The Russian and U.S. Presidential Elections

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On March 4th, Russians will go to the polls to “elect” their next president. As with most elections in the former Soviet Union, other than the Baltic countries, the most interesting questions are not concerned with who will win. It is all but certain that Russia’s current prime minister and erstwhile president, Vladimir Putin will win that election. The more compelling question raised by the Russian presidential election is what will happen after the votes are cast. Fraud in the December 2011 parliamentary election led to major demonstrations in Moscow representing the first cracks in the carefully constructed facade of invincibility which Putin had so arduously worked to create during the last decade.

The lack of freedoms of media, association and speech in Russia means that the March election cannot be truly free, fair and competitive. These enormous problems notwithstanding, Putin may in fact be the most popular candidate on the ballot. However, it is still possible that Putin and his organization will seek to inflate his margin of victory to make him seem stronger and that election fraud will spill over into election day and the post-election counting rather than simply pre-election intimidation and similar behaviors. If the parliamentary elections can be viewed as a precedent, a reasonable proposition, than it is likely that there will be election fraud before, during and after March 4th, and that there will also be large demonstrations in Moscow and possibly elsewhere in Russia following the presidential election.

It is still difficult to know where these demonstrations will lead, but they will raise some challenges for the Obama administration and the U.S. The U.S. was behind he curve in recognizing the seriousness of the citizen uprisings in North Africa last year, but Russia is a different country where a different set of issues and concerns confront the administration.

The dilemma itself is not very complicated. While the U.S. would like to see liberalization and political change in Russia, it cannot be seen as being too strong in its opposition to the Putin regime. This would damage U.S.-Russia relations and possibly push Russia towards a more anti-U.S. foreign policy. It would also undermine the Russian opposition by making Putin’s inevitable attack on them on the grounds of being American proxies or stooges more resonant. However, if the U.S. does not support the demonstrators, their is a risk that the U.S. will miss an opportunity to help make change in Russia and will demonstrate that the U.S. commitment to democracy and human rights is inconsistent.

The Obama administration will need to strike a balance, at first offering rhetorical support for the principles of fair elections, free media and the right to demonstrate and rallying international support for more democracy in Russia, while avoiding a confrontation with the Russian government or offering sufficient support to the demonstrators that the movement is tarred as being an American creation and thus fatally weakened. As the post-election scenario evolves, the U.S. will need to be flexible enough to adjust their tactics as needed. This approach probably cannot be executed perfectly, but it may be the best the U.S. can do.
The U.S. response to events in Russia in March will be complicated by another presidential election, the one in the U.S. While President Obama will have to respond to events in Russia in a thoughtful way taking into consideration a range of issues, Republicans will use these events as an opportunity to portray Obama as soft on Russia. Talking tough on Russia will be a good way for likely Republican nominee Mitt Romney to strengthen his support in at least one part of the Republican base.

Unlike Obama, Romney and the Republicans do not have to govern, or worry about the consequences of what they say. Therefore, they will be able to take strong, and politically popular anti-Russia positions with little regard for the potential impact of their statements and positions. The Republicans have spent most of the last three years seeking to portray Obama as weak. Tough posturing on Russia will be another way for Romney to make this argument. Republicans in congress will only be too happy to join in as well.

This may in the short term make opponents of Putin, both in Russia and the U.S. feel good, but it will accomplish little. The Republican rhetoric, despite not coming from the administration itself will make it easier for the Russian regime to scapegoat American intervention, will raise expectations of the Russian opposition that cannot be met by any American administration and, by further damaging U.S.-Russia relations will reduce whatever remaining influence the U.S. has on Russia’s leadership. The Obama administration has, differentiated itself from its predecessor by prioritizing results over bluster. This is the administration, after all that talked about the war on terror less, but killed Osama Bin Laden. Going back to prioritizing tough talk may make some feel better, and even give Romney a temporary bump in the polls, but it will accomplish little.