

Taking Stock

The Russia that has returned, after its twentieth century misadventure, is not the "petro-fascist" state depicted in much recent writing, where mafiosi roam the streets and citizens hide in their apartments, literally dying of chagrin as they see the country's wealth corruptly privatized, while the prime minister, clad in black, preens before the mirror, envisioning his own triumphant March on Rome. Nor is it the old Soviet Union in disguise, a Marxist bureaucratic meat grinder of a state, bristling with missiles aimed at the United States, and determined to use all tricks at its disposal to weaken the Western world.

It is something more prosaic—a country struggling with a combination of challenges, governed under a system that is part democratic, part authoritarian; informed by a press that is only partly free; powered by an economy cued to world commodity cycles; inhabited by citizens who judge their leaders on the basis of economic performance; where alcoholism, encouraged by the extremely low cost of vodka, is taking an extraordinary toll on life expectancy and aggravating crime. It is a country with problems that are painful but not unusual for middle income states, and with medium-run prospects that remain relatively promising.

Russia's current leaders face some pressing questions. Can they devise a model of relations with society that will work in bad times as well as good? Can they mount a real fight against corruption despite the many trails that lead to their door? Can they trace for themselves a route out of power that will safeguard their personal security and avoid the Suharto scenario, while preserving their international reputation and their claim to have brought stability to Russia? Or, when push comes to shove, will they destroy all that they have built and, giving up on respectability, try to turn their country into a snowy version of Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe?

Those in the West who deal with Russia face questions of their own. Too large to ignore, too large to coopt, Russia, with its Security Council veto, its intelligence networks in Central Asia and the Middle East, its nuclear arsenal, its oil and gas deposits, sits at the epicenter of the major issues that the West must confront in the next generation—from Islamic terrorism and nuclear proliferation to energy security and global warming. In many ways, the interests of Russia and of the United States and its allies diverge. But on some issues, there is overlap. Whether this overlap develops into cooperation in addressing these existential challenges will depend on whether the United States and Russia can build a more constructive relationship than they have managed in the last two decades.

Building a constructive relationship depends in large part on Russia. But it will also require some careful thinking on the Western side. Does it really serve the West's long-run interests to assume some unproven imperial agenda, to exaggerate the authoritarian features of the current regime, to demonize those in the Kremlin and romanticize its liberal opponents, to identify progress toward democracy with revolution, to jump to the defense of Russia's international adversaries before the facts are clear, and to publicly patronize leaders whose help we need in world affairs? Or does this pattern of behavior—part deliberate, part inadvertent—merely discredit us in the eyes of Russia's leaders and its citizens, making it that much harder to begin a

mutually useful conversation?

Year by year, month by month, Russians are waking up. Their country's journey continues. The new Russia will find its place in the world. To increase the chance that the role it defines for itself in coming decades is compatible with Western interests will require an approach that combines patience, humility, and a painstaking attention to the facts as they are rather than as we have imagined them.