

STATEMENT

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**PREPARED STATEMENT
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By

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In 2005, two decades after a little-known Communist Party functionary named Mikhail Gorbachev was selected to the leadership of the Soviet Union, Russia presents an elusive target for students of its foreign policy and domestic affairs, both critics, of whom there are growing numbers, and admirers, whose ranks have been dwindling lately. True to the old adage, Russia is neither as strong as its sheer size and geopolitical heft suggest, nor as weak as it appears relative to other continental giants—China and Europe. No longer capable of projecting its power far beyond its borders as it aspired to do a generation ago, Russia remains the critical variable on the map of Eurasia position on the balance sheet of partners vs. adversaries can make or break most, if not all U.S. design on the continent.

Is Russian Democracy Dying? Any discussion of modern day Russia inevitably turns to the country’s uncertain domestic political situation and what many observers, both Russian and foreign, have lamented as retreat from democracy. Critics point to greater consolidation of government control over major media outlets, marginalization of democratically-oriented political parties, use of law enforcements against Kremlin political opponents and abolition of gubernatorial elections as signs of Russia’s abandonment of democracy and possible return to its undemocratic past. Major human rights organizations have been critical of Russia’s internal developments; Freedom House, a highly regarded human rights advocacy and monitor of freedom worldwide considers Russia as “not free” with the overall rating of 6, with 7 being the least free.

The facts cited by these human rights organizations are not in dispute. The Russian government directly or indirectly controls major media outlets. The most biting programs mocking leading Russian politicians, including presidents Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin can no longer be seen on Russian TV.

However, contemporary Russian media, although more restrained than during the 1990's, is a far cry from what it was during the Soviet era or from what is implied in the short phrase "retreat from democracy." Russian newspapers, sold freely and available on the Internet, are full of diverse opinions; public opinion polls are freely disseminated; news reports ranging from Kremlin infighting to developments in Iraq are published in print and electronic media.

Russian media are certainly not as free-wheeling as they were during the 1990's. But any claim of Russian retreat from democracy ignores the fact that Russia in the 1990's was not a democracy either. Does increased control of the media by the Russian government represent a bigger blow to democracy in Russia than ownership or control of major TV and print outlets by powerful businessmen who did not shy away from editorial interference when their business or political interests so required? Who bears greater responsibility for many Russians' cynical attitudes toward freedom of the press—President Vladimir Putin who has sought to consolidate his control over major media, or those oligarchs who used their media holdings as a tool of their business and political pursuits?

The issue of freedom in Russia too deserves a more nuanced consideration. There is little doubt that a number of steps by the Kremlin toward greater centralization of power and authority in the hands of the federal government is at odds with its stated commitment to greater democracy and open society. But does Russia deserve its "Not Free" rating in 2005 more than it did in 1996, when it held a rather unfair and unbalanced presidential election? Or 1994 and 1995, when it waged a brutal war in Chechnya? Or in 1993, when the Yeltsin government shelled the parliament building in an effort to resolve a constitutional crisis? During all those years, Russia was rated as "Partially Free."

The notion that Russian democracy is dead or dying ignores widespread grass-roots unrest triggered in recent months by the Russian government's unpopular social welfare reforms. People have been organizing and marching in the streets to protest government policies. After months of protests that have confronted the Russian government with a crisis like no other in recent years, Russian democracy is no less alive than it was when Boris Yeltsin was reelected to his second term in an election that was anything but fair.

Rumors of Russian democracy's demise are not only premature, but ignore the impact of such factors as the ever-expanding access to the Internet in many Russian cities in towns; cell phone use; ability to travel abroad; ability by foreigners to travel deep into the Russian heartland. Russia is no longer cut off from the outside world by the Iron Curtain. All this is having impact in many, often immeasurable ways—from the emergence of hundreds of civic organizations at the grass-roots level to academic debates about globalization and its impact on Russia, to the emergence of new independent candidates in the 2008 election to succeed—or challenge, whatever the case may be—President Vladimir Putin. None of these phenomena promise quick change, but they are signs that changes are taking place.

When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, it was universally recognized that Russian democracybuilding would be a difficult and ambitious generational project. 15 years into that project one thing is clear: the future of Russian democracy will remain uncertain for a long time to come. Any judgment about its quality or condition at this point is premature and inaccurate at best.

Is Russia Moving toward Authoritarianism? As a corollary to debates about Russian democracy, students of Russian domestic politics have raised the question of whether Russia is moving toward a more authoritarian system of government.

Surface signs have definitely pointed in the direction of a system that places greater power and authority, as well as greater control over resources, into the hands of the federal executive at the expense of regional governors, legislature and even courts. This has manifested itself in the reform of the Federation Council, which diminished the power and authority of popularly elected governors, reform, which was followed by subsequent elimination of gubernatorial elections altogether.

This was further manifested in the emergence of the pro-Kremlin “party of power” and the federal government’s domination of the Duma with its help, marginalization of other political parties and proliferation of electoral techniques that while certainly not invented in Russia and imported into Russian political life well before Vladimir Putin’s tenure, were put to frequent and widespread use in multiple election campaigns on his watch. Other manifestations of authoritarian tendencies in Russian domestic affairs have taken the form of attempts by the Kremlin to establish greater control over the business community and its role in the nation’s political life.

However, this trend, which began soon after President Putin’s rise to the presidency of Russia, has progressed against the background of disasters and setbacks that have highlighted the shortcomings and failures of the Russian government and its inability to act in a crisis, respond to new challenges and cope with their aftermath. The Kursk submarine disaster, the failure to put an end to the war in Chechnya, the growing threat of domestic terrorism, the hostage dramas in Moscow and Beslan, and most recently the political and social crisis triggered by the welfare reform, have brought to light the fact that far from being authoritarian, the Russian state is dangerously close to being chaotic.

To the people of Russia this comes as no surprise. Public opinion polls consistently demonstrate low confidence on the part of the Russian people in their government’s ability to perform the most basic functions—protect the nation’s wealth, sovereignty and territorial integrity; provide for the poor and the weak; and protect citizens against crime and violence.

An authoritarian system may be the goal pursued by President Vladimir Putin and his political advisors. Having concentrated a great deal of decision-making authority and resources under its control, the Kremlin should be omnipotent. Yet, real power, the ability to formulate and execute policies, to produce results, to deal with crises and their aftermath, to effect change—all that so far has proven elusive to the degree that various

branches of the Russian government and the country's far-flung provinces appear out of control, driven not by a vision of national interest and will imposed from the center, but narrow, parochial concerns or corporate interests of local elites. In December 2004, two percent of participants in a public opinion survey feared introduction of a "dictatorship based on force;" 15 percent feared anarchy and government incompetence; and 16 percent feared the breakup of Russia.

What Is to Be Done about Russian Democracy? How should the United States react to developments in Russia? As policy experts and leaders on both sides of the Atlantic debate policy toward Russia, calls to expel Russia from G-8 have been heard with increased frequency. The most frequently cited reason for it is that Russia does not deserve a seat at the table of the world's most advanced industrialized democracies, especially in the light of its retreat from democracy in recent years.

Indeed, on the one hand, the state and direction of Russia's democratic transformation is uncertain. Russian democracy is not of the same variety as that of the United States, Great Britain or Germany. That is not subject to serious debate.

But on the other hand, to many observers of Russian democracy inside and outside of Russia, the notion that Russia should be kicked out of G-8 now is just as counterintuitive as the notion that Russia belonged among the *crème de la crème* of industrialized democracies in the 1990's, when it gradually became accepted there as a full member of that select group.

Russian acceptance into G-8 was based on the principle, embraced by several U.S. Administrations of both political parties, that Russia's integration into major international institutions would secure Russia's constructive posture abroad and promote positive change at home. In shaping relations between Russia and the G-7, the leaders on both sides of the Atlantic and Japan took the long view of Russia's transformation. Excluding Russia from that group now would mark a departure from that view, ignore important developments in Russia and abandon the vision the West put in place as the foundation of its relations with Russia at the end of the Cold War—a vision of Russia integrated into the Atlantic and Pacific economic, political and security structures—and abandon it prematurely with the most adverse consequences for both Russia and its G-8 partners themselves.

How should the United States then respond to developments in Russia?—As a constructive observer and partner who is fully aware of the complexity of the task ahead, of the national sensitivities and peculiarities due to Russia's historical and cultural preferences and traditions; as an interlocutor who understands that his own record of engagement on this issue has at times lacked consistency and impartiality; and, of course, as a candid critic in those instances where he feels his core interests and principles are at stake.

Russia and Her Neighbors. Russia's pattern of behavior toward her neighbors has been the other major area of recent criticism of Russian international behavior. Russian

meddling in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova has generated further calls for expelling Russia from G-8 and a more confrontational stance toward Russia on the part of its G-8 partners in the international arena.

Once again, the facts are not in dispute. Russian heavy-handed interference in its neighbors' affairs is well documented. However, this is an area where once again Russian behavior is more apt to be interpreted as a sign of weakness, rather than strength.

The public record of Russian involvement in Ukraine's "Orange Revolution," Georgia's "Rose Revolution," recent elections in Moldova and breakaway Georgian province of Abkhazia suggest suggests that Russian influence in the former provinces of the Soviet Union is on the wane. Russia appears to be so unpopular and its interference so heavy-handed that it often produces the opposite effect from what is presumably intended. The results of recent elections in Moldova suggest that a candidate could be well served by Russian interference against him, for such interference is likely to help one's credentials as an independent-minded leader.

However, in areas other than politics, Russia plays an important and at times positive role. This may not be the result of its deliberate policies, but Russia, especially as its coffers swell from the flood of petrodollars, remains an important market for excess labor and goods from some of the neighboring countries, where access to Russian market is a matter of critically important remittances, export revenues and as a result social stability and even survival in some of the poorest areas. It is these flows of goods, people, services and money, often undetected or overlooked by the policy community, that comprise many ties that continue to bind Russia to its neighbors.

Perhaps, the biggest problem that Russia poses in relation to its neighbors is in the area of the so-called "frozen conflicts"—in Abkhazia, Moldova, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Russian involvement with a number of these breakaway regimes is a long-standing irritant in Moscow's relations with some of its neighbors, the United States and other countries.

The dilemma facing U.S. policymakers in this area is whether to confront Russia more forcefully or stay the course of patient, albeit unproductive dialogue. The balance of arguments appears to favor dialogue, though one that needs to be intensified if we are to achieve our stated objective of "unfreezing" these conflicts.

Additional arguments favoring dialogue include changes in Russian attitudes toward these conflicts. Increasingly, Russian interlocutors have acknowledged that developments in the South Caucasus have an impact on the situation in the North Caucasus, where Russian authorities face a growing prospect of destabilization. Some Russian analysts have begun to come to terms with the realization that they lack the capabilities to address the problem of security and stability in the Caucasus alone and that they will need to deal with other parties involved in the region, especially as the United States and Europe carry on with greater involvement there.

The discussion of “frozen conflicts” is bound to come to the fore of the trans-Atlantic agenda for one more reason: the final status of Kosovo. As Europe and the United States approach that thorny issue, as the option of independence for Kosovo looms large in discussions on both sides of the Atlantic, the Abkhaz, the Ossetians and others will ask: if independence is OK for Kosovo, why not for us? It is equally likely to be an issue of considerable importance for Russia, which will be torn between its preference for client-regimes in Abkhazia and Ossetia and its fear that Kosovo’s independence may be the harbinger of the international community’s attitudes toward Chechnya. A preventive dialogue with Russia on this subject is essential to avoid a crisis in relations over this issue.

Chechnya. One of the thorniest problems on the U.S.-Russian agenda will have to be discussed as well. Long treated as a major human rights concern for the United States, this issue has acquired new dimensions—sovereignty vs. self-determination in the context of Kosovo, as discussed in preceding paragraphs; regional stability and security because of spillover into the South Caucasus; and counterterrorism in the aftermath of hostage-takings in Moscow and Beslan, as well as other terrorist incidents. Recognizing the complex and multi-faceted nature of the problem is the first step toward addressing our respective concerns.

Demands and ultimatums, as well as criticism of Russian crisis response, as was the case in the aftermath of Beslan, can only lead to Russian intransigence on this issue. There are no certain answers or solutions to this problem in advance. However, recognizing Russian sensitivities in times of national tragedies such as Beslan, being honest and realistic about our own ability to advise and to help in very difficult circumstances is the first step toward honest dialogue, possibly shared interests and even solutions.

Iran. In looking at Russia in the context of Iran’s WMD ambitions, there is both good news and bad: Russia is neither the problem nor is it the solution. On the one hand, Presidents Putin and Bush have jointly stated that Iran should not be allowed to obtain a nuclear weapon. On the other hand, Russia continues to provide equipment for Iranians’ nuclear energy program.

From Moscow’s perspective, Iran’s program represents a major export opportunity for its nuclear industry that has few domestic or international markets. It perceives Iran as a major political player in the region; an Islamic country that has been largely deferential to Russian interests in the past; and a key partner in the Gulf region.

For the Russians, the Iranian issue is not high enough on their list of the most pressing security concerns. While Moscow would prefer the status quo and considers the prospect of a nuclear armed Iran to be an unwelcome one, the threat it would pose is not so great as to move the Russian Government to jeopardize other Russian interests in Iran in order to resolve this issue. At the same time, Moscow would not want to be cut out of any scheme to solve the issue put together by Europe and the United States.

Russian officials and analysts understand that it is an important issue for the international community, one that is high on the agenda of its (Russia's) principal interlocutors—the United States, United Kingdom, Germany and France. Russian policymakers would most likely view their involvement in solving the Iranian nuclear crisis as a great power prerogative, as well as a function of their interests in that country.

When discussing Iran's nuclear ambitions, Russian analysts appear to be more concerned about a US intervention than about Iran's ambitions as such. US intervention, they fear, would jeopardize Russian commercial interests; complicate relations with the United States, Israel, and others; cause further regional destabilization; and set off other ripple effects that Russia may be ill-equipped to handle. Some in Russia view the Iranian nuclear program as chiefly aimed at the U.S. and therefore a positive in countering growing U.S. "adventurism."

That is not to say that Russia is cavalier about Iranian intentions; they continue to monitor Tehran's behavior for signs of greater ambition and possible mischief. Generally though, while Russia might object to solutions that rely on use of force, it is unlikely to become a true obstacle to U.S. policy in the region. It is unlikely that Russia will ever become a major player in dealing with an Iranian nuclear program and would probably be more reactive than proactive.

At the same time, Russia could play a useful role in the general framework of the international community's response to the crisis. In doing so, Russia is more likely to use the international legal framework than adopt a position that could leave senior policymakers vulnerable to domestic charges of caving in to U.S. pressure. For example, Russia's agreement with Iran on spent nuclear fuel ran against U.S. policy preferences, but instead emphasized compliance with Russian obligations under the NPT Treaty. Perhaps, one collateral benefit of the agreement is that it underscores the point that Iran does not need to develop its own full nuclear fuel cycle.

Russian behavior in the run up to OIF could be indicative of Russian behavior in a future crisis involving Iran. Unwilling to jeopardize its bilateral relations with the United States or Europe, Russia would likely adopt a "wait-and-see" attitude and watch the debate unfold among allies on both sides of the Atlantic. Russia would likely shy away from a leadership position in that debate, leaving that role to others, while insisting on keeping the tensions confined to the UNNPT framework, which would give it a major decision-making role, shield its equities vis a vis the United States and Europe, as well as maximize its leverage vis a vis Iran and neutralize domestic anti-U.S. sentiments.

Summing up. U.S.-Russian relations are neither as bad as critics charge, nor as good as optimists hope they can be. It is indeed a relationship that has fallen far short of its potential. At the same time, it is a relationship that has avoided many very real downturns and certainly avoided the worst. For the United States, it remains a relationship that could facilitate enormously U.S. pursuit of its geopolitical and strategic objectives—stability and peace in Europe, balanced relations with China, global war on terror, counterproliferation and energy security. It is a relationship that if it turns sour and

adversarial, could seriously complicate U.S. pursuit of these objectives and the prosecution of the war on terror in Eurasia, as well as elsewhere in the world. It is a relationship that was founded at the end of the Cold War on the realization that the road ahead would be long, difficult and involve change that would be nothing short of generational. It is also a relationship that has paid off in a number of key areas—NATO and EU enlargement, Cooperative Threat Reduction, cooperation in the war on terror, etc. It has paid off for the United States through perseverance and adherence to the long view. There is little in the balance of Russia's domestic trends or international behavior to warrant a fundamental reassessment of U.S. commitment to that relationship, let alone a radical departure from it.

And while on the subject of radical departures, anyone considering a fundamental change in this relationship ought to consider the implications and costs of the alternative—a policy of neocontainment of Russia. They would be enormous, ranging from the added burden of military encirclement of Russia to political, involving a new rift in trans-Atlantic relations, for such a radical turnaround is unlikely to be endorsed by Europe. To paraphrase an old-fashioned Soviet phrase, the correlation of factors favors staying the course.

* The views expressed in this testimony are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.