

Time to Get Off the Putin Path

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In the last few years, Russia has become an increasingly hostile place for those who support democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Political and social activists inside and outside Russia have long recognized the trends were negative. Toward the end of 2004, a series of events – the elimination of Russian citizens’ direct vote for governors, the Kremlin’s repeated public endorsement of fraudulent elections in Ukraine, and the shadowy auctions serving to dismantle the oil giant YUKOS – have made Russia’s trajectory both increasingly obvious and harder to ignore for European and American policymakers.

Less obvious is what should and what can the Euro-Atlantic community do about the steadily shrinking public political space in Russia. As of this writing, the majority of policymakers in the international community have downplayed the multiple threats to democracy there. As numerous Russian officials, including President Vladimir Putin himself, reveal to the world just how out of sync they are with their counterparts in Europe and North America on such basic issues as the right to vote, the desire for new policies that prioritize democracy and human rights in Russia will likely grow within numerous capitals. Meanwhile, inside Russia, some Kremlin-friendly pundits warn that external responses and pressures will only increase the authoritarian trend. What then makes sense? Continue to ignore the authoritarian drift? Or respond to it? And what would a new policy prioritizing democracy and human rights even look like?

One More Time: Russia’s Internal Politics Matter

What Sometimes it seems as if the Euro-Atlantic community woke up at the end of November 2004, following the second round of presidential elections in Ukraine, suddenly shocked to find an authoritarian president in Moscow proclaiming the fraudulent Ukrainian elections free and fair. Equally suddenly, internal politics in Russia seem to matter again.

In reality, domestic politics have always mattered. Politics inside the Soviet Union, and specifically, within the elite, played the definitive role in ending the Cold War and not, as many in the United States claim, “Star Wars”, Ronald Reagan, or any specific aspect of U.S. foreign policy. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, policymakers in the United States and Europe were especially concerned about Russia’s political trajectory and have allocated funds since 1992 to support the much hoped for democratic transition.

While Russia was not a full-fledged democracy in the 1990s under Boris Yeltsin, things seemed to go seriously wrong after Vladimir Putin rose to power in the summer and fall of 1999.

Yet U.S. policy toward Russia – first under the Clinton administration and then in the early Bush era – has been essentially adrift, lacking a coherent response to the most egregious threats to democracy, namely the second war in Chechnya and its collateral damage to the rule of law, independent media, and elections (e.g., the 1999 and 2000 Russian elections were largely shaped by that war and the Kremlin controlled media). Policy malaise toward Russia grew more noticeable after the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001 when high-level attention was focused almost exclusively first on Afghanistan and Al Qaeda, and then, on Iraq and Saddam Hussein. Funds for work with human rights and democratic activists in Russia in the last several years have declined or stayed flat, and each year, the administration has tried to cut these funds precisely as threats from the Russian authorities increased. As recently as December 2004, President George W. Bush continued to defend his “good personal relationship” with Putin.

Across the Atlantic, the situation has scarcely been different. If anything, European policymakers seem to have been more eager to criticize the Bush administration than to focus on events inside Putin’s Russia. Whatever the explanation for such policies – whether a product of European reliance on Russian energy resources, fear of Russia’s nuclear weapons, a desire to balance American hegemony, or simple indifference – the cost of doing little to date has been borne entirely inside Russia. Over many years, the unintended consequence of downplaying internal developments has been to embolden the authoritarians and to leave isolated and discouraged those in Russia who support democracy.

Why Should Western Policies Be Different?

Real, lasting security for Russia has always been fundamentally about ideas and institutions. Specifically, it has been about increasing the number of people inside Russia who support democracy and the rule of law, who are willing to build institutions widely associated with democracy such as critical media, and nongovernmental organizations. With these people and on these issues, the Euro-Atlantic community has dramatically underinvested.

Beyond self-interested security concerns about the internal politics of Russia, a skeptic might ask: why should Western policies change if the Russian public is supportive of Putin? While surveys show high levels of support for the president, these numbers are a product of the Kremlin’s total control over television’s coverage of the president. There simply are no critical reports. As Peter Baker, a Washington Post correspondent who covered the Kremlin for four years recently explained, “Putin is never challenged. The Kremlin press pool is not allowed to ask him questions. He has only one real press conference a year, and even there many of the questions are planted.”

More important, when the issue is posed slightly differently – how supportive is the Russian population of authoritarian rule? – the answer is less clear cut. In fact, there is more support for democracy and human rights and less for authoritarianism than conventional wisdom suggests. In random sample surveys that colleagues and I have

overseen in the last several years, we find evidence of a divided public. In earlier PONARS memos, Theodore P. Gerber and I have detailed this divide, arguing that Russia looks to be composed of roughly one-third democrats, one-third autocrats, and one-third that are ideologically up for grabs. Western policymakers at the highest levels have unwittingly supported the authoritarians, sitting silently as Putin has shrunk public political space. A change in policy would consciously support those in the population who are inclined toward democracy while keeping an eye on those who are still undecided.

One form of support has particular potential to strengthen this democratic camp and civil society: funding for and training on how to conduct social marketing and public awareness campaigns. To be effective, opinion data must form the basis of these efforts. When foreign donors and local activists rely on such data to shape their activities, they are likely to be more effective than when implementing blue-prints developed overseas. Attention to survey data may mean setting aside issues that many Western donors are transfixed by, such as political party development. In numerous surveys and focus groups, we found the Russian population does not trust and is not supportive of political parties. In fact, there is barely any support for parties. Moreover, results from four focus groups in Moscow and Yaroslavl with university students in December 2004 suggest that even they (never mind the Putin administration) view foreign support for parties as interference. So why fund such work when it is likely to have little direct impact (given Kremlin control) and the population does not want it? On the other hand, external support for other sorts of organizations, for health, humanitarian or human rights groups and especially those organizations that provide some sort of service for people, all is viewed much more benignly.

If it makes sense to target support for certain issues, it makes sense also to focus on certain demographic groups. Specifically, Western support for democracy and human rights in Russia should primarily center on those from the younger generation (16 to 29 year olds) that are inclined toward democracy. While this endeavor is a long-term project, the pool of “democrats” simply must become larger and more diverse than it is today, and this may happen in part through stimulating interest in and knowledge about Western liberal beliefs. To be clear, our surveys suggest Russian youth are not spontaneously or even overwhelmingly sympathetic to democracy. They are, however, the most inclined toward democracy and the least toward authoritarianism of all cohorts in Russia. If 30 percent of the general public chose democracy as the preferred form of government on our surveys, 40 percent of those Russians under 29 chose it. Through grants, but also opportunities to study abroad, donors can encourage organizations to actively reach out to this next generation. Our data suggest there may be some young democrats hidden among the general population. To date, civil society groups have done a poor job of finding and motivating them.

In all efforts, Western support for democracy and human rights in Russia should be guided by those issues of greatest concern to Russians as indicated in public opinion surveys. For example, a whopping 94 percent of Russians want army officers who tolerate *dedovshchina*, an especially brutal form of hazing, to be prosecuted. Our surveys suggest the war in Chechnya is not popular. A majority is concerned about military casualties and supports a non-military solution there. Some critics like to argue that there

is no civil society in Russia and no support for NGOs, a key part of any robust civil society. Again, survey data and multiple focus groups in Russia's regions suggest a dramatically different picture. For example, the network of organizations known as the Committee of Mothers' Soldiers has consistently significant recognition among the general population. Specifically, depending on the age group, our data suggest that between 73 percent and 82 percent know this organization. Not only is it well known, but the vast majority of people – between 64 percent and 69 percent – who know it, think they do “very good or good” work.

Yet instead of bolstering democrats or fighting for human rights (especially those our data suggest have support inside Russia), Western policymakers have played a pernicious role enabling the authoritarians and overlooking abuses. No one should expect an immediate or dramatic change in Putin's behavior if or when European and North American presidents and prime ministers speak frankly about internal matters. A renewed focus, however, on delivering substantial, on-the-ground support to both activists and the population may ultimately help sustain the Euro-Atlantic community's long-term friends through an epoch of ever shrinking political space. As is, Russia's democratic camp is in a highly precarious position; it is too large to be ignored and much too small for complacency or effectiveness.

On some level, Western policymakers have long known this. Privately, in many capitals, those who follow Russia on a daily basis for their governments have bemoaned their government's overly docile approach to Putin. Others have fought and failed to increase democracy assistance to Russia. I have heard, for example, American and European diplomats and civil servants express deep frustration over their country's lack of response to Russia's shrinking public political space. Sadly, the Russian president's wooing has been seemingly more persuasive to Bush, Chirac, Blair, Berlusconi, and Schroeder than the analyses their staffs have presumably provided them.

Do Not Forget Chechnya

Nowhere are the contradictions of Western policies more evident than with respect to Chechnya. It exists as a failed region within the Russian Federation. As human rights groups have so well documented, there is no security for citizens, and no functioning infrastructure. The younger generation has known literally nothing but war. Thousands who are aggrieved make excellent potential recruits for criminal and terrorist networks. The conflict is spilling over into neighboring states and territories within Russia. Whether motivated by the legacies of the Cold War, rhetoric about fighting the global war on terror, or access to Russian gas and oil, international inaction regarding Chechnya determines in part the unintended consequence of destabilization in this region and enhances international terrorist networks. The war threatens Russia's neighbors and strategic partners, and therefore should be a top priority on the foreign policy agenda of the international community.

Unlike many other conflicts, such as Israel and the West Bank/Gaza, India and Kashmir, Great Britain and Northern Ireland, almost no money, no attention, no high level policymakers, and precious few conferences have been devoted to this issue. The international community has not begun to explore reasonable options.

A first step to reversing this situation would be to increase the accountability of international organizations that have as their mandate the monitoring of compliance with human rights norms and laws. To date, these organizations have taken distressingly little action to curb abuses in Chechnya. The consequence of witnessing or ignoring such violence not only affects Russia, but also the international community. The inaction of the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe should itself become the focus of investigation and a concerted campaign. Who is monitoring the monitors? Why has there been such silence? Why has the international human rights machinery broken? What, if anything, can be done to fix it?

Another step would be to convene a high level international policy group on Chechnya composed of Europeans from the North, the South, the East and the West, as well as North Americans. At the moment, no diplomat or official anywhere in Europe or North America has the resolution of Chechnya as their “brief.” No one has made the resolution of this conflict a priority. As Americans and Europeans have learned, policy makers ignore failed regions at the peril of their national security. Continue to pretend Chechnya does not exist, and this war will come to roost in the middle of the Euro-Atlantic community.

How Far Will the Authoritarian Drift Take Us?

No one knows the answer to this question. In his relations with Western counterparts, Putin is likely to maintain the charm offensive and win back at least some of the expended political capital he and the Russian government spent so recklessly in Ukraine. If outsiders keep a close watch on internal matters in Russia, however, they are likely to see the rule of man and not the rule of law.

To be sure, there are many arguments for the continued policy of turning a blind eye to Russian internal politics. At various seminars in Washington convened to hash over the proper foreign policy toward Russia, for example, numerous observers argue that “Putin is the best we have and better to have the authoritarian we know, than the one we do not.” This argument is (again) pernicious and discriminatory to those Russians who support the development of democratic institutions and the protection of their rights.

The argument for prioritizing democracy and human rights is not an argument for ending contact with the president of Russia. That is foolish. The point is simply not to always prioritize the president at the expense of those in the public who do support democracy. The Euro-Atlantic community’s approach toward Russia has done precious little for them, and ultimately, the fate of these people converges with Euro-Atlantic stability and security. Too often, policymakers have bought Putin’s line and acted as if democracy were established in Russia. This policy course has bolstered the forces in Russia that have done their best to eliminate whatever rights remain. It has also increased risks to those who favor democracy and for still others, it has helped make the costs of openly supporting democracy seemingly too high. Now is the time for the Euro-Atlantic community to shift priorities and to nurture and support those in Russia who want democracy, human rights and the rule of law. In other words, it is time to get off the Putin path.

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