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“Tear Down This Wall”: The Obama “Reset”

Twenty-five years ago [today](#), President Ronald Reagan spoke before the Brandenburg Gate near the Berlin Wall. Reagan pressed the head of the Soviet Union that if he believed in “freedom and peace,” and if he sought “prosperity” for the Soviet people, the one unmistakable sign confirming this would be to tear down the wall.

President Obama made similar connections in his [speech](#) accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, saying support for human rights was critical to peace, while emphasizing that America’s interests are not served “by the denial of human aspirations.” Despite the president’s “reset,” Russia remains a systematic oppressor of human rights both within and beyond its borders.

Human Rights Violations in Russia

The most recent State Department [report](#) on human rights in Russia observes the following:

- “The government placed restrictions on freedom of movement within the country and on migration.”
- The December 2011 parliamentary elections were described as “marked by government interference, manipulation, [and] electoral irregularities.”
- “Individuals who threatened powerful state or business interests were subjected to political prosecution.”
- “Attacks on and killings of journalists and activists occurred ... During the December Duma elections, Web sites that published reports of electoral fraud were disabled.”
- “There were numerous, credible reports that law enforcement personnel engaged in torture, abuse, and violence to coerce confessions from suspects.”
- “The government used direct ownership, or ownership by large private companies with government links, to control or influence major national media and regional media outlets.”
- Official corruption “was a pervasive problem ... and officials often engaged in corrupt practices with impunity.”

Protecting Bad Actors

The Russian government's oppression of human rights is not limited to its borders. It exports oppression elsewhere by serving as the protector of human rights violators such as Syria, Iran, and North Korea.

- **Syria:** Secretary of State Clinton [confirmed](#) earlier this month that there remains “a very consistent arms trade ... coming from Russia to Syria,” and that this “continuing supply of arms from Russia has strengthened the Assad regime.”
 - In addition to arming the Syrian regime, Russia provides diplomatic protection. In a matter of four months, Russia vetoed two U.N. Security Council resolutions regarding the Syrian government's forcible repression of its citizens' universal freedoms. Neither contained sanctions on Syria because Russia “[vastly watered-down](#)” the resolutions before vetoing them.
- **Iran:** Russia similarly protects Iran. It [voted](#) against a U.N. General Assembly resolution expressing concern over Iran's failure to investigate properly the alleged human rights abuses following the June 2009 presidential elections.
 - As Senator McCain has [pointed out](#) on many occasions, the citizens of Iran protested the fraud and electoral abuses perpetrated by the Iranian government, asking in the streets, “Obama, Obama, are you with us or are you with them?” President Obama did not answer, “he did not want to jeopardize his chances to negotiate with the Islamic government of Iran,” as Senator McCain explained.
- **North Korea:** Russia has voted against a [resolution](#) expressing concern about “the persistence of continuing reports of systematic, widespread and grave violations of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights” in North Korea.

Still Waiting for Russian Cooperation

Secretary of State Clinton [promised](#) arms control cooperation like “a ratified New START Treaty would also continue our progress toward broader U.S.-Russian cooperation.” At the swearing-in ceremony for the new U.S. Ambassador to Russia in the beginning of this year, she [said](#) Russia “is intimately involved with some of our most important diplomatic challenges.” That cooperation on our most important diplomatic challenges has not manifested itself.

Twenty-five years ago President Reagan spoke with moral clarity challenging the very existence of a system that would repress its people so systematically. To be sure, President Obama does not face a threat of that magnitude with the Russian government today; but he still praises a relationship with a government that denies freedoms at home and abroad and actively works against U.S. interests. Instead of challenging that government, President Obama wants to have “flexibility” to work with it following this fall's election.