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SUBJECT: POLITICAL OPPOSITION IN RUSSIA FOCUSED ON
PREVENTING PUTIN RETURN

Classified By: Ambassador John Beyrle for Reasons 1.4(b,d)

1. (C) Summary: Leaders of the political opposition in Moscow discussed Russia's political future and the role of the United States in it with NSC Senior Director for Russia Michael McFaul. Opposition leaders believe that increased political freedom and serious measures to combat corruption can only be pursued if Vladimir Putin is prevented from winning back the Russian presidency in 2012. They also think that, with civil society ostensibly "asleep" for the foreseeable future, only a major national emergency has the potential to destabilize the current regime in the short-term. End Summary.

2. (C) On January 14, National Security Council Senior Director for Russia Michael McFaul met with Boris Nemtsov and

Vladimir Milov of the Solidarity Movement, Grigoriy Bovt of the political party Right Cause, and Vladimir Ryzhkov, former head of the now defunct Russia's Republican Party and professor at Moscow's Higher School of Economics. All four leaders view Barack Obama as a highly pragmatic president focused on external cooperation with Russia, but supposedly not willing to pressure the Russian government for greater political freedom. President Medvedev is not seen as a viable alternative to Prime Minister Putin, who they believe will likely retake the Presidency in 2012. This, according to them, will ensure that a corrupt and unresponsive government continues to run Russia. They agreed that the aim of the political opposition over the next two years should be to prevent the return of Putin to the presidency. According to them, however, given Putin's control over society only an emergency situation could bring about his fall from grace.

3. (C) Bovt argued that civil society was presently sleeping, and is unlikely to be drawn to active opposition of the current regime through any political process. He compared Putin's government to that of the Soviet Union, though

Ryzhkov clarified that today Russians enjoy the freedom to a personal life and international travel as long as they refrain from criticism of the government. The majority of Russia's citizens, according to him, appear satisfied with the arrangement. Nemtsov added that the regime's weakness stems from societal problems that it refuses to address -- chief among them corruption. The group agreed that such corruption, which prevents the modernization of the country, leads to the theft of billions of dollars budgeted for social services and causes mounting deaths as infrastructure fails spectacularly across the country. The growing potential for large-scale emergency situations, according to them, is the only real threat of instability to the regime.

4. (C) The Opposition figures claimed that, to further improve relations between Russia and the U.S., the Obama administration has ostensibly refrained from vocal support for democratic reform. While this strategy was showing pragmatic results in the short term, they argued, Putin's return to the Presidency would only lead to a deterioration of relations with the United States. (NOTE: During the July 2009 summit in Moscow, the President met with a broad array of opposition, including those considered "outside the system" to the great irritation of the Russian Presidential Administration. END NOTE) McFaul opined that "de-Putinization" must come from within Russia, from a focus on civil education to broaden demands within society for increased freedom. Though the President may not be as vocal about his support for civil society within Russia as opposition members in Russia might prefer, McFaul made clear to this group, all of whom he has known throughout his career, that the President fully supports democratic reform in Russia. All agreed that dramatic change in the Russian political landscape would not take place in the near future.

5. National Security Council Senior Director for Russia Michael McFaul has cleared on this cable. Beyrle