States, we see the creation of the Department of Homeland Security – a behemoth with a long list of obligations and lack of real power. Both leaders want to establish a national strategy for assessing threats. They want to create a new system of national security for disseminating intelligence about threats among federal and local officials in order to coordinate federal and local emergency capabilities. The new integrated strategy for the United States and Russia would embrace several new common key elements of national security: border security (preventing drug traffic and illegal immigration), intelligence, law enforcement, and transport security.

Both leaders support an increase in defense spending. Bush and Putin started their terms promising revolution and radical transformation of the national armed forces, favoring the purchase of a new generation of weapons, an increase in research and development, and cutbacks in overseas military presence. But at the practical level both leaders essentially reaffirmed the core elements of predecessor's defense policy with more money to be spent. Some defense spending increases are genuinely needed. But most of those proposed by the Bush and Putin administrations (concerning, for example, missile capabilities) have only limited relevance to the war on terrorism. Moscow and Washington have placed homeland security at the top of the security agenda. Both leaders have proposed budget plans appropriate for a state existing in a hostile environment. In times of war, increased defense spending is a military necessity and is politically feasible. The war on terror is a justification of the new defense spending for both leaders. However, both countries have chosen to run the risk of spending too much on defense.

Putin and Bush advocate an active role for the intelligence community. Terrorist attacks on the American and Russian territory reveal flaws in the national intelligence systems that affect homeland security. The main problem is the lack of coordination between different agencies on the federal and local levels and poor understanding of an increasingly complex and borderless world. Both countries have established some new common requirements. For example they prefer to use more militarized and intelligence-oriented Special Forces characterized by flexibility and rapid response in dealing with terrorist threats. Of course Russia and the United State have different resources to accomplish the proclaimed goals, but a number of reforms would undoubtedly emerge in both countries due to a willingness to provide better guidance to the domestic intelligence organs. The two countries could use these common interests to strengthen the relationship between their intelligences communities, at least on selected issues.

Many state institutions in both countries have been subject to severe criticism in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the homeland (September 11, Nord Ost, and Beslan). After several terrorist attacks both countries have provided federal agencies with the authority to wiretap, trace email messages, track web-surfing, and use the business records and computer records from internet service providers to protect the country and its citizens against international terrorism or clandestine intelligence activities. Both countries have reinforced national immigration law, with new restrictions on foreigners

staying in both countries. Aliens who are certified to be threats to national security can be detained indefinitely. Both countries developed new regulations concerning money laundering. U.S. and Russian banks can be ordered to determine sources of suspicious accounts. Some political leaders of both countries favor more severe penalties for aiding, abetting, or committing acts of terrorism. The Russian State Duma has initiated several hearings on these issues preparing the public for changes in federal law.

Both countries are working on the development of a new computerized screening system that could link every reservation system to private and government databases. Both states want to control all information about passengers' profiles to ferret out potential threats. In sum, both countries have initiated reforms that limit some civil liberties in order to provide security.

#### **4. Bush and Putin both have a state-centric worldview.**

The Bush and Putin foreign policy teams have a state-centric worldview. They advocate a strong state as the key international actor. Both countries view so-called transnational threats (global warming, illegal drug traffic, WMD proliferation, and stateless terrorists) as functional issues for state-to-state cooperation. The United States and Russia endorse traditional principles of international relations: state sovereignty, territorial integrity, national security, and national interests. They promise to enforce these principles with military strength. Both countries advocate for a central role of the nation-state in world politics. International organizations and institutions should serve the interests of its members. National security and national interests are key drivers of strategic thinking in both countries.

Contemporary foreign and security policy priorities of the U.S. coincide with Russian priorities. For Russia, the main task is solving domestic issues. These do not worry the current U.S. administration as they do not represent a direct threat to U.S. interests. Even human rights issues are not as important for George Bush as they were for Democrats. U.S.-Russian relations for the first time since 1917 are pragmatic with minimal ideological influence. In spite of the fact that Republicans do not trust international organizations and fight for unlimited sovereignty when American national security is at stake, they would agree to work together with international institutions in order to strengthen structures based on western values and principles. Putin's Russia has the same attitude towards international organizations and a similar understanding of state sovereignty. Russia has accepted the basic western democratic norms and principles so there is field where two teams can play one game according common rules. That is why Putin has welcomed Bush's victory.