

Wanted: A New U.S. Policy on Russia

Sarah E. Mendelson

CSIS

January 2004

This piece originally appeared as a Program on New Approaches to Russian Security (PONARS) memo and is available at

http://csis.org/ruseura/ponars/policymemos/pm_index.htm

Recent Russian parliamentary elections did much to expose the myth of “managed democracy” in that country. U.S. policymakers, however, had numerous (and bloody) reasons to be worried about Russia’s political course long before election season or before that other shock that has received so much attention—the arrest of Russia’s richest man, Mikhail Khodorkovsky. If U.S. policymakers have been concerned by the course of events in Russia, it has been very hard to tell. Generally, President George W. Bush has counted Russia as a good partner to the United States and applauded President Vladimir Putin’s “vision” of democracy in Russia even as Putin presided over numerous and well documented assaults on reforms.

This approach is simply no longer viable nor in U.S. interests. Now is the time to take a hard look at the Putin path and consider a new and different policy toward Russia; one that does not give a pass to undemocratic behavior in the name of fighting terrorism. This memo explains why current U.S. policy has not worked and how to fix it.

Remembering What We Forgot: Russia’s Internal Politics are a National Security Issue

Russia’s domestic politics and U.S. national security are linked. Internal politics inside the Soviet Union played an enormous role in ending the Cold War. After the Soviet Union collapsed, U.S. policymakers were especially concerned about Russia’s political trajectory. Since the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, however, the Bush administration has focused almost exclusively on the need for democracy in the Middle East and forgotten about it in other parts of the world. In the meantime, the political transition in Russia has measurably regressed. It is unfinished business and continues to be a U.S. national security issue.

Russia’s democratic future is of fundamental interest to the United States, and not only because of its weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The Bush administration, like the one before it, has spent billions trying to secure these weapons along with enabling nuclear materials and sensitive technologies. This makes sense. Real, lasting security, however, is fundamentally about ideas and institutions. On these issues the Bush administration has dramatically underinvested. As the United States helps dismantle *hardware* in Russia, policymakers must not overlook the need for serious support of *software*: transparent, democratic institutions bolstered by democratic activists who share democratic values. These are critical to secure a peaceful future with Russia.

Russia’s post-communist transition has entered an especially shaky period. Based on results from public opinion surveys I have done with colleagues [see PONARS Policy

Memo 296], Russia now looks to be composed of roughly one-third democrats, one-third autocrats and one-third that are ideologically up for grabs—people who do not know if they prefer authoritarian or democratic forms of government. (The election results from December 7 suggested that some of these folks might be making up their minds.) Perhaps more shocking, Stalin's popularity, fifty years after his death, is surprisingly high even among younger generations. The assumption that the older authoritarians will die out and be replaced by young democrats is just not supported by our data or recent elections.

The software side of security has been in jeopardy in Russia for a long time—well before September 11, 2001, when many argued that urgent threats to the United States dictated that the Bush administration turn a blind eye to undemocratic practices. Certainly the Bush administration has done that in the name of fighting terrorism. Have the benefits outweighed the costs? In short: no. One positive has been the reported cooperation in counterterrorism. On the other hand, Russian diplomats were of no help to the Bush administration at the United Nations in the lead up to the war in Iraq, and nuclear reactor deals with Iran continue to plague this administration's non-proliferation strategy. But the real cost has come inside Russia.

Stranded on the Putin Path

No one organization has amassed an index, catalogue, or map of how many times, in how many variations or locations Russian authorities have begun to repress elements of society they deemed threatening or problematic, but many of us have been watching closely and what we have seen is troubling.

Sometimes the harassment is quite subtle. Sometimes it turns violent. We have seen countless individuals (in many cases, colleagues) investigated, intimidated, interrogated, sometimes jailed, accused of treason, some beaten by federal and local authorities, and, in a few cases, killed. In addition to journalists, this has happened to entrepreneurs, to environmentalists, to human rights and labor activists, to political party activists, to students and to scholars—Russians as well as Americans and Europeans. Visas have been revoked or denied. Tax police have dropped by unannounced.

Nowhere is the situation more dangerous and damaging than in Chechnya. Russia's war in Chechnya has bred extremism rather than contained it. U.S. policymakers know this. Russian policymakers know this. They even know that we know this. Yet U.S. policymakers have indulged in a terrible and very costly temptation to bracket the war, to say that this bloodshed is somehow not a part of Russia or that the brutality is an exception to the rule. But it is precisely this war in Chechnya that has played a significant role in seriously damaging democracy in Russia. The Putin administration used it to squash whatever independent media had emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It has stood by and watched as the war emboldened its military and the Federal Security Service, or FSB (successor to the KGB)—all unreformed since the Soviet era. The war has institutionalized a culture of impunity that has developed among the 80,000 federal forces currently stationed in Chechnya. Are there terrorists in Chechnya? Undoubtedly. Is the Russian approach making us safer? Undoubtedly not. But it also masks a larger struggle.

The unfinished business of democracy in Russia is fundamentally a battle of networks—liberal internationalists versus illiberal nationalists. Put simply, liberal internationalists want Russia embedded in the Euro-Atlantic community, and illiberal nationalists regard with suspicion opportunities to freely interact with counterparts from other countries. Alarming, they are repulsed by the work Americans and Russians do together to reduce threats from WMD in Russia. Clearly, the illiberal nationalists are winning; they are presiding over the steady shrinking of public political space in Russia. The results: controlled elections, few critical sources of information, and harassment of independent organizations. A well-respected 30 year-old activist from one of Russia's most prominent human rights groups told a Washington audience in November 2003 that her colleagues are for the first time in their young lives talking about "working underground or emigration." These people are canaries in a coalmine.

Yet the silence from the West is deafening. Putin has confused policymakers in Washington (and in London, Paris, and Berlin); they put him in the box marked liberal internationalists because he is fluent in "Western." Based on actual policies, however, he has more in common with the nationalists. Also confusing—illiberal nationalists are not wearing red or brown shirts but are grey in manner and tone. Their ideology is not searing communism or fascism, but a more generic, steadily creeping authoritarian one, more Andropov than Stalin.

What does this mean for Russians? It means the illiberal nationalists can crush parties, Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces for example, through this creeping authoritarian approach—they control the media. It means that the television channels that reach all of Russia cover the "party of power" from 10 to 50 times more than any other party—even one of comparable size in the Duma. It means that the Central Electoral Commission controls the majority of appointments on regional electoral commissions, and that more people with ties to the special services sit on these regional commissions than ever before. It means that there is no public control of the electoral process.

If Western policymakers were surprised by the elections or the events associated with YUKOS and Khodorkovsky, the political situation has not gone entirely unnoticed by the outside world: for example, in 2003 Reporters Without Borders listed Russia's media in 148th place (out of 166 countries) in terms of media freedom. In other words, there are only 18 places in the world that have less free media, and one can imagine which states are on that list. None is a good partner to the United States.

Toward a New Policy on Russia

Given the realities of Putin's Russia, what then should be the focus of a new U.S. policy? It must prioritize areas that are fundamental to U.S. security interests but that have been ignored in the last several years by the Bush administration.

- Russia's political trajectory is heading in the wrong direction, and it is dangerous for our nation's security to pretend otherwise. U.S. leadership should send a clear message to democratic and human rights activists that the United States stands with them;

- The United States can and should assist democratic reform in Russia rather than ending support as is currently planned;
- The U.S-Russian relationship should be embedded in core values rather than derivative of presidential chemistry;
- The United States should work with Russia and with Europe to end the war in Chechnya.

Here is what these four priorities would mean for U.S. policy:

Take a Stand For Democracy

The promotion of democracy—well funded and strategically done—is defense by other means in an age of terror. A new policy toward Russia would encourage consistency rather than engage in selective preoccupation in democratic transition and human rights abuses in some states while ignoring them in others. This change would go far beyond Russia, but it could begin with Russia. U.S. actions should match U.S. words so that Russians understand more precisely what the United States values. As is, the United States’s commitment to democracy appears hollow.

There are several ways to change this at home and abroad. The most important is for democracy promotion to actually be—and to be perceived to be—central to U.S. foreign policy. Another sign would be for senior U.S. leadership, including most importantly the president, to reach out and meet publicly, when in Russia, with those who believe in the plurality of views. These include journalists that have been harassed, and human rights groups that document abuse.

Invest in Democracy

For the United States to really demonstrate its commitment to combating creeping authoritarianism it should invest seriously in democracy in Russia instead of the pocket change it has thrown at the problem. This would be a dramatic change in policy as the Bush administration decided in 2002 to end democracy support. Specifically, the administration has directed the USAID Mission in Russia to plan for a “phase out.” Although no specific date has been set for “graduation,” there is talk of 2006 or 2007. The administration then cut an already deeply underfunded 2004 budget.

The people in Russia happiest about the current U.S. policy are those who do not want to see Russia develop rule of law or cooperate on safely storing and dismantling WMD. Cutting and running is, simply put, a very bad idea. Abandoning Russian democrats, for that is how colleagues in Russia see this policy, undermines the work that the United States has done there since the collapse of the Soviet regime. Reversing the decision to leave Russia will send an important signal that U.S. policymakers recognize “managed democracy” is a dangerous myth.

Focus on Russians, Not a Russian

Now is the time to de-emphasize the personal aspect of U.S.-Russia relations and focus instead on institutions that reveal more about the actual condition of mutual interests and shared values. In contrast to almost all other U.S. foreign policies, policy toward Russia has largely been governed by the relationship between the presidents. There are multiple layers to the U.S.-Russian relationship of course, but in the last several years, no matter what U.S. policy analysts inside government were reporting, the president continued to engage Putin in backslaps and pleasantries. No one wants a bad relationship between presidents, but this American president has not used what appears to be a good relationship to push hard where Russian and U.S. interests and values clash, such as the way the Russians have used force in Chechnya or the state's control of media. As the U.S. government supports activists, it also has to take a strong stand for democracy with leaders. Such action bolsters democratic and human rights norms. The strength of these norms is critical to our ultimate security.

Address the Security Threat of Chechnya

A senior U.S. policymaker should be appointed to focus on crafting a solution to this long- ignored security problem. Chechnya has many of the markings of a failed state, except of course that it is not separate from the Russian Federation. As we have learned elsewhere, U.S. policymakers ignore failed regions at our national security peril; continue to pretend Chechnya does not exist and this war will come to roost in the Euro-Atlantic community. The war is a threat to Russia's neighborhood and requires priority of place on the political agenda. Do not wait until this war spills over or terrorists move from downtown Moscow to downtown Paris or London or a flight from New York. U.S. policymakers should take a lead on this issue working with Russia and with Europe to find a solution to this conflict.

No one said this would be easy: we must do all the above without undermining the important efforts we have made in cooperation on counterterrorism and reducing WMD threats. A tall order yes, but the alternative is not viable: to stay on the business-as-usual track only emboldens those who do not want to cooperate in the first place. Political space shrank considerably in Russia in 2003. The more it continues to shrink, the greater the threat to the national security of the United States. Bold leadership in 2004 and beyond will be required to get us on the right track with Russia. Support of these priorities will bolster our true friends in Russia and help open up space for liberal internationalists who work every day for the rule of law and democracy. This is the path—and not the Putin path—we need to be on to help make Russia a real, strategic partner to the United States.

Sarah E. Mendelson is a senior fellow in the Russia and Eurasia Program at CSIS.