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War Erupts Inside the Atlantic Council Over Article Questioning Washington's Hostile Approach to Moscow

by [Dave DeCamp](#) Posted on [March 15, 2021](#)

Almost two dozen Atlantic Council fellows denounced a piece that said US policy towards Russia should not be focused on human rights

An article written by two Atlantic Council employees that argues Washington should consider a more realistic approach to Russia [caused quite the stir within the think tank.](#)

The article, [written by Emma Ashford and Mathew Burrows](#), says the US should “avoid a human-rights-first approach to Russia.” The authors suggest that the Biden administration should instead “seek to build a less aspirational policy toward Russia, minimize the use of sanctions, and look for incentives that might induce Moscow to take steps in line with US interests.”

Ashford and Burrows make an argument grounded in reality. The US does not have the power to control what happens inside Russia through sanctions and other unilateral means. The authors are not at all sympathetic to Russian President Vladimir Putin and don't even suggest lifting sanctions that are currently in place. But at the hyper-interventionist Atlantic Council, the idea of taking a less hostile approach to Russia is out of the question to many of its employees.

Twenty-two Atlantic Council fellows [signed a statement denouncing the article](#). “Their article is premised on a false assumption that human rights and national interests are wholly separate,” the statement reads. The statement ignores the fact that Washington cooperates with many countries with questionable human rights records, including some of the Atlantic Council's top donors.

[In the 2019 fiscal year](#), the embassy of the United Arab Emirates contributed over \$1 million to the Atlantic Council. The UAE's state oil company also chipped in over \$250,000 for the think tank. Abu Dhabi is not the only Gulf monarchy that funds the Atlantic Council, the embassy of Bahrain donated somewhere between \$100,000 and \$249,000.

While the Atlantic Council's Gulf funding is rarely questioned, the article from Ashford and Burrows caused some of its employees to complain about recent donations from Charles Koch, who funds the libertarian Cato Institute that advocates for a less interventionist foreign policy.

The Atlantic Council received a \$4.5 million donation over five years from Koch that set up [the New American Engagement Initiative](#) (NAEI) and brought over some experts from the Cato Institute, including Ashford. According to its website, the NAEI aims to question the “prevailing assumptions governing US foreign policy, in particular with respect to the efficacy of military intervention and the lost potential of diplomacy.”

Atlantic Council fellows that signed the statement denouncing Ashford and Burrow's article made it clear that to them, questioning US aggression is akin to spreading Russian propaganda. “The Koch industry operates as a Trojan horse operation trying to destroy good institutions and they have pretty much the same views as the Russians,” one person that signed the letter told *Politico*.

“The general view at the Atlantic Council is to send them back to the Cato Institute where they came from,” another person that signed the statement said. While they all had harsh words for Ashford and Burrow’s article, the people that spoke with *Politico* who signed the statement refused to go on the record and spoke anonymously.

One signatory to the statement did go on record in his criticism and published an article responding to Ashford and Burrow’s argument. Dylan Myles-Primakoff, [who heads the Free Russia Foundation](#) at the Atlantic Council, wrote a piece titled [“America’s Russia policy must not ignore human rights.”](#)

Myles-Primakoff argued that “Russia’s domestic politics and its foreign policy are inextricably linked.” His main example for this was what he described as the 2014 “invasion” of Ukraine that resulted in Russia annexing Crimea. Myles-Primakoff said the annexation of Crimea had a purpose in “Russia’s domestic politics.” He said the Russian government “sought to convince Russians that the inevitable result of a popular reform movement like Ukraine’s Euromaidan was not dignity and democracy, but violence and chaos.”

Myles-Primakoff is right that the Euromaidan protests that led to the ouster of former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych, who was democratically elected, caused Russia to annex Crimea, but he ignores crucial context. First, referendum after referendum shows [the largely ethnic Russian population of Crimea favored joining the Russian Federation](#). This is also demonstrated by the fact that what Myles-Primakoff called an “invasion” was met with no violent resistance.

Second, Myles-Primakoff makes no mention of Washington’s role in the ouster of Yanukovych. The US threw its full weight behind the opposition in Ukraine during demonstrations in 2013 and 2014, an opposition that [even had a neo-nazi element](#). A few weeks before Yanukovych was forced out, a recording of a [phone call](#) between then-US Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt and Victoria Nuland, who was working in the State Department at the time, was leaked and [released on YouTube](#). In the now-infamous phone call, Nuland and Pyatt discussed who should replace the government of Yanukovych.

Like the ethnic Russians in Crimea, the ethnic Russians in Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region also rejected the post-coup government in Kyiv, sparking the war that has killed tens of thousands. The context of US involvement in the coup that sparked these events is crucial, especially when discussing what US foreign policy should look like in that part of the world. There’s an argument to be made that neither the annexation of Crimea nor the war in the Donbas would have happened the way it did if not for US intervention.

Myles-Primakoff took issue with Ashford and Burrows pointing out that US-Russia relations began rapidly declining around the 2011 and 2012 protests in Russia. Ashford and Burrows write: “US-Russia relations declined markedly in 2011-12 after then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton voiced support for protests in Moscow.” Myles-Primakoff says this line ignores the context of what was happening in Russia at the time and blames Putin’s decision to run for a third term and alleged fraud in the 2011 parliamentary elections for the damage that was done to the US-Russia relationship at the time.

But Myles-Primakoff again misses the mark with his argument. In 2011, Clinton voiced support for protesters in Russia and voiced concern over claims of fraud in the parliamentary elections. [Putin responded by accusing Clinton of inciting protests](#). “They heard the signal and with the support of the US State Department began active work,” Putin said.

Myles-Primakoff described Putin’s comments as a “wild conspiratorial response.” While Putin may have been overstating it, he had real reasons to fear that the US was funding protesters and opposition groups in Russia. Clinton based her claims of election fraud on a report from an election monitoring organization known as Golos, [which was accusing the Russian](#)

[government of violating election laws](#) before votes were cast in the 2011 parliamentary election.

At the time, Golos was funded by the US government [through the US Agency for International Development \(USAID\)](#). Golos was also receiving money from the National Endowment for Democracy, an organization that presents itself as a private company but is [funded almost entirely by the US government](#).

The US government was also funding political parties inside Russia at the time. “We had been offering political training to every political party in Russia, to Putin’s own party, to the Communists, but also to Putin’s opponents,” [Victoria Nuland told PBS in 2017](#) when discussing the 2011 elections. Although Nuland said the US was training Putin’s United Russia party through the NED and similar organizations, the party had [rejected earlier claims from Nuland that they got funding from USAID](#).

With the US so deeply entrenched in Russia’s politics in 2011, Washington certainly had ways to influence Putin’s opposition, and these facts make the Russian president seem less paranoid than Myles-Primakoff would like readers to believe. Russia’s Central Electoral Commission eventually issued a report on the 2011 elections and found out of the 1686 reports on irregularities they investigated, [11.5 percent were confirmed to be true](#). Only 60 of the complaints were claims that voting results were falsified. In 2012, Putin kicked USAID out of Russia.

Myles-Primakoff also addresses jailed Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny, who Ashford and Burrows described as “an open nationalist who is widely known to agree with Putin on many foreign policy questions; he backed the Russian seizure of Crimea and has made racist and Islamophobic remarks.”

Myles-Primakoff rebuked the claim that Navalny “backed” the annexation of Crimea by using a quote from Navalny in 2014. The opposition figure said, “Crimea was seized with egregious violations of all international regulations.” While this is a real quote from Navalny, Myles-Primakoff presented it out of context. Navalny made the comment while explaining that if he were president of Russia, he would not return Crimea to Ukraine.

[Here’s what Navalny said](#) in October 2014: “Crimea, of course, now de facto belongs to Russia. I think that despite the fact that Crimea was seized with egregious violations of all international regulations, the reality is that Crimea is now part of Russia. Let’s not deceive ourselves. And I would also strongly advise Ukrainians not to deceive themselves.”

Myles-Primakoff did not challenge the assertion that Navalny is a nationalist who has made racist and Islamophobic remarks. Due to past comments Navalny made, Amnesty International revoked his status as a prisoner of conscience, [which is being spun by Western media](#) as the result of a Russian government-backed smear campaign, [but Amnesty denies that claim](#). “Reports that Amnesty’s decision was influenced by the Russian state’s smear campaign against Navalny are untrue,” the rights group said in a statement.

Ashford and Burrows also touch on what is perhaps the most important aspect of the US-Russia relationship: arms control. They argue that focusing on human rights inside Russia interferes with progress on arms control. Myles-Primakoff says this argument is irrelevant because Russia decided to extend New START, the vital nuclear treaty that would have expired in February, amid threats of sanctions from the new Biden administration. But extending New START is the bare minimum Washington and Russia could do.

As the two largest nuclear powers, the US and Russia have an obligation to the world to negotiate new treaties to dismantle their enormous arsenals. With the Biden administration slapping new sanctions on Russia over Navalny, it makes it much harder for Moscow and

Washington to negotiate a new treaty. New START had a built-in five-year extension, so renewing the treaty took little more than a phone call. A brand new treaty would require good faith.

But most funders of the Atlantic Council have no interest in nuclear treaties or easing tensions with Moscow. [The think tank receives contributions from the top US weapons makers](#), including Raytheon, General Atomics, Boeing, Lockheed Martin, and Northrop Grumman. The Atlantic Council is also funded by NATO, an alliance that has an interest in keeping tensions high and presenting Russia's annexation of Crimea as an unprovoked "invasion."

With these facts in mind, it's no surprise that Ashford and Burrows' article caused such a stir within the Atlantic Council. By making such a fuss over a mild criticism of Washington's hostile approach to Russia, the Atlantic Council fellows showed their hand.