

Russia and the Independent States of the Former Soviet Union: A Set of Policy Guidelines for the Obama Administration

Executive Summary

NCSJ is a not-for-profit voluntary organization dedicated to safeguarding the individual and communal rights of Jews living in Russia and the region. After nearly forty years of highly effective national and international advocacy for Jews and Jewish communities, NCSJ has an unmatched record and network in every part of Russia and the independent states of the region. NCSJ is recognized by national and regional leaders, and has proven its commitment both to the promotion of human rights and to a constructive U.S.-Russian relationship. NCSJ is uniquely qualified to propose a constructive set of policy guidelines for the new Administration.

NCSJ proposes that the new Administration pursue policies towards Russia and the region based on principles that:

- Promote a constructive, positive, and institutionally robust long-term relationship with Russia, despite the persistence of contentious or outstanding issues and leadership changes;
- Encourage partnering with Russia and other independent states to support human rights, and oppose anti-Semitism, extremism, and xenophobia;
- Expand local law enforcement training, restitution of property, grassroots civil society development, improve local healthcare, and create cultural and educational opportunities for minorities;
- Secure Russian support for and compliance with U.S.-led nonproliferation and nuclear threat reduction efforts in Russia, Iran, and elsewhere;
- Reinforce and modernize the arms control framework while addressing continuing Russian concerns on issues such as planned American anti-missile defenses in Central Europe or existing treaty limitations on conventional forces in Russia;
- Support the unhindered voluntary integration of independent states in the region into the key institutions of the Euro-Atlantic community, including the European Union and NATO;
- Affirm a commitment to the national sovereignty of independent states in the region.

Background

The NCSJ policy principles are set against a background of U.S.-Russian relations that have deteriorated to their lowest point since the end of the Soviet Union in 1991. Russia and the United States disagree over basic issues. These include Russia's relations with its neighbors, particularly Georgia and Ukraine, that wish to join NATO; a proposed limited U.S. missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic; Russia's policies in the Middle East, in particular towards Iran, Hamas and Syria; several disputed arms control treaties; Russian energy export policies; the U.S. role in the region; and more.

Likewise, the Putin/Medvedev administration's increasing authoritarianism and tolerance of anti-Americanism at home have eroded any lingering hopes for a grand convergence between post-Soviet Russia and the West. It remains unclear whether President Medvedev will emerge as a more liberal counterweight to Prime Minister Putin. Most observers now predict growing political uncertainty in Russia, especially if oil prices decline further and social protests grow. Opinions remain divided as to the future of the Putin/Medvedev tandem: some predict Medvedev's early resignation and Putin's return to the presidency, while others see Putin weakened by the impact of the economic crisis now battering Russia.

NCSJ Policy Proposals

1. Introduction

Despite some notable successes under both Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush, Russian policy towards the U.S. grew increasingly critical and adversarial during Putin's two presidential terms, and remains so under President Medvedev. At the same time, Russia is entering a period of political and economic predicament brought on by the impact of the global financial crisis.

Russia's ethnic and religious minorities are increasingly vulnerable.

In the last quarter of 2008, Russian industrial output and personal incomes fell sharply and unemployment rose dramatically, sparking popular protests across Russia, directed at the Putin/Medvedev government. At the same time, racist violence against people of color spiked. 2008 ended with a record number of assaults and murders by skinheads and extremists against non-ethnic Russians. Interior Ministry statistics released in late 2008 showed a threefold increase in extremist crimes since 2004. Meanwhile, most observers predict Russia's economy will worsen in 2009.

The deterioration of U.S.-Russian relations has created a creeping crisis.

Russia's increasingly assertive foreign policy – evidenced by Russia's military conflict with Georgia in August 2008; its cyber and diplomatic conflict with NATO member Estonia in April, 2008; repeated claims by various Russian politicians to Ukrainian Crimea; and its natural gas shut-off to Ukraine and the EU in early 2009 – have heightened bilateral tensions with the United States and affected Russia's relationships with other states in the former Soviet region and with the European Union.

Russian policies challenge U.S. goals.

Starting with then-President Putin's combative Munich speech in February 2007, the Kremlin has openly blamed the United States for the global economic crisis and its impact on Russia, promoted anti-American policies on state-controlled media and through pro-Kremlin organizations, and expanded relations with Venezuela, Iran, and Hamas.

2. Proposals

NCSJ, a highly respected national advocacy organization for Jews in Russia and the independent states of the region, proposes to the new Administration the following policy initiatives:

Overall

- Appoint a senior Administration official as point person for United States policy towards Russia and other states in the region.
- Arrange for a visit to Russia and the region by President Obama.

Adopt the following set of core principles:

- Promote and protect international human rights;
- Promote a constructive, positive, and institutionally robust long-term relationship with Russia despite the persistence of contentious or outstanding issues and leadership changes;
- Partner with Russia and the surrounding independent states to oppose anti-Semitism, extremism, and xenophobia;
- Train local law enforcement, encourage property restitution, promote grassroots civil society, and create cultural and educational opportunities for minorities;
- Secure meaningful Russian support for compliance with U.S.-led nonproliferation and threat reduction efforts in Russia, Iran and elsewhere;
- Encourage governments in the region to fulfill their OSCE obligations and commitments;
- Engage with Russia to reinforce and modernize the existing arms control framework while addressing Russian concerns on missile defense and conventional force limits;
- Continue to support the unhindered voluntary integration of the independent states of the region into the key institutions of the Euro-Atlantic community, including the European Union and NATO;
- Reinforce our commitment to the national sovereignty of states in the former Soviet region.

Country-specific proposals

Russia

- Develop public and private sector initiatives to:
 - Train Russian law enforcement authorities in the effective prevention, investigation, and prosecution of hate crimes; appropriate management of peaceful public rallies and demonstrations; effective liaising with non-governmental organizations; and ways to strengthen cooperation with international law enforcement authorities, especially in ways to combat extremist activity;
 - Facilitate partnerships and exchanges between diverse American and Russian non-governmental organizations to strengthen bilateral links and support the growth of and respect for civil society in both countries, including greater integration of, participation by, and respect for ethnic and religious

- minorities;
 - Explore possibilities for public- and private-sector Russian-American cooperation to meet global economic challenges;
 - Enhance American public/private-sector cooperation on healthcare, including training, professional exchanges, and material support for Russian healthcare providers to help reverse alarming trends in Russia's demographic statistics.
- Demonstrate U.S. commitment to resolving major bilateral points of contention and finding areas for expanded cooperation and constructive engagement:
 - Affirm and expand the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), due to expire in December 2009;
 - Affirm and expand the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT), which depends on START for its verification and monitoring provisions;
 - Reinstitute the 1990 Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), Russia's compliance in which was suspended by then-President Putin in December 2007;
 - Reinstitute the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM), from which the U.S. withdrew under George W. Bush in 2002;
 - Affirm and expand the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), Russia's participation in which was called into question by then-President Putin in 2007 to counter declared U.S. plans for a limited missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic;
 - Graduate Russia from Jackson-Vanik requirements when U.S.-Russian relations show improvement; Russia's Jewish community today enjoys continued open emigration and dynamic community development, creating an opportunity for the Obama Administration to recognize Russian progress in this area.

Ukraine

- Support Ukraine's pro-Western orientation, sovereignty and territorial integrity, particularly in the face of Russian pressure on Ukraine.
- Urge the government to develop and implement initiatives to combat extremism, anti-Semitism and hate crimes, including programs to promote tolerance of ethnic and religious minorities and to combat hate-based violence through improved training of local law enforcement.
- Encourage the government to develop and enact comprehensive communal property restitution legislation.
- Strengthen U.S.-Ukrainian cooperation in accordance with the bilateral strategic partnership agreement signed by Secretary of State Rice and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Ogrzyzko in December 2008.
- Promote Ukraine's economic development, increase U.S. investment, and increase bilateral trade volume.

Georgia

- Work with our allies to resolve the Georgian-Russian conflict.
- Affirm proposals from the U.S.-Georgian strategic partnership agreement signed on January 9, 2009.
- Support initiatives to strengthen Georgian civil and political institutions and promote democratic reforms and the growth of civil society in Georgia.
- Enhance U.S.-Georgian economic and security cooperation, including through NATO and bilateral joint exercises with the United States.
- Support greater U.S. private sector investment in Georgia as per the October 2008 trade development mission to Tbilisi organized by the U.S. Department of Commerce.
- Support regional integration and cooperation between Georgia and its neighbors, including through the GUAM organization for democracy and economic development (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova), the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, and the European Union's "Eastern Partnership" program.

Lithuania

- Urge the government to prosecute extremist hate crimes and to end the ongoing legal harassment of World War II Jewish partisans.
- Encourage the government to continue opposing anti-Semitism, including vandalism of cemeteries and Holocaust memorial sites, and inflammatory statements by public figures.
- Encourage the government to move forward on property restitution, especially the long-delayed submission of a restitution bill by the prime minister to parliament to initiate the restitution process.

Latvia

- Encourage Latvian officials to condemn annual marches and demonstrations in support of war veterans who fought on the side of the Germans during World War II, including in SS units.
- Urge the government to promote property restitution, including expediting the return of property lost by Latvia's Jewish community during the German and Soviet occupations.
- Encourage the government to continue opposing anti-Semitism, including vandalism of cemeteries and Holocaust memorial sites, inflammatory statements by public figures, and assaults by extremists.

Estonia

- Encourage the government to continue opposing anti-Semitism, including vandalism of cemeteries and Holocaust memorial sites.
- Urge the government to prosecute hate crimes, including assaults and attacks by extremists.
- Encourage Estonian officials to oppose official celebrations of Estonian war veterans who fought on the side of the Germans during World War II, including in SS units.

Belarus

- Continue to press the government to improve its human rights record.
- Condemn anti-Semitic statements by public figures and in the Belarusian media, as well as desecration of Jewish cemeteries and Holocaust memorial sites.
- Increase free market economy, develop civil society, enhance economic cooperation with OPIC and the IMF, and security cooperation with NATO and the EU.
- Pursue conditions conducive to the resumption of full diplomatic ties, including the reinstatement of ambassadors.

Kazakhstan

- Continue to strengthen bilateral relations.
- Urge the government to expedite political and legal reforms in line with its OSCE commitments. Kazakhstan is due to chair the OSCE in 2010.
- Support Kazakhstan's ongoing interfaith efforts.
- Secure President Nazarbayev's cooperation in ongoing U.S. efforts to build a just and lasting peace in the Middle East.

Uzbekistan

- Improve relations under the terms of the U.S.-Uzbek 2002 Declaration of Strategic Partnership.
- Urge the government to promote and protect human rights.
- Engage the government in the areas of counterterrorism and the fight against drug trafficking.
- Pursue a trilateral partnership with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to stabilize the Aral Sea and ameliorate this Soviet-era regional environmental disaster.

NCSJ

The mission of NCSJ is to safeguard the individual and communal political rights of Jews living in the 15 successor states of the former Soviet Union and to secure their religious and political freedoms.

NCSJ actively monitors compliance by the governments of the former Soviet Union in the areas of free emigration and religious and cultural rights, and also monitors closely developments related to anti-Semitism in the Soviet successor states. NCSJ also works closely and cooperatively with all branches of government, particularly the White House, Department of State, Congress and the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (U.S. Helsinki Commission) in order to further our goals.

For more information on these and other countries in the former Soviet region, please contact:

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