

ACKNOWLEDGING THE ROLE OF DOMESTIC POLITICS

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Many Americans, and some Russians living in the United States, say that the root cause of current problems in U.S.–Russian relations is that anti-U.S. rhetoric and actions that displease the United States play well in Russian domestic politics, so there is nothing that the United States can do to improve the relationship until President Putin decides that he has more to lose than gain by such tactics. Saying that the problem is all internal to Russia lets the United States off the hook too easily. Domestic politics also push U.S. policies on key issues, including missile defense, human rights, and Iran’s nuclear program, in directions that impede U.S.–Russian cooperation. Some U.S. politicians score points with their constituents by exaggerating problems in the relationship and inflaming anti-Russian sentiments. Some domestic policy issues on which Russia is being criticized by the West, such as intolerance toward homosexuals, are equally controversial in the United States, although the forms of legal discrimination are different.

Even the opposing positions taken by Russia and the United States on the Snowden case are really the extreme ends of a policy dilemma that both countries face between empowering governments to collect private information and keep secrets in the name of national security versus empowering citizens to know what their governments are doing and to keep personal information private. Americans cannot agree about how to balance these two objectives, and Russians probably cannot either, so staking out extreme positions and demonizing the other side is not an appropriate response. Acknowledging the ways in which domestic politics shape U.S. relations with Russia will not make the policy disagreements go away, but it is a step toward managing them in a more constructive fashion.

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