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DOI:

[10.1080/23340460.2020.1734959](https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2020.1734959)

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Citation for published version (APA):

Deyermond, R. (2020). "You think our country's so innocent?" The Trump administration's policy on democratic practices in Russia and the challenge to US identity. *Global Affairs*, 6(1), 105-120.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2020.1734959>

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‘You think our country’s so innocent?’ The Trump administration’s policy on democratic practices in Russia and the challenge to US identity

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Abstract

Adopting a constructivist approach to foreign policy analysis, this article considers the Trump administration's responses to the conduct of Russian elections, the treatment of leading Russian opposition figures, and President Trump's statements about the US-Russia relationship. It argues that there has been a retreat from previous administrations' policy, avoiding explicit criticism of the Russian government where possible, and erasing the normative difference between Russia and the US which has been central to US governmental discourse on Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This radical change has implications that extend beyond the bilateral relationship, undermining US identity as constituted through foreign policy by challenging the national narrative that links foreign policy and the concept of American exceptionalism. In particular, the US's identity as the global exemplar and champion of democracy is currently being eroded by the discursive practices of the Trump administration in relation to Russia. Although clear conclusions about this aspect of the Trump administration's foreign policy are rendered problematic by the multiple, conflicting voices inside the Trump presidency on the issue, this uncertainty itself represents a radical change from the discursive positions of previous administrations, threatening the national narrative about the US's normative superiority and exemplary status.

Keywords:

US foreign policy, Russia, Trump administration, constructivism, narrative, democracy, American exceptionalism

Introduction

Since the start of the Trump presidency, few areas of US foreign policy have attracted as much popular attention as US-Russia relations. Both the administration's perceived disregard for established US foreign policy norms and the uncertainty concerning the nature of President Trump's relationship to the Russian government have contributed to a perception that the bilateral relationship has diverged in fundamental ways from the practices and principles of previous administrations' policies towards Russia.

Adopting a constructivist approach to foreign policy analysis, this article considers the Trump administration's policy towards two issues of anti-democratic practice in Russia – the conduct of Russian elections and the treatment of leading opposition figures – in the context of statements by President Trump himself on the US's relationship to Russia. It argues that in both of these areas there has been a retreat from the policy of previous administrations, avoiding explicit criticism of the Russian government on these issues where possible, and erasing the normative difference between Russia and the US which was central to US governmental discourse on Russia during the George W. Bush and Obama presidencies.

It argues that this changing approach to Russia by the Trump administration has implications that extend beyond the bilateral relationship, undermining key aspects of the US's foreign policy identity by challenging the national narrative that links foreign policy and the concept of American exceptionalism. In particular, it argues that the US's identity as the global exemplar and champion of democracy – something that has been critical to the constitution of US foreign policy identity as a whole – is currently being eroded by the discursive practices of the Trump administration in relation to Russia. This has manifested itself in two ways in particular: through silence (an unwillingness or failure to discuss aspects of Russian electoral and human rights practices that have previously been the focus of US governmental discussion and reprimand) and in the rejection by President Trump of previously dominant ideas

concerning the normative superiority of US political practices to those of Russia. It suggests that this is particularly significant for US identity as guardian of democratic values because that identity has been constituted in relation to Russia in significant ways since the collapse of the USSR.

The article also suggests, however, that clear conclusions about this aspect of the Trump administration's foreign policy are rendered problematic by the multiple, conflicting voices inside the Trump presidency. White House officials, State Department officials, and Trump himself adopt significantly different positions on issues relating to normative matters and Russia and the hierarchy of these voices is not always clear. It argues, however, that this uncertainty itself represents a radical change from the discursive positions of previous administrations and thus challenges the national narrative about the normative superiority and exemplary status of the US.

Using discourse analysis, the Trump administration position(s) on democracy in, and normative identity in relation to, Russia is traced by an examination of texts produced by the Trump administration White House and State Department, as made available through their official websites. It is based specifically on the reading of all White House and State Department press releases and press conference transcripts containing the terms 'Russia' or 'Putin'. Reading these documents in their entirety and in chronological order has meant that public statements by the Trump administration about democratic practices in Russia have been read in the broader discursive context in which they are situated, rather than analysed in isolation from them. They have also been compared with statements on the same theme by previous administrations, using documents (press conference and speech transcripts, press releases, and other papers) taken from the physical and digital presidential archives of George HW Bush and Bill Clinton, and the archived White House websites of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Relevant policy documents, including the National Security Strategy (NSS)

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and the State Department's annual human rights report, have also been examined. In addition, Trump's views have also been explored through pre-presidency press interviews, transcripts of the 2016 presidential debates, and his twitter account.

US identity, national narratives, democracy, and Russia

Constructivist approaches to foreign policy analysis start from the position that identity constitution is central to any understanding of foreign policy. For constructivists, identity is constituted through interaction with, and in relation to, others. As scholars from a range of theoretical positions have argued (for example, Somers, 1994; Browning, 2008; Berenskoetter, 2014; Subotić, 2016), it is also constituted through the construction of narratives about the self, narratives in which the story of self-identity is shaped by representations of difference from the other. Theorists concerned with the function of identity in foreign policy, particularly the role of narratives of the self as constitutive of identity, contend that, as Browning (2008, p.11) notes, the 'process of narrating a constitutive story that differentiates the self from others is an essential aspect of foreign policy'. As Subotić shows, 'autobiographical identity narratives' perform critical functions for states, enabling them to 'make sense of their own behaviour in the international system, to give their actions meaning' (Subotić, 2016, p.614), but also demarcating the limits of acceptable practice by political actors (2016, p. 613). Domestically, as Berenskoetter argues:

The political potency of a national biography lies in its function to provide a community with a basic discourse, or master narrative, which guides and legitimizes courses of action and provides ontological security (Berenskoetter, 2014, p. 279)

Although identity construction is a continuous process deriving from interactions with and changing understandings about other actors, states' national narratives emphasise elements of continuity: seemingly fixed aspects of state identity that provide coherence to that identity and

thus ontological security. Continuity does not preclude change, however – as both Subotić and Berenskoetter note, change can be accommodated within national narratives provided that it is compatible with the core features of that narrative. Change becomes problematic for the continued existence of the narrative when ‘policy change undermines the foundational narrative’ (Subotić, 2016, p. 611) or where the degree of contestation over representation by political actors exceeds the limits that allow a stable narrative to be maintained (Berenskoetter, 2014, pp. 279-80).

If issues of identity constitution are central to understanding the foreign policy of all states, and if identity constitution and foreign policy are bound together in the production and reproduction of autobiographical narratives, they have been understood to be most obviously critical for the US which, as Campbell famously argued, is ‘peculiarly dependent upon representational practices for its being’ (Campbell, 1992, p.105) and for which ‘the practices of foreign policy have been integral to the (re)production of American identity’ (Campbell, 1992, p.143). As scholars in a variety of disciplinary and theoretical fields have noted (for example, Campbell, 1992; Lipset, 1997; Lieven, 2004), the US as a political entity has been understood to be constituted by ideas about political and social values, rather than by the autochthonous presence within its geographic boundaries of an ethnic group identified as ‘Americians’. US identity has been – and, importantly, has traditionally been represented in its dominant national discourse as being – constituted by shared ideas about its political and social character, including the ways in which that character inform relations with the rest of world through foreign policy. A central component of that identity has been the idea of democracy and the US’s particular role in its framing and its global development.

The concept of democracy, and the US's role as its global exemplar and promoter, has been central to US identity and thus to its foreign policy discourse because it is a critical element of the pre-eminent strand of US autobiographical narrative, American exceptionalism (on American exceptionalism see, for example, Huntington, 1981; Shafer, 1991; Lipset, 1997; Hodgson, 2009; Lieven 2004; Restad, 2015). Grounded in the twin national mythologies of Puritan foundation and the American Revolution, exceptionalism has historically framed US identity as involving a unique set of ethical obligations to the world that merge divinely-ordained mission with Enlightenment principles concerning political organisation. Domestic debates about foreign policy and official US foreign policy discourse before the Trump presidency were characterised by political elite consensus about the US's exceptionalist identity. As Restad (2015) shows, the critical role performed by exceptionalism in the constitution of American identity has meant that it has been a constant and central feature of US foreign policy. Its exemplary and missionary aspects have, at different times, been weighted differently in the story that the US has told itself and others about its relationship to other states and societies, but the idea has remained fundamental to US foreign policy discourse, shaping both debates about the conduct of relations with the world outside its borders and discourse about practices in other states.

For more than a century, a commitment to, and special responsibility for, the advancement of democracy has been a core element of the exceptionalist narrative as reflected in US foreign policy discourse. Democracy is one of the principles most emphasised in political elite and popular discourse relating to American exceptionalism; the US is popularly characterised as 'the world's greatest democracy' and the first modern democratic state, and the strength of this identification of democracy with the US has meant that it has been a central concept for US foreign policy. As with exceptionalism more broadly, its exemplary and missionary aspects have both been important elements in foreign policy

identity – the US has been understood to represent the democratic ideal (even if imperfect) which other societies should emulate and, in some periods, the US has been understood to have a critical, active role in advancing the global spread of democracy through policies of democracy promotion (Smith, 2012; Bouchet, 2013; Cox, Lynch, and Bouchet, 2013).

The idea that the US bears a special responsibility for democracy (however that responsibility is understood) has thus formed a central aspect of its identity as a foreign policy actor. As a result, between the end of the Cold War and the start of the Trump presidency this was reflected in the speeches, interviews, and policy documents of successive administrations, and articulated at all levels of both State Department and White House, including the president.

Democracy in Russia and US foreign policy discourse

Since the collapse of the USSR, the status of democracy and human rights in Russia has been one of the dominant elements of US discourse about the bilateral US-Russia relationship. In the early post-Soviet period, ideas about Russia's democratic transition informed US policy and the extent and character of engagement with Russian political elites, above all the Russian president. Since the beginning of the century, the Russian governmental turn towards authoritarianism has been a central issue in the decline of the US-Russia relationship.

The importance of Russian democratic transition both for the global advance of democracy and for international stability was emphasised by both presidential administrations and prominent scholars; Tony Smith, for example, described the success of Russian democratisation in the 1990s as equally important for world peace as German democratisation after World War II (Smith, 2012, p. 331). As the successor state of the USSR, the US's principal hostile other in the Cold War, the issue of Russian democratisation was intimately linked to the post-Cold War configuration of the US's identity as global defender and promoter of liberal norms and to the

framing of the US's own political identity as exemplary democratic state. As a result, as Foglesong (2007) notes, political change in Russia was frequently understood as a reflection of the US's political values and institutions.

During the 1990s, the George H.W. Bush and Clinton administrations focused on the process of post-Soviet democratisation, encouraging the further development of what they presented as an already-democratising Russia. Particularly in the period between the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and the 1996 Russian presidential election, Russia was represented as a state in transition to a consolidated democracy, on the path to a developed civil society, culture of respect for human rights, and a political system supported by a working constitution and the rule of law. Some speeches and press comments by both presidents and members of their administrations went even further, framing developments in Russia as repetitions of the US's post-revolutionary experience as Clinton's Russia advisor Strobe Talbott recalled (Talbott, 2002, p. 150), and as Clinton himself notoriously did when he compared Boris Yeltsin's actions in Chechnya to Abraham Lincoln's actions to prevent the secession of the Confederacy (Clinton Presidential Library, 1996).

After the election of Vladimir Putin in 2000, as the Russian political system moved towards a more authoritarian model, administration approaches to the issue became more complex. Both the need to maintain functioning bilateral relations with Russia to facilitate interaction on arms control and other long-term international security issues, and the immediate demands of, respectively, the 'Global War and Terror' and the 'reset' led George W. Bush and Obama to moderate, though not eliminate, criticism of the Russian government's democracy and human rights practices in their first years in office (Stent, 2014, pp. 78-79; Deyermond, 2013; Deyermond, 2015). By the second term of both presidencies, however, further restrictions on Russian civil society, the treatment of opposition figures, and the conduct of Russian presidential and parliamentary elections led the administrations to adopt a more publicly

critical position. The annual State Department Human Rights Report provided detailed analysis of Russia's democratic and human rights failings, and the language of comments by State Department officials on issues such as the conduct of elections and the treatment of opposition figures was explicit in its criticism of Russian governmental practices. Thus, by the time of the 2016 presidential election, every US presidential administration since the collapse of the USSR had developed unambiguous public positions on the critical importance of consolidating or restoring democracy and respect for human rights in Russia. Both the State Department and the White House of Obama's second term had engaged in clear and increasingly strong criticism of the Russian government's authoritarianism.

The public statements of the Trump administration have demonstrated a dramatic change in approach to normative matters in relation to Russia, including questions of democracy and human rights. This change has been demonstrated by absence; discussion of the Russian government's authoritarianism has largely disappeared from White House and State Department comments on Russia. Where it does occur, criticism of Russia on these issues is often made by officials or documents of limited policy significance; senior members of the administration have often remained silent.

The Trump administration: Russian democracy and elections

Russian parliamentary and presidential elections in the decade before the start of the Trump presidency routinely attracted criticism from the US government for their undemocratic character. Policy documents, officials, and senior political figures criticised the conduct of Russian elections and the status of Russian democracy. In 2008 the State Department was critical of the 2008 Russian presidential election which, its press spokesperson said, reinforced concerns 'about democracy and the progress of democracy in Russia' (State Department,

2008). Such concerns were evident in, for example, the 2006 National Security Strategy (NSS); reflecting the longstanding position that the US had a responsibility to encourage democracy in Russia and to discipline Russia when it failed to move towards greater democracy, it asserted that:

We must encourage Russia to respect the values of freedom and democracy [...] Strengthening our relationship will depend on the policies, foreign and domestic, that Russia adopts. Recent trends regrettably point toward a diminishing commitment to democratic freedoms and institutions. We will work to try to persuade the Russian Government to move forward, not backward, along freedom's path. (White House, 2006)

Although the Obama administration reduced the emphasis on the issue in its interactions with Russia during the 'reset' period of 2009-2010, concern about Russian democratic failings remained a feature of US policy towards Russia. Critical statements on the subject were made by the White House as well as the State Department, and meetings with Russian civil society leaders were held by the President, Vice President, and Secretary of State (McFaul 2018, p.117). Significantly, public criticism was made by senior administration figures as well as officials. In 2011, for example, Vice President Biden published an op-ed attacking the Russian government's 'backsliding on democracy' and emphasising the need for the Obama administration to speak out 'in defence of universal values' in interactions with it (Biden, 2011). In December 2011, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described Russian parliamentary elections as 'neither free nor fair' and as characterised by 'electoral fraud and manipulation' (State Department, 2011).

The Trump administration's reaction to the 2018 presidential elections in Russia represented a significant change from this approach. This was most clearly evident in the response of the

White House. Responding to questions referencing Senator John McCain's statement that Trump's congratulation of Putin on the election outcome 'insulted every Russian citizen who was denied the right to vote in a free and fair election', the White House press secretary avoided engaging with the suggestion that Putin had won a 'sham election' and instead asserted that:

We disagree with the fact that we shouldn't have conversations with Russia. There are important topics that we should be able to discuss. [...] At the same time, we've been very clear in the actions that we've taken that we're going to be tough on Russia.

When pressed on the question of whether the White House considered the Russian elections to be free and fair, the press secretary responded:

We don't get to dictate how other countries operate. What we do know is that Putin has been elected in their country, and that's not something that we can dictate to them how they operate. We can only focus on the freeness and the fairness of our elections. (White House, 2018b)

This position represented a radical departure from that of all previous post-Cold War administrations; the suggestion that the US could only be concerned with its own democratic process and had no right to comment on democratic failings in Russia attacks the assumptions about the US's responsibilities in relation to the global status of democracy that have been central to US post-Cold War identity.

The State Department response to the 2018 Russian elections initially appeared to conform to previous administration positions, acknowledging reports that 'some people were paid to turn out to vote. We've seen that opposition leaders have been intimidated, jailed, and other things of the sort' (State Department, 2018b). This critical language was reflected in the later human rights report, which provided a detailed assessment of the democratic failings of the election

(State Department 2019b, pp. 37-40). This more traditional position was, however, complicated by the necessity to reconcile it with the White House official's comments. Pressed by journalists on the difference between the two statements, the spokesperson moved towards the instrumental aspects of the White House response, asserting that:

Whether folks like it or not, we have a relationship with the Russian government. That is just a part of the world. That is just simply a reality. [...] We call out Russia when they are responsible for an action and we will not hesitate to do so. But the reality is that we are two nuclear powers, two superpowers in this world, and we still have to be able to pick up the phone and have a dialogue. (State Department, 2018b)

Thus, while the position of the White House on the issue of the Russian election represented a rejection of national narratives about the US as global authority on questions of democracy, the State Department was ambiguous. This ambiguity itself, however, represents a significant change in US government discourse on the issue of democracy in Russia.

Russian opposition figures

For previous administrations and members of Congress, one of the most significant areas of Russian governmental failure on democratic and human rights issues has been the harassment and detention of critics of the Putin administration and particularly of prominent political opposition figures. Three cases have attracted particular attention in US media and in Congress in the last five years: the 2015 murder of Boris Nemtsov, the poisoning of Vladimir Kara-Murza in 2015 and 2017, and the repeated detention of Alexei Navalny, perhaps the most prominent opposition figure in contemporary Russia.

The multiple arrests of Navalny and the ban on his candidacy in the 2018 Russian presidential elections, is one of the most widely reported issues relating to democracy and contemporary Russia, covered by the spectrum of news media including Fox News (Diaz, 2017) and the *New York Times* (Pigman, 2018). Despite this, the State Department website has only nine documents in which Navalny's name appears; six of these references appear in the congressionally mandated human rights report, and two more are identical, brief references in two versions of the same 'investment climate report'. Only one document is a response to current events: a short statement in March 2017 condemning the arrest of Navalny and others as 'an affront to core democratic values'(State Department, 2017). No document on the State Department website makes any reference to the prevention of Navalny from running as a candidate in the 2018 presidential elections in late 2017; his arrest in January 2018; his arrest in July 2019; or his alleged poisoning in July 2019. In comparison, the State Department archive website for the Obama administration includes condemning the detention of Navalny in 2012, 2013, and 2014, and a reference to his arrest in a speech on internet freedom by Hillary Clinton in December 2011 (State Department, 2009-17).

Another opposition figure, Vladimir Kara-Murza, has attracted even less attention. In May 2015, Kara-Murza was hospitalised in what was widely characterised as a poisoning incident. The issue was discussed at successive Obama administration State Department press briefings and detailed in the 2015 Human Rights Report (State Department, 2016b) In February 2017, Kara-Murza was hospitalised in what was reported to be a second poisoning incident. The case was covered extensively by the news media and raised in both houses of Congress, by both Democrats and Republicans, but the State Department made no comment on the incident at the time or at any subsequent point.

The murder of Boris Nemtsov occurred in 2015, but has remained a prominent issue relating to Russia for US media and in Congress. It was the focus of State Department comment on multiple occasions during the Obama administration and was the subject of a statement by then-Secretary John Kerry (State Department, 2015). The Trump administration State Department has appeared more willing to comment on Nemtsov's death and to connect it to wider human rights failings in Russia than it has in other cases. This has been evident in, for example, the annual statement released on the anniversary of his death; the 2019 statement called on the Russian government to 'allow journalists, civil society activists, and political opposition members to exercise their universal human rights of freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly' (State Department, 2019a). In 2018, the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs spoke at the dedication of Boris Nemtsov Plaza outside the Russian embassy in Washington, describing Nemstov as:

A Russian patriot. His life and work were devoted to giving all Russians the just and accountable government to which men and women across the world aspire. He understood that the Russian nation can achieve greatness only through respecting the fundamental rights, of which they have so often been deprived in the past and continue to be deprived of today (State Department, 2018a).

In each of these three cases, however, the White House appears to have avoided engagement or comment. The only White House document referencing Boris Nemtsov is one in which the press secretary refused to discuss whether the White House supported the creation of Boris Nemtsov Plaza (White House 2017h). In 2015, in contrast, the White House responded to his murder by releasing a statement by President Obama describing Nemtsov as 'a tireless advocate for his country, seeking for his fellow Russian citizens the rights to which all people

are entitled' and spoke about his meeting with, and personal admiration for, him (Obama White House, 2015).

The Trump White House has also made no comment on Kara-Murza's poisoning and it has refused to publicly discuss engaging with him. During a March 2017 visit to Washington, Kara-Murza appealed to then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to meet Russian civil society figures and offered to meet with administration members. White House officials refused to engage with the issue when asked by the press, other than to indicate that no meeting was planned (White House, 2017a); they also refused to discuss the possibility of a meeting between Tillerson and Navalny, Khodorkovsky, or other civil society figures (White House, 2017b). On two later occasions when asked about the treatment of Navalny by the Russian government, the press secretary replied simply that they would have to 'get back to' the questioner on the issue (White House, 2017d; White House, 2018a).

Following the arrest of a large number of protesters, including Navalny, after the Russian presidential election in March 2018, the White House press secretary was asked what message the president had for Putin on the issue; he replied:

First, the President congratulates him and looks forward to a time when we can hopefully have a good relationship with Russia. However, the United States believes that everyone has a right to be heard and assemble peacefully (White House, 2018d).

The prioritising of the positive message to Putin and the general statement about peaceful assembly which includes no explicit criticism of the Russian government's actions illustrates the Trump administration's use of rhetorical formulations which avoid direct condemnation of human rights and democracy failings in Russia. It contrasts strikingly with responses by previous administrations to similar events, including previous arrests of Navalny. In July 2013,

for example, the White House press secretary strongly criticised both the case itself and democracy and human rights failings in Russia more widely, stating:

Navalny's harsh prison sentence is the latest example of a disturbing trend of government actions aimed at suppressing dissent and civil society in Russia. The numerous procedural shortcomings in this case also reinforce our broader concerns about rule of law in Russia. [...] We call on the Russian government to cease its campaign of pressure against individuals and groups seeking to expose corruption, and to ensure that the universal human rights and fundamental freedoms of all of its citizens, including the freedoms of speech and assembly, are protected and respected. (Obama White House, 2013)

Given the apparent reluctance of White House officials to comment on issues of democracy and human rights in Russia, it is not surprising that Trump himself has avoided engagement with the subject. In November 2017 Trump was asked whether he felt an obligation to raise the issue of human rights abuses with Putin given that 'in the past, American presidents have felt the obligation to raise [these] issues'. Although his response began with the assertion 'I do', he provided no detail on the topic and then spoke entirely about the need to work cooperatively with Russia, asserting that 'having a good relationship with Russia is a great, great thing' (White House 2017e).

The Russia Human Rights Report

On the question of democracy in Russia, one area of unambiguous continuity with previous administrations has been the annual State Department Human Rights Report. This document is a congressionally mandated report on the condition of human rights in states around the world,

issued annually since the mid-1970s. Although originally created in connection with US aid to other states, no funding-related mechanisms are attached to it, and it is thus seen as an informative document rather than one with a direct role in shaping policy; the effect, if any, on states criticised in the report is understood to derive from the shaming effect of such criticism by the US (Weber, 2019). Both its mandatory character and the weak link to policy may help to explain why the report on human rights in Russia has remained unchanged during the Trump presidency.

Although Trump administration reports on Russia have reproduced the structure and significant sections of text found in Obama administration versions of the report, they have also been shorter, shrinking from seventy to seventy five pages in the Obama period to sixty to sixty five in the Trump administration. Nevertheless, the content of these reports remain detailed and specific on a wide range of democratic failings and human rights abuses, and the reports and official comments on them (State Department, 2018c) are clear in locating the responsibility for these abuses with the Russian government. The reports thus appear to exist in an entirely different political context than the approach to issues of Russian human rights and democracy elsewhere in the administration, including in other areas of State Department practice.

Trump and the US-Russia normative relationship

The absence of an official White House voice on issues relating to democracy and Russia should be understood in the context of Trump's remarks on Russia more broadly. Public differences of emphasis between branches of the executive on issues have been features of previous administrations – for example, the differences within the Clinton administration over the issue of NATO expansion (Goldgeier, 1998) – but the Trump administration is distinctive

for the public evidence of its differences on matters of substance. In particular, and unusually, the worldview of the president sometimes appears to be in conflict with the foreign policy positions of sections of his own administration.

If the White House and State Department of the Trump presidency have reduced the focus on democracy and human rights in Russia, Trump himself has done something different – his comments on the Russian government in general and Putin in particular suggest normative sympathy or convergence. This is not a convergence resulting from the increasing proximity of Russian governmental practices to American political values and experience (as noted above, an assumption made by US presidents in the 1990s) but from an erasure of normative difference between Russia as an authoritarian state and the US, and from a rejection of the central national narrative of American exceptionalism (Wertheim, 2018).

Beyond a rejection of public engagement with the issue of anti-democratic practices in Russia, there are two discursive moves in particular by which Trump demonstrates his rejection of ideas concerning American normative superiority in relation to Russia. The first and most significant of these is an erasure of any normative distinction in relation to the Russian government. This position has been evident since early in the 2016 presidential election campaign. Asked in 2015 for his view about the murder of Russian journalists who had criticised Putin, Trump replied that ‘he’s running his country, and at least he’s a leader, you know unlike what we have in this country’; when challenged, he asserted that ‘our country does plenty of killing also’ (Gass, 2018). Trump repeated this statement of equivalence shortly after his inauguration when, responding to an interviewer’s statement that Putin is ‘a killer’, he asserted that ‘there are a lot of killers. You think our country’s so innocent?’ (Tatum, 2017). The media and Congressional responses to this position indicated how far it was located outside

US mainstream positions on the US-Russia relationship; Senator John McCain, a frequent critic of Russia asserted that:

There [is] no moral equivalence between the United States and Putin's Russia. I repeat: There is no moral equivalence between that butcher and thug and KGB colonel and the United States of America, the country that Ronald Reagan used to call a shining city on a hill. (McCain, 2017)

Elsewhere, Trump has drawn an equivalence between Russia and the US on the issue of the deterioration of the bilateral relationship, widely understood in the US political elite to be a consequence of Russian aggression and authoritarianism. Asked whether he held Russia responsible for the decline in US-Russia relations, Trump replied, 'I hold both countries responsible. I think that the United States has been foolish. I think we've all been foolish. [...] And I think we're all to blame' (White House, 2018e).

The second discursive move used by Trump that elides or erases the issue of normative difference between the US and Russia is to stress the desirability of improved relations with Russia, irrespective of the context of the domestic or international actions of the Russian government. Trump has repeatedly emphasised this position in his tweets; he has claimed, for example, that 'having a good relationship with Russia is a good thing not a bad thing. Only 'stupid' people or fools would think that it is bad!' (Trump, 2017a) and that 'things will work out fine between the USA and Russia. At the right time everyone will come to their senses & there will be lasting peace!' (Trump, 2017b). In this context, he has attacked media criticism of his interactions with Putin, tweeting after the July 2018 summit meeting, for example, that 'I had a GREAT meeting with Putin and the Fake News used every bit of their energy to try and disparage it. So bad for our country!' (Trump, 2018b) and that 'I got severely criticized by the Fake News Media for being too nice to President Putin. In the Old Days they would call it

Diplomacy' (Trump, 2018a). In May 2019 he tweeted, 'very good call yesterday with President Putin of Russia. Tremendous potential for a good/great relationship with Russia, despite what you read and see in the Fake News Media' (Trump, 2019). Significantly, he has repeated claims about the desirability of a good relationship with Russia in contexts where it appears particularly provocative, including joint press conferences with the Secretary General of NATO (White House, 2017c) and with the presidents of the Baltic States, the governments of which regard Russia as their primary security threat (White House, 2018c).

Trump's voice on the subject of Russia and values has not been entirely consistent, perhaps because of his tendency to deviate from agreed scripts. In cases where this appears to occur on the issue of values, what seems to be the official line is more critical than Trump's unscripted comments, which reflect a view of relations with Russia as positive, or of future positive relations as desirable. In December 2017, for example, Trump spoke at the launch of the new NSS, a document that criticises the Russian government on normative matters, asserting that 'China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests [...] They are determined [...] to control information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence' (White House, 2017f). In his remarks, which begin by restating the NSS formulation but then depart from it, Trump asserts that:

We also face rival powers, Russia and China, that seek to challenge American influence, values, and wealth. We will attempt to build a great partnership with those and other countries, but in a manner that always protects our national interest. As an example, yesterday I received a call from President Putin of Russia thanking our country for the intelligence [...] concerning a major terrorist attack [...] And that's a great thing, and the way it's supposed to work. That is the way it's supposed to work. (White House, 2017g)

These two discursive moves – drawing an equivalence between the conduct of the Russian and US governments, and emphasising the desirability of a good relationship with Russia – have combined cumulatively in Trump’s tweets, interviews, and apparent departures from scripts to erase the assumption of normative superiority by the US government in relation to Russia. As McCain’s remark indicates, this poses a fundamental challenge not only to established understandings in the US political elite about the normative difference between the two governments and political systems, but to the understanding of the US as exemplar state that is central to national narratives about American exceptionalism and thus to US national identity.

Conclusion

In the period since the end of the Cold War, the US’s role as global exemplar and promoter of democracy, an identity embedded in the wider national narrative of American exceptionalism, has formed a central element of its foreign policy discourse. This role assumed a particular importance in the relationship with Russia, successor state to the US’s principal hostile other, the USSR. Between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Obama presidency, administrations represented the US’s relationship to Russia as one shaped by the special responsibility of the US in respect of Russian democracy. Initially understood as a model for a Russian political system in transition to an American-style democracy, the US democratic model became a standard against which to judge, and an image used to admonish, the Russian government’s twenty first century movement towards authoritarianism. Even in periods when the desire for an improved bilateral relationship encouraged limitations on criticism, the national obligation to support democracy led administrations to condemn what were seen to be democratic failings. Importantly, administrations spoke with a consistent voice on the issue

and did so in a wide range of formats including human rights reports, press secretary comments, and in remarks by senior figures including the Secretary of State and the president.

US governmental discourse on the status of democracy in Russia has been transformed by the Trump presidency. The Trump administration has eroded the US's position on democracy and human rights in Russia, reducing public comment by the State Department and moderating much of the content of any comment made, and ceasing comment by the White House almost entirely. This reduction of a public position on the issue has occurred in the context of Trump's own emphasis on normative equivalence between the US and Russia and on the pre-eminent importance of a positive bilateral relationship.

However, interpretation of the Trump administration position on the issue of democracy in Russia is complicated by a lack of clarity and seemingly of coordination. When it speaks, the Trump administration does so with several different voices on the connected issues of Russian anti-democratic practices and the normative position of the US in relation to Russia. The approach of White House officials – suggesting, for example, that ‘we don't get to dictate’ on the issue of Russian electoral practices – challenges the foreign policy narrative of all US administrations since the end of the Cold War; the silence on the treatment of opposition figures represents the same challenge. In contrast, State Department officials have been more vocal and more critical on these issues, though they have appeared concerned at points to reconcile their own position with that of the White House. The president himself has avoided any **comment on issue** of democracy in Russia, instead emphasising the normative equivalence of the US and Russia and the importance of good bilateral relations. At the same time, however, the State Department's Human Rights Report retains the highly critical and detailed position on these issues that was evident in reports produced by previous administrations, often utilising the same text and structure. With the exception of temporary corrections where a contradiction has been identified between White House and State Department positions, none of these voices

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has changed over the course of the administration to date and the disconnection between the different positions has remained. This makes it difficult to identify a coherent Trump administration position on the issue of Russia's (anti)democratic practice which is, in itself, a radical departure from previous administrations.

The incoherence of the Trump administration's policy on democracy in Russia and the change of language (or absence of language) on the issue in the White House and State Department constitute a fundamental challenge to the US's post-Cold War identity as global exemplar and defender of democracy. This in turn threatens the stability of the wider national narrative of which this identity is a part: the narrative of American exceptionalism. The Trump administration change of policy in this area thus constitutes the kind of threat to continuity in the US's foundational narrative that, as Subotić (2016) and Berenskoetter (2014) identify, represents a challenge to a state's ontological security. The story that the US has told itself about its exceptional character is ruptured by the discourse of this administration, which assumes both a normative equivalence between the US and Russia and an absence of any particular US responsibility for democratic advancement. If US national identity constitutes and is constituted by US foreign policy, it appears to face a significant threat in the form of the Trump administration's policy towards Russia.

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