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MINNPOST

Biden travels, talks and ticks off the Russians

By Nick Hayes | 07/27/09



REUTERS/David Mdzinarishvili

Vice President Joe Biden reviewing a honor guard during a welcoming ceremony in Tbilisi last week. Later, Biden said United States "stands with" Georgia a year after war with Russia.

Just when we were worried that no one would be keeping their eyes on Russia once Sarah Palin left the governor's office in Alaska, Vice President Joe Biden let us know that he was up to the job.

Biden capped off his visit last week to Ukraine and Georgia where his public remarks had already managed to irk the Russians by giving an end of the week interview to the Wall Street Journal in which the vice president seemed intent on talking down to the Russians with a mix of tough love and belittlement.

The interview appeared on the [Wall Street Journal website](#) late Friday evening and was published Saturday. By Saturday evening, the Russian news agency [Interfax](#) was issuing statements to the press by Russian officials showing wounded feelings and complaining that they were "perplexed" by Biden's remarks. They asked: Who's in charge of U.S. policy toward Russia? President Obama, who only two weeks earlier had promised in Moscow to "re-start" U.S.-Russian relations, or his "second in command" who had obviously pressed a few of the Kremlin's hot buttons?

Vice presidents have a way of doing this. It seemed fitting that Biden's visit to the former USSR



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coincided with the 50th anniversary of then-Vice President Richard Nixon's notorious "kitchen debate" in Moscow with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. For several years, President Eisenhower had moved in the direction of "peaceful co-existence" with the Russians when in 1959 his vice president met Khrushchev at a U.S. trade exhibition in Moscow and turned an argument about American kitchen appliances into a well-publicized opportunity to talk tough with his Russian host.



Video of Vice President Richard Nixon escorting Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev through the 1959 U.S. Fair in Moscow.

The 're-start' button

Earlier this July, Obama had gone to Moscow turning his metaphor of pressing the "re-start" button into at least a few tangible results. By the time Biden wrapped his visit up with the interview in the Wall Street Journal, he seemed to have pushed the erase button on the last three weeks of U.S.-Russian diplomacy.

It wasn't so much what the vice president said but the way in which he said it. His tone was patronizing. His interview contained the following exercise in undiplomatic language. The Russians, he said, "have a shrinking population, they have a withering economy, they have a banking sector and structure that is not likely to be able to withstand the next 15 years, they're in a situation where the world is changing before them and they're clinging to something in the past that is not sustainable."

Although Russians are perhaps the most incurably nostalgic people on earth, they get defensive when told their way of life and institutions are fossils from the past.

The Kremlin has its own thoughts about just who is trying to apply old solutions to new problems.

Take the most vexing issue in U.S.-Russian relations today: the eastward expansion of NATO into Ukraine and Georgia. Biden caricatured the Russian resistance to this proposal as a residue of 19th century thinking. The Kremlin has a point that the eastward march of NATO would apply an old remedy from the Cold War to the more complex malady of poorly drawn borders and festering nationalist conflict that came with the break-up of the Soviet Union.

In Moscow's eyes, another initiative — the proposed Missile Defense Shield in the Czech Republic and Poland — would let an old concept that never worked undermine the basis for arms control treaties that did work.

Politics and policy

Have we sent two contradictory messages to Moscow this summer? I think not. First of all, the Obama administration can diffuse the reaction to Biden's remarks. The State Department is already reminding the press that the vice president can be a bit voluble and has made more than a few gaffes before. You can imagine DOS heads shaking with bemused smiles and saying, "Oh, you know, our Joe."

Secondly, and more to the point, I suspect the Obama administration has taken a chapter from the Russian playbook of Bush 41 in which politics often appeared to contradict policy. He back-channeled private messages to Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev to make sure he understood the difference. Criticism of the Russians before American domestic audiences, the Russian president was told, did not mean that the U.S. president was retreating from their shared diplomatic goals.

Obama left Moscow with agreements on the transport across Russian airspace of U.S. military supplies and personnel to support the war in Afghanistan, renegotiation of the START Treaty with larger cuts in the nuclear arsenals of each, and cooperation on the issues of the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons in Iran and North Korea. He probably also let the Kremlin know either explicitly or implicitly that it would probably not like what Biden would say in his forthcoming trip to Ukraine and Georgia.

The Kremlin is astute enough to appreciate that mutual benefits of the agreements in hand with Obama far outweigh the fears of NATO encirclement or hostile Missile Defense Shields that lie far off in the political bushes of the future. It's not likely that Moscow will see NATO troops moving against Russia or an operative hostile missile shield aimed at Russia any sooner than Sarah Palin will spot the

Russians attacking Alaska.

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