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**RUSSIA**

## **For Real Results, Let's Get Real**

By Eugene B. Rumer

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The news from Russia and the experts' assessment of it are grim. The country continues its retreat from democracy, its economy is addicted to oil and its foreign policy is ham-handed. How much worse can it get?

Before embracing this conventional wisdom, let's review facts.

The Putin administration has curtailed media freedoms, marginalized liberal political parties and concentrated power in the Kremlin. But many Russian print and Web-based outlets run articles that criticize the government and openly ridicule President Vladimir V. Putin, some even calling him a liar. Internet use is growing, and there are no barriers blocking access to foreign and domestic sources of information. Millions of Russians travel abroad. There's a lot not to like in Russian domestic politics, but it would be premature to write them off.

Russia is addicted to oil. About 25% of its gross domestic product and 40% of its government revenue come from the energy trade. Its growth depends on energy exports because it lacks a solid economic foundation. Recent governmental actions against the Yukos Oil Co. and British Petroleum's Russian joint venture, coupled with its threats to close off the oil sector to foreign investment, don't bode well for Russia. Nevertheless, the boost its economy gets from hundreds of billions of dollars in export revenues will last quite a while. Russia lacks the rule of law, transparent markets and a fair tax regime, but as long as energy and other commodity prices stay high, they will cushion the country against sudden shocks in the international marketplace.

Russian policy toward its neighbors has been heavy-handed — and it has backfired. Its interference in Georgia in 2003, in Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" last year and in the recent election campaign in Moldova all boosted candidates who opposed closer ties to Moscow. But Russia hardly intervened in Kyrgyzstan's recent crisis, and Putin has taken steps to repair relations with Ukraine. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei V. Lavrov has announced concessions on the most sensitive issue in Georgian-Russian relations — Russian troop withdrawal. Could the Kremlin be rethinking its approach to its neighbors?

Putin created a stir when he recently said the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe in the 20th century. Most people outside Russia don't remember it that way. But that is how many Russians think about it. When Putin speaks to and about his country's greatest generation, his audience is the soldiers and their families who defended the Soviet Union in World War II. They were ready to die "for motherland, for Stalin." The survivors saw the motherland and its ideals shatter in 1991, followed by rampant inflation that wiped out their savings and by the oligarchs who stole their patrimony. For Russia's greatest generation, it was indeed a catastrophe.

Recent polls by the independent Levada Center show that 70% of Russian citizens say they think that Mikhail S. Gorbachev's perestroika did more harm than good, and 66% approve of Putin's overall performance as president. And more than 20% say they think that Josef Stalin was a wise and strong leader.

This is not the Russia we thought we would be dealing with when Boris N. Yeltsin climbed on a tank in August 1991 and called upon the people of Russia and the Soviet Union to stand up for democracy and freedom. But nor is this the Russia we feared when extreme nationalist Vladimir V. Zhirinovskiy received a surprisingly large share of the vote in the parliamentary election of 1993.

How then do we deal with it?

In the 1990s, when the United States was more active in promoting democracy in Russia and Moscow was much more receptive to our entreaties, our policy didn't produce the expected results. Many Russians blame the chaos of that decade on what they perceive to be "made-in-the-U.S.A. reforms," which ended in an economic and political meltdown in August 1998.

Today, nearly two of every three Russians say they think that the U.S. "unceremoniously interferes in the internal affairs of other countries and imposes its values on them," according to polls. This is not an auspicious environment for the U.S. to push Russia to renew its democratic aspirations. .

Rather than insist on democracy as a precondition to better relations, the U.S. should pursue a course that takes full measure of Russia's internal evolution and explores opportunities to advance our interests inside and around Russia.

We can build on the nuclear security agreement reached by President Bush and Putin in Bratislava in February. We can work with the Russians and the Georgians to finalize their agreement on Russian troop withdrawal and offer financial assistance to implement it. We can try to convince Russia that a nuclear Iran is dangerous.

None of this requires concessions to Russia. It requires dealing with the Russia we've got, not the one we would like to have. Russia's internal evolution is going to be its domestic project, not ours.

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