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MINNPOST

The flying Putin glides into U.S. presidential campaign

By Nick Hayes | 09/21/12



Ever since the

REUTERS/Alexsey Druginyn/RIA Novosti/Kremlin

Russian President Vladimir Putin sitting in a motorized deltaplane prior to leading cranes on a migration route.

Republican and Democratic national conventions, Russia's Vladimir Putin has tried to get our attention.

On Sept. 5, he staged another of his macho publicity stunts. On the eve of President Obama's acceptance speech to the DNC, **Putin flew a "delta-plane,"** a motorized glider on a rescue mission to lead the endangered Siberian cranes on their migration route along the Yamai Peninsula in northwestern Siberia. From the images of Putin saving the Siberian tiger to Putin saving the cranes, this act is getting old. It is, of course, staged.

It would not surprise me if we later learned that the flying cranes turned out to be mechanized birds. In any case, the publicity for Putin's stunt faded out as the news broke of the crisis in Libya.

The flying Putin stunt reminded me of a story from the late 1980s. Then president of the Soviet Union

Mikhail Gorbachev took a vacation in his childhood village in southern Russia, where the press gave ample coverage to the president hiking in the woods and picking mushrooms. Video footage later leaked out that showed Gorbachev's aides the night before planting the mushrooms.



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This week, Putin tried a more subtle approach to a **more serious issue**. On Sept. 18, the U.S. State Department confirmed the Russian had requested closure of the USAID office in Moscow. The next day, a spokesman for the Russian Foreign Ministry, Alexander Lukashevich, said that the USAID office had funded political opposition groups in Russia and sought to "influence the political process, including elections." The following day, a spokesman for Putin said that the Russian president held the "identical opinion" on the U.S. agency's interferences in Russian political life.

Moscow had disconnected the Obama administration's

"re-set" button.

The news of the USAID office coincided with the political bombshell of the video of Mitt Romney's comments in Boca Raton. Romney's remarks on the "47 percent" spun out of control and sent the USAID story below the fold of our newspapers. A gaffe from the Romney campaign spared the Obama administration from the public scrutiny the USAID controversy deserves.

Debate in campaign

The incident should spark a debate in the presidential campaign over what works and what doesn't work in our diplomacy toward Russia.

Obama's efforts to facilitate a kinder, gentler and more democratic face in Russian politics has not worked. From the start, the administration's efforts to "re-set" relations with Moscow showed flaws. When Secretary of State Clinton met with her Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, in Geneva in 2009, she **ceremoniously presented him with a gift** – a model of a "re-set" button as the metaphor for starting a new era.

Our mistakes often tell more about us than our intentions. There was a mistranslation. The inscription on the model presented by Clinton used the Russian word for "over-charged" or "tilt" instead of "re-set."

The Obama administration misread and miscalculated the political situation in Russia. It took seriously the fiction that then President Dmitry Medvedev represented the ascendancy of liberal democrats in the Kremlin. Obama's man in Moscow, Ambassador Michael McFaul **openly sided** with opposition leaders. Our USAID office did fund "civil society" projects, which, like "Golos." pointed to

fraud in the Russian elections and bolstered the opposition.

In retrospect, it was Putin who had pushed the “re-set” button, dumping Medvedev as president, cracking down on dissent and consolidating a corrupt autocratic regime.

Obama’s efforts on arms control, military cooperation and trade with Moscow have worked. The new START Treaty put nuclear-weapons reduction back on track. Moscow granted the U.S. military passage across Russian airspace to supply our operations in Afghanistan. Last August, Russia joined the WTO (World Trade Organization) and potentially opened the way for an expansion of U.S. exports into the vast Russian market.

In our presidential campaign, Obama should stand on his policy record and offer us a clear choice in our relations with Russia. Successful diplomacy is a trade-off. The price of nuclear arms reduction, diplomatic cooperation with Teheran or Damascus and beneficial trade agreements is a delay on the deployment of a Missile Shield in Poland and the Czech Republic and a discrete retreat from involvement in Russian domestic politics.

On the other hand, we could embrace the Republican alternative. At the very least, Romney’s view of Russia is clear. He has identified Russia as “without question our No. 1 geopolitical foe” and promised a policy toward Putin of “less flexibility and more backbone.” His [campaign website](#) fills in some of the details.

Romney positions

For starters, a Romney administration would move ahead aggressively with the deployment of the Missile Shield in Poland and the Czech Republic. Although the proposed defense system has near unanimous support among “neocons,” public opinion polls in the Czech Republic consistently show that two thirds of the Czechs oppose the missiles. Polls in Poland show that slightly over 50 percent of Poles also oppose the Missile Defense system in their country.

Romney promises to “review” the new START Treaty on the mutual reduction of the Russian and U.S. nuclear weapons. Poll data indicates that nearly three-quarters of the American public supports the new START Treaty. He would be more aggressive in supporting “civil society” in Russia. Perhaps, he would send in the Navy Seals to free Pussy Riot.

We may have done about as much as we can to in the promotion of democracy in Russia. This task is and always has been the task of the Russian people themselves. What is more, the demonstrations of the past year give us hope that Russians just might achieve that goal on their own and send Putin into retirement, where he can spend all the time he wants in Siberia flying in gliders and rescuing cranes and tigers.

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