

# Suffocation by Embrace The Putin-Bush Alliance and the Cultural Threat to Western Democracy

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In the wake of the heinous terror strikes in the United States, President Vladimir Putin firmly embraced the idea of a counterterrorist alliance led by the United States/NATO and Russia. This was by no means an abrupt shift for him: in less than two years of his rule, Putin had been consistently pursuing wide-ranging security cooperation with dominant Western powers, and the United States in particular. This policy builds on the similar course of Mikhail Gorbachev and most of Boris Yeltsin's presidency. Yet Putin has ventured in this direction far ahead of both of his predecessors, as well as of Russia's liberal and Western-friendly mainstream establishment in general—despite the lack of a reciprocal response on the part of Washington (with the exception of it closing its eyes to antidemocratic developments inside Russia and in the Chechen War—a reward of a dubious value).

The balance sheet of this policy is not encouraging for Russia—at least from the point of view of common sense that guides most outside observers and what remains of Russia's domestic opinion. On the other hand, Putin's policies have produced an unprecedented stream of seemingly good news for the Bush administration and, indeed, U.S. security in these hard times. However, for analysts and experts there is a danger of being swamped by the feel-good attitudes of government bureaucracy. Meanwhile, the longer-term impact and unintended—at least for the United States—consequences of the newly discovered Moscow-Washington friendship for the West are far from as positive as they may seem. To shed some light on this darker scenario, asking what the driving force is behind Putin's breathtaking rapprochement with the United States and NATO is worthwhile: what is it that he expects to gain, or believes to have already gained, as a reward from the Bush administration?

The most obvious of these rewards has already been mentioned: the post September 11 developments in the United States have marginalized all those critical of the Russian government's excesses in Chechnya and its domestic politics in general. Western human rights advocates cannot effectively criticize Russia because it has become such a crucial ally of the West in a Manichean battle against the consummate evil of terrorism, while Russian democrats—whose voices are barely heard anyway—cannot afford to question certain aspects of

Putin's rapprochement with the West for fear of losing their credibility in the West as reformers - and thus becoming even more vulnerable to repression and muzzling at home. Both are now impatiently dismissed as perpetual grumblers. This means a huge political and propagandistic gain for Putin, amounting to international quasi-legitimation of his domestic policies. Or, as a pro-Kremlin observer put it, "Russia's active involvement in the antiterrorist coalition...[has] brought about a striking convergence of the interests of the civilized world...with the personal interests and ambitions of our president."

Moreover, wartime restrictions on freedoms in the United States and their spillover to other western countries have allowed the pro-Kremlin media to recast Russia's domestic "dictatorship of the law" as a norm to which the United States itself is allegedly—and hopefully—converging. General Shamanov, the grim "hero" of the Chechen atrocities, magnified Putin's personal enthusiasm for this situation when he distracted himself from his present gubernatorial duties to note, "We have something to learn from the Americans" as regards the unity between the government and its people. As one of the spokesmen for this variant of the "convergence model," Moscow pundit Alexander Tsytko put it, "The fact that...[the West] now needs to strike a balance between freedom and the need for...safety has prompted it to draw closer to our country...now at last the Americans will begin...to understand that the problems of human life cannot be reduced to...the rights of sexual minorities or the right to participate in presidential elections."

Although Putin's domestic plans of total control over the political landscape had already been overfulfilled before September 11, his foreign policy still has enough room for trying to consolidate and perpetuate the international constellation of forces favorable to his vision of a U.S.-Russian security condominium. As discussed elsewhere (see PONARS Policy Memo No. 147), influential groups within the Russian establishment implicitly conceptualize the state they control as a commercial corporate entity selling "protection" and "conflict mediation," as its main specialty on domestic and foreign political "markets" to the most affluent or strategically important "consumers"—under the new circumstances, the United States and NATO are at the top of the list. Within this mindset, the consolidation of Putin's gains requires maintaining a steady level of western demand for these "services." This, in turn, implies extending ad infinitum the present instability and suspense of international confrontation.

Hence the otherwise seemingly illogical diplomacy of subtly encouraging the hard-line and war-prone groups within Western governments (that are partially overlapping with those who have positioned themselves as the winners of the Cold War). The starkest evidence to date of such an encouragement was Putin's "impromptu" statement in Brussels that virtually absolved the countries of the antiterrorist coalition from responsibility for whatever civilian casualties may occur in the course of their operations. Later, he restated the same point differently, by saying that the desire to avoid civilian casualties actually caused some of the U.S. problems in the Afghan operation (a point that at another level has become a sort of informal wisdom among Russia's intelligence services, whose representatives so often mock the United States in private and informally in the Russian media for their "overvalue" of the cost of human life).

This incitement to the bloodthirsty elements that exist in the West as everywhere else was particularly striking in comparison with Moscow's ostentatious lack of enthusiasm for U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell's coalition-building and diplomatic initiatives to defuse the

confrontational atmospherics, such as his efforts to rely on the Afghan ex-king Mohammad Zahir Shah.

Systematic analysis of Putin and his proxies' actions and statements reveals a pattern of encouragement for the more bellicose forces both in the West and among its rivals at the expense of forces of moderation and tolerance. Consider, for example, Putin's comments to Germany's *Bild*, in which he softly reproached Germany for being content with its "modest position in the world" rather than playing a more active military and security role globally, and spoke condescendingly of those "intellectuals" who keep reminding everyone about Hitler to justify restraint. On another occasion, Putin specially emphasized that the German armed forces' participation in a military action outside of the German territory will "cause no concern at all" on his part.

In light of this not-so-subtle overture to Germany's nostalgic right wing, it is particularly telling that at home the Putin administration has been encouraging and promoting, among others, the Eurasia Movement led by Alexander Dugin. Inspired by old racial theories, the mystical radicalism of the European New Right, and the "clash of civilizations" theory, the leaders of this organization speak of Russia and Germany as innately authoritarian geopolitical allies and guardians of the Eurasian "heartland" against both the inferior nations of the south and the "oceanic powers" (i.e., the United States and Britain) that always try to seduce and corrupt the European continent with their democratic myth. The Kremlin's virtual silence in response to the recent massive violence in Moscow by skinheads who ferociously attacked members of the Afghan émigré community and also ended up killing citizens of India, Armenia, and Tajikistan was all the more troublesome.

This flirtation with the domestic extreme right or, at best, a toleration of it, dovetails with Putin's encouragement of Western hardliners. This mindset and these practices increasingly look like the mirror image of the early Bolshevik ideological operations in the West: while Bolshevik emissaries worked to divide and subvert western societies by radicalizing the Left, Putin and his cohorts may be doing just the same—only this time by coopting and encouraging the right-wing flank of the Western political spectrum. This strategy has been effective; even the Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, constrained as he is supposed to be by his official responsibilities, announced after an encounter with Putin that "Europe should rediscover its Christian roots" in connection with the war against terrorism.

Here we come to the seemingly immaterial but nonetheless quite real political and cultural challenge to the very foundations of the international democratic community—a challenge that is directly linked to the disarming and unnatural friendliness on Putin's part. His interests and policy actions point toward influencing the fundamentals of the Western political order and value system. This may be done by fueling and indefinitely extending the state of conflict and thus spreading the culture of emergency—based on the sense of an ever-present threat that justifies a long-term abandonment of democratic and human rights standards (in accordance with the Russian saying, "There is nothing temporary that with the passage of time would not become permanent"). His ultimate vision of international security appears to be a global technocratic police state.

Meanwhile, as Ekaterina Stepanova noted in a different context (PONARS Policy Memo No. 201), "The world cannot afford its leader, the United States, to become another Israel—a 'fortress state' whose...unilateral counterterrorist measures seem largely irrelevant to the

underlying problems...” To take this comparison a step further, it is worth noting that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict served for many years as a playing ground of sorts for those forces, including Soviet agencies, that thrived on fueling confrontation and emergency culture to increase international demand for their mediation “services.” While in those times Moscow representatives tended to encourage irreconcilable stands on the part of the Arabs, in the 1990s the situation changed in the other direction. Thus, political spokesmen of the large and powerful Russian diaspora in Israel—openly connected with the Moscow establishment—have systematically weighed in in favor of the hard-line and confrontational elements in Israeli politics, thus exacerbating the climate of a “besieged fortress.” The Kremlin recently felt markedly more at ease with hard-line than with moderate Israeli governments.

Although Russia certainly does not have anything remotely close to such a diaspora in the United States, Putin seems intent on playing a similar role in person, as the United States’ most valuable—and most uncompromising—ally. Clearly, the “Israelization” of the United States, in the security sense that was outlined above, vis-à-vis the Islamic world (coupled as it is with the progressing “Saudization” of Russia) would usher in an era of global instability, in which human rights, democracy, and tolerance would most of the time be seen as an unwelcome distraction from the struggle of Western civilization for its survival. This endless pursuit of physical security would only mask the moral defeat of the Western world and the subversion of its basic values.

There is a Russian proverbial image equivalent to that of the Trojan horse: “suffocation by embrace.” It is high time for Western strategists to learn it as well as they did the other Russian proverb—“trust but verify.” One wishes that the reading of Putin’s policies implied by this saying were to prove overly pessimistic. After all, millions of Russians, although feeling oppressed by their present order, aspire to a genuine rapprochement with the West—not on the basis of a shared threat and emergency culture, but on the firmer foundation of common humanistic values, including democracy, rule of law, private initiative, pursuit of social and moral justice, and respect for different civilizations, religions, and cultures. Their aspirations are now hostage to Putin’s successes and failures. And there is a strong likelihood that arrogant rebukes to his charm offensive—such as the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and far-reaching NATO expansion—will further weaken and antagonize these strategic allies of the democratic world within Russian society.

Yet, as between Scylla and Charybdis, no less of a peril stems from further rapprochement with Russia’s present elite: namely, that the United States (together with some West European powers) may end up in the most dangerously “entangling” alliance in its history, in which Western values—as well as the goal of a genuine and inclusive Westernization of Russia—would be severely compromised.