
Putin & Co.: What Is to Be Done?

Richard Pipes

TODAY'S RUSSIA, the Russia of Putin and Medvedev, is a country of extraordinary contradictions. Its leaders claim that it is part of European culture; yet, at the same time, they warn the West not to instruct them in how to run their affairs, because Russia has its own unique national traditions. They insist on being a global power, even while they concede that economically Russia lags far behind its rivals and desperately needs to learn from them. They contend they are a democracy, and yet they do everything they can to emasculate democratic procedures and institutions. When one takes a close look at what they say in public, one has difficulty determining what is genuine confusion and what outright cynicism. Chances are that the answer is both: cynicism masking confusion.

Take, as an example, the March 2008 presidential elections. All opinion polls indicated that Dmitry Medvedev, the man nominated by outgoing President Vladimir Putin, enjoyed a comfortable lead over every potential rival. And yet the Putin government did everything in its power to sabotage the electoral process. Every likely competitor was eliminated under one pretext or another, until the only ones left, in addition to Medvedev, were the head of the Communist party, the leader of the ultra-nationalists, and a political

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non-entity, none of the three likely to challenge the regime's authoritarian policies.

Nor was this all. Putin publicly accused genuine opposition candidates of being "jackals" working on behalf of foreign governments. The television networks, the main source of news in a country as spacious as Russia, were closed to Medvedev's rivals. Throughout the country, voters were forced to cast ballots at the risk of losing their jobs, often in a manner that allowed their supervisors to learn whom they were voting for. These egregious procedures were possible because Moscow had all but prevented international organizations from monitoring the elections. Adding insult to injury, Putin then accused the European monitoring group of having stayed away on instructions of the U.S. Department of State.

Medvedev won with a 70.28-percent majority—a subtle 1.02 percent lower than the total garnered by Putin in 2004. Given the effective monopoly his party, United Russia, enjoys in parliament, the vote gives him virtually dictatorial powers. But little is known of this man, who for most of his life had worked in the shadows. Born in Leningrad in 1965, he received a doctorate in law in 1990. In 2002 he was appointed chairman of the giant gas monopoly, Gazprom. Three years later he was named first deputy prime minister. Unlike Putin and many of his close advisers, he had never served in the secret police.

According to the arrangement struck between

Putin and Medvedev, the latter will serve as president and the former as prime minister. This is most unusual for Russia, a country accustomed to one-man rule, and hence it is fraught with danger. Medvedev has no independent power base and will have to rely on the one controlled by his prime minister. How this diarchy will work out, time alone will tell. In any case, many Russians view Medvedev as but an interim head of state, since they interpret Putin's long-term vision of Russia, which he has dubbed "Plan 2020," as a sign that he intends to run again for the presidency four years hence.

As I have said, the leaders of Russia insist that their country is a democracy. Indeed, one of them, Sergei Ivanov, the deputy prime minister, recently ranked Russia's democratic procedures as superior to those of certain unnamed "other countries," on the grounds that the 2008 presidential elections in Russia featured no fewer than four competing candidates, while these "other countries" had only two.

But on the subject of democracy, too, Russian leaders are inconsistent and self-contradictory. Thus, in a speech delivered at the 2007 World Economic Forum in Davos, Medvedev asserted, without qualification:

Today we are building new institutions based on the fundamental principles of full democracy. This democracy requires no additional definition. This democracy is effective and is based on the principles of the market economy, supremacy of the law, and government that is accountable to the rest of society.

Clear enough, one would think. But less than a year later, in conversation with foreign journalists, the same Medvedev made the following statement:

A parliamentary democracy—this is my personal opinion—is unacceptable in Russia either now or in the future. Probably in 200 or 300 years, when the ideas of democracy will be different, . . . when everything will be different.

And how does Medvedev envision the profile of Russia's political regime until this distant time arrives? In a recent interview with the magazine *Itogi*, he declared that Russia

is a federal country with great prospects but not a few problems. Such a country can be administered only with the help of strong presidential power. Should Russia become a parliamentary republic it will disappear. . . This is

my profound conviction. . . . Russia was always built around a rigid executive vertical line. These lands were assembled over centuries and they cannot be administered in any other way.

The key words in this statement are "rigid executive vertical line." They mean that political power in Russia does not emanate from below but from above, a notion that utterly belies the democratic professions uttered by Medvedev and other members of the current government. One can assume that, in articulating these ideas, Medvedev was unaware that he was echoing Czar Alexander II, who a century-and-a-half ago, having liberated Russia's serfs and being asked to give his country a constitution, replied:

I give you my word that I would sign right now, on this table, any constitution, if I were convinced this was for Russia's good. But I know that were I to do this today, tomorrow Russia would crumble into bits and pieces.

To reconcile the irreconcilable—that is, a verbal commitment to democracy with the conviction that in practice democracy would destroy Russia—a group of aspiring theorists in the Kremlin have now come up with the concept of "sovereign democracy." The term was coined by Vladimir Surkov, a Russified Chechen who occupies the post of deputy chief of the presidential administration but in fact is chief ideologist of the Putin-Medvedev government as well as de-facto head of Putin's party. In a long and rambling speech delivered in February 2006, Surkov asserted that Russia is without question a European country, one that shares with Europe the values of material well-being, freedom, and justice. On another occasion, however, he stressed that throughout its history Russia has been a centralized country—decentralization, in his view, being a force that weakens democracy.

What Surkov has tried to get at in his incoherent fashion was formulated succinctly by his boss, Putin, on assuming the presidency in 2000: "In a state that does not respect the rule of law, and which therefore is weak, a person is defenseless and therefore not free. The stronger the state, the freer the individual." That is to say, in effect, that the freedom of citizens is best assured by a dictatorship.

Perhaps the clearest definition of "sovereign democracy" has been given not by Surkov or Putin but by Masha Lipman, a member of the Carnegie Endowment's Moscow Center. The term, she writes,

conveys two messages: first, that Russia's

regime is democratic, and, second, that its claim must be accepted, period. Any attempt at verification will be regarded as unfriendly and meddling in Russia's domestic affairs.

WHY DO the Russian people put up with this kind of fraudulent democracy? To this, there are several answers.

In the first place, Russians in general attach the greatest value to stability. Their few and brief experiences with democracy—in 1917 and then again in the 1990's—have persuaded them that it brings nothing but anarchy and crime. When asked by pollsters which they prize more highly, freedom (*svoboda*) or order (*poriadok*), they overwhelmingly choose the latter, apparently unaware that the two are not mutually exclusive. As a result, they do not favor political competition and regard a multiparty system as harmful. They want a “strong hand” and do not much care how it comes into or stays in power. To the contrary: the less it is challenged at the ballot box, the stronger it is.

Secondly, most Russians, to judge again by survey data, do not perceive themselves to be members of a political or social community in any meaningful sense. This is an attitude that those of us who live in a democratic society may find it difficult to comprehend. For most Russians, however, the only significant entity is the “small” community consisting of their immediate family and friends—those whom they address as *ty* (in French, *tu*). That is why it matters less to them who runs the national government, as long as the rulers maintain order and keep Russia a “great power” (*velikaia derzhava*). In the words of a critical Russian journalist:

The silence of the people is the principal social and political misfortune of Russia throughout its entire history. And today, too, the vast majority of the country's inhabitants have hermetically “blocked” politics and everything that does not relate to private life. . . . [T]he right to express one's political opinion Russians place at most at the very end of ratings of the most important human rights and liberties.

Finally, most Russians refuse to believe that people anywhere in the world can in fact decide upon their own rulers, or that these rulers care about them. Rather, in the Russian view, all governments, including those reputed to be models of democracy, are in reality run by avaricious and power-hungry individuals who use the state to enrich themselves and dominate their society. In a poll conducted this past January, fewer than 40 percent said

that elections are conducted honestly. This being the case, what difference does it make how governments are chosen? At the same time, all polls and voting results indicate that, at most, only 10 percent of Russians support democratic ideals.

This minority consists mostly of the well-educated inhabitants of large cities, whose chances of achieving power are virtually nil, at any rate for generations to come. After having tried and failed to change their country's political culture in the 1990's, they have largely withdrawn from public life.

ONE CONSOLING fact about present-day Russia is that, for all the braggadocio about how great the country is and how glorious its future, privately its leaders seem well aware of its weaknesses and are determined to overcome them. Testimony to this is contained in an important speech delivered by Putin in February.

The gist of his remarks was that the era in which Russia could rely on revenues from natural resources—mostly energy, which today accounts for four-fifths of exports—had passed beyond recall. In order to prosper, the country had to develop its entire economic base by recourse to technological innovation. Looking forward to the year 2020, Putin called for major efforts in the realm of human and material resources. In particular, he labeled it a “disgrace” that every second Russian male will never reach the age of sixty, and foresaw the need to raise the nation's average longevity to seventy-five.

Given the exceedingly poor health standards prevailing in Russia, this is a difficult and possibly unachievable goal. It is estimated that fully half of the premature deaths of working-age Russians are due to alcoholism, while Russia's HIV figures are the highest in the world outside Africa. As for labor productivity, at present it stands, Putin reminded his audience, at one-seventh of Germany's. One way to achieve growth would be by promoting small businesses and the middle class, which today contribute less than 15 percent of GDP. But this objective, too, will be difficult to achieve in light of the fact that a majority of Russians believe private businessmen to be “saboteurs,” while a similar proportion is convinced that honest labor does not bring success.

No less an obstacle to significant economic improvement is the cavalier manner in which the government itself treats contracts and property rights. In recent years, Moscow has violated billions of dollars' worth of agreements signed with British Petroleum and Royal Dutch Shell for the exploration of oil on Russian territory. If it persists in treating contracts as statements of intent rather

than binding obligations, foreign investments are likely to fall far below their potential.

Even so, however, the Russian press has recently been encouraging its readers to think that the economic progress projected by Putin for the year 2020 will be achieved five years earlier, by which time, it is asserted, Russia's economy will be among the five largest in the world and one-half of the population will qualify as middle-class.* By 2020, average monthly pay will have quintupled, from \$526 (in 2007) to \$2,700.

One may question how realistic these forecasts are. They recall Nikita Khrushchev's boasts a half-century ago that the Soviet Union would, before long, overtake the United States in the production of foodstuffs. But whether or not they can be achieved, economic progress of the sort envisaged by Putin requires the assistance of the West.

THIS NEED for Western assistance in economic modernization, however, stands in conflict not only with Russia's domestic practices but also with its foreign policy toward the West, which has turned increasingly hostile.

The aggressive trend began, at least on the verbal level, in February 2007 when, on German soil, Putin delivered a broadside attack on the United States, accusing it of attempting to create a unipolar world with Washington as "the one center of authority, one center of force, one center of decision-making." The speech was no casual outburst. According to Sergei Lavrov, the minister of foreign affairs, it marked the onset of a general rethinking of the "realities of a globalizing world." In the year since then, Lavrov asserts, Russia has affirmed its "growing authority and influence in the world."

Encouraged by the Kremlin, and combining ridicule with threats, the Russian press delights in recounting adverse news from the West, especially the United States. Thus, *Izvestiia* recently amused its readers with the story of an unnamed American military unit in the former Yugoslavia that allegedly refused to deploy for action unless served fresh orange juice. At the same time, Russian diplomats and military figures resort to intimidation. In a speech this past January that received little if any attention abroad, the chairman of the Russian general staff, Iurii Baluevskii, emphasized Moscow's strenuous opposition to the American plan to install anti-missile defenses and radar systems in Poland and the Czech Republic:

We [Russians] have no plans to attack anyone, but we consider it necessary for all our partners clearly to understand . . . that for the defense

of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Russia and its allies there will be resort to armed force also preventively, and also with recourse to nuclear weapons. Military power ought to be utilized to demonstrate the resolve of the country's leaders to assert its interests, and, as an extreme measure, in a concentrated manner when other measures prove ineffective.

As if this were not clear enough, it was spelled out again in *Izvestiia's* coverage of Baluevskii's remarks. Moscow, the paper asserted, reserves the right to engage in preemptive nuclear attacks in order to forestall whatever it interprets as a massive aggression against it. This, of course, is a restatement of Soviet nuclear strategy, which in its time remained deliberately unarticulated (and was therefore disbelieved by the majority of Western observers).

For Moscow, probably the greatest irritant in its relations with the West is the eastward expansion of NATO, both past and projected. And in this matter, one must concede, its position is not without merit: the West has indeed been oblivious of Russian sensitivities and has broken promises made when Moscow dissolved the Warsaw Pact and withdrew its troops from Eastern Europe.

The Russians regard NATO, not without reason, as a hostile alliance directed against them, and they intensely resent the fact that it has expanded to their very frontiers. The easternmost border of Estonia, a member of NATO, is a mere 90 miles from St. Petersburg, Russia's ancient capital and second largest city. As if this were not provocation enough, the United States has been pressing to bring the Ukraine and Georgia into the Western military alliance. These actions cause the Russians to fear they are being encircled.

In his speech of February 2007, Putin recalled that in 1990, Manfred Wörner, NATO's secretary general, had disavowed any intention of placing NATO forces east of Germany. But, Putin went on,

NATO itself is expanding. It is approaching our borders. We drew down our bases in Cuba and in Vietnam. What did we get? New American bases in Romania, Bulgaria.† A new third missile-defense region in Poland. We are categorically being told these actions are not directed at Russia, and therefore our concerns are com-

* This projection seems to be based on figures from a Goldman Sachs study cited in Anders Åslund, *Russia's Capitalist Revolution*.

† This is an allusion to U.S.-Bulgarian and U.S.-Romanian agreements in 2006 calling for American assistance in modernizing the air bases of both countries and stationing small American forces there.

pletely unfounded. That is not a constructive response. It is already clear that a new arms race is being unleashed across the world. . . . It is not our fault, we did not start it.

As if to demonstrate its resolve to assert its military prowess, Moscow has recently launched a series of military moves which, while not dangerous, are threatening and are meant to be. It has resumed bomber patrols in regions far away from Russia. The Russian navy has carried out military exercises off the coast of Spain. And Putin claims to have initiated a massive program of military modernization costing hundreds of billions of dollars.

STILL, EVEN if the expansion of NATO is, in the words of Foreign Minister Lavrov, the outstanding cause of East-West tension, it is not the decisive one. The roots of this tension lie deeper. Russia has never been able to make up its mind where it belongs in the global community of nations. By appearance, language, and religion, Russians are Europeans. They intensely dislike being labeled Orientals, for they consider the Chinese and/or Muslims to belong to inferior races. Yet, at the same time, they harbor an abiding antipathy to their Western neighbors. This attitude is conditioned partly by their sense of national inferiority, and partly by the teachings of the Orthodox church.

In their hearts, Russians are quite conscious that by virtually every criterion they lag far behind the West. Historically they have sought to compensate for this feeling by acquiring a level of brute physical power that the West must respect. When Mike McConnell, the director of U.S. national intelligence, declared recently that Russia's growing economic might posed a threat to U.S. security, a Russian journalist exulted: "If the Americans fear, that means they have finally begun to respect us."

All opinion surveys indicate that today's Russians feel deep nostalgia for the Soviet Union, in good measure because of its undisputed status as a global superpower, and restoration of this status enjoys a high priority in their minds. Bolstering their sense of entitlement in this regard is their claim to be in important respects superior to other nations, by virtue of their creativity, their unique capability for friendship, and their ability to survive under the most trying conditions. Russia's victory over the Germans in World War II continues to be a source of immense pride.

Russian Orthodoxy, derived from Byzantium, also influences attitudes toward the West. To the Eastern church, Western churches were heretical, and Russians cultivated a profound aversion toward

them. They have traditionally called their country "holy"—except for Palestine, the only place in the world so designated—because they adhere to the true faith. Such an attitude, of course, was not unique to Russia, but unique was the fact that unlike the other Christian churches, which were transnational, Russia's was for all practical purposes a national church. After the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, Russia was the only Orthodox state left in the world. In the eyes of the church's adherents, therefore, the fate of Russia and the fate of the true faith have been inextricably linked.

That the link is very much alive is confirmed by the sensation created by a recent film, *The Destruction of an Empire: The Lessons of Byzantine History*. According to press reports, the film, produced by a Russian priest, attributes the defeat of the Byzantine empire to its (alleged) adoption of Western values, and in particular Western-style individualism. In this manner, Byzantium destroyed the faith that had bound people to their rulers, thus undermining the safety and security of the realm. The lesson: do not follow Western ways. Although Russian scholars have dismissed the film as "trash," it has attracted a great deal of favorable attention.

Such emotions and attitudes, inculcated over centuries, have helped create a lasting antipathy to the West and a determination to be different. On a visit to Germany, Vice Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov expressed the feelings of many Russians in this regard:

We respect the values that America and Europe have cultivated over the centuries. However, we are fully aware that this unique experience cannot serve as a standard with which, as if it were a troy ounce, all nations should evaluate their political structures, national cultures, religion, and mindset.

The trouble is that, combined with their racial antagonism toward the Orient, the anti-Westernism of Russians and their insistence on the sui-generis nature of their country has left them suspended in air. They belong neither to the West nor to the East, but only to themselves and the few tiny Orthodox communities remaining abroad. This accounts not only for the anti-Westernism of the Russian population, a large percentage of whom, judging by opinion polls, regard the West as an enemy, but also for their obsession with the Serbs, one of the few coreligionist communities left in the world, and their determination not to let Kosovo separate itself from Serbia.

The consequence is a severe geopolitical and cultural disorientation.

UNLIKE POST-NAZI Germany, post-Communist Russia has never made a clean break with its totalitarian past. The relics of Soviet Communism are visible everywhere, so much so that according to a poll conducted earlier in this decade, fully 30 percent of Russian citizens are not even aware that the Soviet regime no longer exists. Although the city of Leningrad has been renamed St. Petersburg, the area in which it is located continues to be called the Leningrad Region. Lenin's corpse still lies in a mausoleum in Red Square, and his statues are visible everywhere. Throughout Russia, streets and squares bear the names they were given in Soviet days. The national anthem is sung to the same tune as in Stalin's days, even if the lyrics have been changed.

These mementos of the past respond to popular feelings. A majority of Russians—at least two-thirds and very likely more—regret the passing of the Soviet Union. When asked how they would react if the Communists staged a coup and seized power, they respond that they would either join the insurgents, collaborate with them, or else simply try to get on with their lives. Only 10 percent would actively resist.

The current government does not hesitate to appeal to these sentiments. In his 2005 state-of-the-nation speech, Putin let the world know that he regarded the dissolution of the Soviet Union as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century”—the century, that is to say, of Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mao, and Pol Pot. Yes, Putin conceded, there were dark chapters in Russia's history—by which he meant the 1930's—but unlike some other powers, which he did not deign to name, Russia “did not employ nuclear weapons against a peaceful population . . . did not pour chemicals over thousands of kilometers . . . did not drop enormous quantities of bombs on a small country.”

Under the Kremlin's guidance, Russian history manuals are currently being revised to glorify Stalin as a great national leader who restored the boundaries of the czarist empire, won World War II, industrialized the country, and created “the best educational system in the world.” In this manner, the terrible decades of Communist rule, which cost tens of millions of Russian lives and imposed dreadful misery on the survivors, are being incorporated into the mainstream of national history, legitimizing a gradual return to its practices.

Observing all these developments, so depressing

after the promise of the immediate post-Soviet era, one cannot help regretting that the Russian people in their large majority are unable to confront their past—as they must do if they are ever to make a new beginning. To the contrary, they seem to be their own worst enemies, racked by self-doubts which they try to mitigate by enmity toward the world that surrounds them, blaming others for their own mistakes, and allowing themselves to be misled by their leaders.

In my view, the outside world, and certainly the Western powers, did their best after 1991 to bring Russia into the community of nations; if the attempt failed, it was not for lack of trying. But not everyone in the West shares this point of view. In a recent article in *Foreign Affairs* entitled “Losing Russia,” Dmitri Simes of the Nixon Center in Washington has blamed “misguided and arrogant U.S. policies since the end of the cold war” for fueling “resentment in Russia.” America's main error, according to Simes, was to treat the Soviet Union as a defeated power, exulting in its dissolution and promoting Ukrainian and Georgian separatism. Simes further charges the United States with badly “managing” Russia's transition.

I have already stipulated that, by expanding NATO, the Western powers showed insensitivity to Russia's anxieties about its borders and its one-time possessions, or what it calls “the near abroad.” But we have never owned Russia, and could not “manage” it. Simes in his article says scarcely a word about the resurgent anti-Westernism and imperialism of post-Soviet Russia, or its reversion to autocratic traditions that, instead of free elections, promote chauvinism as a means of cementing relations between government and people. His analysis no more accounts for that aggressiveness than the unfair Versailles treaty accounts for Hitler's unleashing of World War II.

A BETTER APPROACH to the current Russian mindset is to note that today's occupants of the Kremlin are, for the most part, “ex-Chekists,” a name Russians apply to members of the political police. Their entire outlook has been shaped by the mentality of this organization, whose origins go back to the 18th century and which ever since has played an important role in Russia's political life. To quote words written a century ago by the head of the czarist police department, Chekists believe

that there are the people and there is state authority, that the latter is under constant threat from the former, for which reason it is subject to protective measures, and that to carry out

these measures, any means may be used with impunity. . . . As a result, the protection of the state . . . turns into a war against all of society.*

“Any means may be used with impunity”: this entails not only violations of basic human rights but resort to assassination of anyone, at home or abroad, who is a source of embarrassment. Since Putin has come to power, there has been a succession of such unresolved murders of the regime’s critics. The fact that no perpetrator has been apprehended raises questions about the possible complicity of the Kremlin.

The new rulers talk of democracy and the rule of law because these are fashionable slogans, but in reality they reject both as utterly unsuited for Russia. When they are feeling cocky, as Putin was during a dinner he gave a year ago for foreign journalists, they do not hesitate to mock such Western concepts in public. “Of course, I am a pure and absolute democrat,” Putin said on this occasion, continuing:

The tragedy is that I am alone. I am the only such pure democrat. There are no such other democrats in the world. Let us see what is happening in North America: just horrible torture. The homeless. Guantanamo. Detentions without normal court proceedings. After the death of Mahatma Gandhi, I have nobody to talk to.

Putin’s crew believe that Russia is a great country that had fallen on bad times, but that they will raise it again to its proper rank as a global power and the rest of the world had better pay heed. To this end, they will defend it from any and all challengers, domestic or foreign.

Does this mean, as some observers fear, that we are heading toward a new cold war? I believe not. The cold war was the result of a global policy conducted by a Communist government with the assistance of other Communist regimes and movements abroad: it was a policy that had as its objective, in Trotsky’s words, “overturning the world.” In this conflict, as Lenin said, there would be no compromise: either Communism or capitalism had to triumph.

I do not see such ambitions motivating the present Russian government. Nor do I perceive that it has sufficient economic or military power at its disposal physically to threaten the West. But it does have the power and the will to create a state of constant tension with the West and thus to make everyone’s life difficult. For the foreseeable future, managing that tension wisely will remain a central and highly arduous task confronting Western diplomacy.

* A.A. Lopukhin, *The Present and the Future of the Russian Police* (Moscow, 1907).