

CURRENT HISTORY

October 2005

"Should Western leaders try to stop this perilous drift of disengagement? Yes. Can they stop it anytime in the foreseeable future? Not likely."

Russia and the West: A Dangerous Drift

MICHAEL McFAUL

Early in his tenure as general secretary of the Soviet Communist party, Mikhail Gorbachev took a radical first step toward reversing decades of Soviet isolation from the outside world with his quest for a "common European home." Gorbachev eventually came to acknowledge that a common European home would mean that most of the change would have to come first from within the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union. But even as the monumental prerequisites for integration became clear, including the dismantling of command economies and authoritarian regimes and the creation of market and democratic institutions, Gorbachev stayed the course.

So too did his postcommunist successor in the Kremlin, Boris Yeltsin, who pursued the same objective of integration into the West, but with even greater vigor. Whereas Gorbachev hoped that the East might meet West in some transformational blending of socialism and capitalism, Yeltsin was fully prepared to accept the superiority of Western economic and political institutions and the necessity therefore for Russia to adopt and build them. In his first years in power, Yeltsin also did not fear Western multilateral institutions such as the Group of Seven, the World Trade Organization, the European Union, or even the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, but aggressively sought to join them. Yeltsin's successor, Vladimir Putin, also began his term as Russian president with a clear proclivity for integration. Initially, Putin looked to the West, both as a model for Russia's internal development and as a place (however abstractly defined) for Russia to join.

Generally, Western leaders have reacted favorably to the integrationist push from first the Soviet Union and then Russia over the past two decades. Intermittently, especially around presidential election time in the United States, calls for a return to containment or disengagement have surfaced in public debate. Never, however, has containment or active disengagement been the official policy of a major Western country since Gorbachev came to power 20 years ago. Instead, the central foreign policy agenda toward the former communist world, including Russia, has been integration.

Yet never in two decades has this strategic agenda of integration been so threatened as it is today. Three factors have combined to make Russian integration into the West a foreign policy project with very little momentum. First, under Putin, Russia's political system has drifted toward autocracy. Integrating nondemocracies into Western institutions is much harder than integrating countries ruled by democratic regimes. Second, the focus of American foreign policy has shifted dramatically since September 11, 2001. A decade ago, devising policies to bring Russia into the Western community of democratic states was a top concern. Today, President George W. Bush is focused primarily on the wider Middle East; all other parts of the world receive much less attention. Third, European Union expansion—the most powerful and successful tool for promoting democracy and integrating the former communist world into the West—has now come to an impasse. These three factors, and the interaction among them, have stalled the integration project.

RUSSIA'S THERMIDOR

If you asked Putin if he is a European, he would answer unequivocally yes. In Russia's longstanding debate about geographical and cultural identity, Putin sides with the Westernizers, not the Slavophiles. He

MICHAEL McFAUL, a Current History contributing editor, is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, a professor of political science at Stanford University, and a nonresident senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment.

speaks German, not Chinese or Arabic. He truly believes that his model of economic development is a Western model, not an Asian or uniquely Russian model. He has never espoused the construction of a political system that he considers an alternative to democracy. As president, Putin has courted cordial relations with nearly all nations in the world, but he has devoted particular attention to developing bilateral ties with the large countries of Europe. Especially after 9-11, Putin has framed world politics as a competition between the “civilized” West and Islamic terrorists.

At the same time, and in contrast to both Gorbachev and Yeltsin, Putin has not defined integration into the West as the central objective of his presidency. Instead, after taking office in the spring of 2000, Putin made the rebuilding of the Russian state his primary goal. After a decade of revolutionary turmoil, this mission was inevitable. However unintended, Gorbachev’s reforms eventually unleashed major political, economic, and social upheaval in the Soviet Union and then Russia. In scale and scope, these changes rivaled the “great” revolutions in France at the end of the eighteenth century and in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century.

There was nothing great about these changes, however, for most Russian citizens. As in all major revolutions, this period of upheaval exposed the average Russian to immense economic uncertainty and physical insecurity when the Soviet and the Russian state essentially collapsed. Thus, by the end of the 1990s the Russian revolution had reached a period equivalent to the Thermidor in France, a moment when society had tired of revolutionary change and yearned for the restoration of stability.

Society’s demand for stability and security spiked in the fall of 1999 after terrorist attacks against Russian civilians, and Putin understood these circumstances. First as prime minister, then as president, he reacted swiftly and forcefully to Chechen insurgents who had invaded the Russian republic of Dagestan. Then he went on the offensive, invading Chechnya in the fall of 1999 and vowing to reaffirm the power of the Russian state in this most anarchic part of the Russian Federation. This objective—the restoration of order through the strengthening of the Russian state—has become the defining theme of Putin’s presidency. Without question, by the end of the 1990s, Russia was in dire need of a more effective state, and Putin correctly diagnosed the problem.

The best that might be hoped for is engagement and integration of Russians, not Russia, into Western institutions.

The vacuum that had been created by the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991 had to be filled. As a sober-minded, tough-sounding former KGB officer, Putin seemed to many Russians like the man for the job.

SLIDING TOWARD AUTOCRACY

Putin, however, has a flawed and outdated theory of state building, one that also has had major side effects, first for Russian democracy and later for Russian capitalism. Putin may think of himself as a European who looks to the West—not the East or South—for cultural identification if not even inspiration, but his ideas about the state were formed much more by his own professional background and historical experience than by any Western political model or treatise.

At its core, Putin’s strategy for strengthening the state has focused primarily on eliminating checks and balances on presidential power, rather than strengthening the effectiveness of state institutions. Putin wrongly equates democracy with weakness and centralized authority with powerful rule. Consequently, he has devoted tremendous time and energy to weakening or eliminating every independent source of political power within the Russian political system. Putin did not inherit a consolidated democracy when

he became president in 2000, and he has not radically violated the 1993 constitution, cancelled elections, or arrested hundreds of political opponents. Russia today remains much freer and more democratic than the Soviet Union. However, if the formal institutions of Russian democracy remain in place, the actual democratic content of these institutions has eroded considerably on Putin’s watch.

Putin has effectively seized control of all national television networks, emasculated the power of the Federation Council (Russia’s upper parliamentary house), tamed regional barons who once served as a potent balance to Yeltsin’s presidential rule, arbitrarily used the law to jail or chase away political foes, removed candidates from electoral ballots, harassed and arrested leaders of nongovernment organizations, and weakened Russia’s independent political parties. In the wake of the horrific terrorist attack in Beslan in September 2004, Putin announced plans for further centralizing political power in Russia, floating the idea that governors should be appointed rather than elected, and that all, not just half, the members of the Duma (the parliament’s lower house) should be chosen

through proportional representation. Both changes, which were eventually implemented, strengthen the power of the president and weaken even further the power of the parliament and the governors.

At the same time, Putin has increased the role of the Federal Security Service (FSB, the successor to the KGB) in governing Russia, and he has arbitrarily wielded state authorities such as the courts, tax inspectors, and police for political ends. Today, power is more concentrated in the office of the president than at anytime in Russia's post-Soviet history. The Russian polity has considerably less pluralism in 2005 than it did in 2000. In addition, the human rights of individual Russian citizens are less secure today than when Putin came to power.

HEADED FOR A FALL?

In the first years of Putin's political "reforms," the economy grew at a rapid pace and public opinion polls reflected a sense of stability within society. Over time, however, the limits of Putin's strategy for state building have become increasingly apparent. Although there is a correlation between Putin's political changes and economic growth, the causation is much more difficult to discern. Economic growth began before Putin's political changes were implemented, spurred first by devaluation of the ruble in 1998 and then by rising oil prices. Some have posited that Putin's autocratic ways, however bad for democracy, have nonetheless created an atmosphere of stability for investors, both domestic and foreign. But the manner in which the state seized the assets of oil magnate Mikhail Khodorkovsky (in parallel to criminal charges brought against the billionaire and his colleagues) undermined any presumption of secure property rights in Putin's Russia. In 2004, capital flight soared back into the tens of billions. According to the head of the Economy Ministry, Russian firms took \$19 billion out of the country in the first quarter of 2005 alone.

Even with oil prices hovering above \$60 a barrel, economic growth sagged in the first quarter of 2005, compelling forecasts for the year to be adjusted downward. A new correlation can now be identified: growing authoritarianism and declining economic growth rates. Whether these two trends are causally related can be determined only with time, but it stands to reason that strengthened rule of law and greater accountability and transparency would foster increased investment and growth.

Nor does the Russian state appear to be any better at providing security than it was five years ago, in particular from Chechen separatists. The siege of the Beslan school last year was the most terrible ter-

rorist incident in Russia since the 1999 attacks, but not the first. The list of victims is as long as it is shocking: 120 hostages died in a standoff at a Moscow theater in October 2002 and more than 270 people, including the Kremlin-backed president of Chechnya, Akhmad Kadyrov, died in eight incidents between December 2002 and May 2004. In June 2004, 92 were killed at a police station. On August 24, 2004, two passenger jets exploded, killing 89. And 10 more people died on August 31, 2004, when a suicide bomber struck outside a subway station in Moscow. Within Chechnya and its neighborhood, smaller-scale terrorist attacks have continued throughout this year.

Against this backdrop of carnage, Russians understandably have begun to doubt the effectiveness of their security forces in carrying out a war on terrorism. Instead of a strong police force, Russians see a corrupt one. Indeed, Putin's move to centralize Russian institutions has done little to reduce graft, and instead has impaired traditional instruments for battling corruption, such as an independent media and genuine opposition political parties. Putin's restructuring has not produced a more effective state, but a weak, corrupt, and unaccountable regime: authoritarianism without authority. It is also now a regime with only one real decision maker—Putin—in a country too big and too complex for one man to handle.

In fact, a series of moves designed to increase the Kremlin's decision-making powers is now showing signs of undermining Putin's own political standing. Former senior government officials in Putin's administration, including most prominently former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, have openly criticized Putin's ability to lead. Even more ominous are attacks on Putin's leadership from critics on the right, who claim that he is too weak and not authoritarian enough to govern Russia. Public support for Putin's policies, such as his strategy in fighting the Chechen war and his ideas for welfare reform, has fallen considerably, well below majorities. Even his own personal approval rating, rock solid for years, has recently shown signs of slippage. While no one is prepared to forecast exactly how Putin will fall from power, some are now ready to predict that he will fall, an argument that would have been unheard of just a year ago.

If the United States and Europe were fully committed to—and totally focused on—engaging and integrating Russia, the growing autocracy within Russia would make the task much harder. After all, it was internal change toward greater pluralism within the Soviet Union and then Russia that

prompted a Western policy of increased cooperation with Moscow. It should not be surprising that internal changes within Russia in the opposite direction should have the reverse effect.

The challenge, however, is exacerbated by the fact that the Bush administration and European leaders are not focused on the task of engaging Russia, let alone of bringing Russia into the West's array of multinational institutions. Instead, leaders in Washington and Europe are focused on other security and foreign policy priorities. For many Western leaders, Russia's growing authoritarianism might well be a blessing in disguise, offering them a perfect excuse not to tackle the difficult and complex problem of how to anchor Russia into the West.

SHIFTING PRIORITIES IN WASHINGTON

For the second half of the twentieth century, how to deal with Soviet power and Soviet communism constituted the central problem for American strategic thinking. All other issues in US foreign policy were derivatives of Washington's Soviet policy.

As the Soviet Union collapsed, dealing with Moscow remained the top priority for American foreign policy makers. For the elder Bush and his administration, managing the Soviet dissolution and avoiding conflict within the territory of the former Soviet Union were the primary concerns. In Bill Clinton's first term of office, assisting Russia's process of political and economic transformation was the central objective. By Clinton's second term, priorities had already begun to shift. Issues such as NATO expansion or stopping ethnic cleansing in Kosovo became greater concerns, relegating Russia policy to a second-order issue.

Even when Russia fell from the core to the periphery of America's international concerns, Clinton still remained committed both to constructive engagement as a strategy for dealing with Russia and to integration as the goal of this engagement. The Clinton administration pushed hard to invent new forms of interaction between Russia and NATO, lobbied reluctant members of the Group of Seven to allow Russia to join, and saw Russian accession into the World Trade Organization as both good and inevitable.

As a presidential candidate, George W. Bush declared the approach to Russia by Clinton and Vice President Al Gore a total failure. His central criticism was that the Clinton team had devoted too much time and resources to trying to change Russia internally. Bush's foreign policy advisers, headed by Stanford provost Condoleezza Rice, believed that the best way to repair US-Russian relations was to treat Russia like an international power. They advo-

cated greater focus on the great powers in the world, such as Russia and China, and less attention to "humanitarian concerns" such as Haiti, Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo.

Greater attention did not mean a softer line. On the contrary, in reference to both Russia and China, Bush campaign officials promised to depart from the Clinton accommodationist strategy and adhere to a more confrontational approach. With Russia, Bush advisers promised to end the "happy talk" and discontinue the over-personalized approach that they believed Clinton practiced with Yeltsin. They also threatened sanctions if Russia continued to supply Iran with nuclear technologies and pledged to not consider Russian interests in dealing with European security matters.

Once in office, Bush did not make changing Russia internally or integrating Russia into the West core objectives. Instead, obtaining Putin's acquiescence to the abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty was the top priority. This required personal engagement with Putin, which Bush initiated with real success at the first Bush-Putin summit in May 2001.

The bond between Bush and Putin grew even stronger after 9-11. The Russian president was one of the first foreign leaders to call Bush to communicate his full support for the United States and the American people. Putin expressed sympathy as the leader of a country that also had suffered from acts of terrorism against civilians in the nation's capital. Eventually, Putin followed his words of support with helpful policies, including increased direct humanitarian and military aid to the guerrilla Northern Alliance in Afghanistan and acceptance of US air bases in Central Asia. For several months after 9-11, the identification of a new common enemy united the United States and Russia. Joint interests and joint actions, rather than incorporating Russia into Western international institutions, seemed like the more effective path for deepening ties between the two countries. Importantly, this cooperation did not depend on Russian reforms, third countries, or international bureaucrats.

The warm and fuzzy feelings between Washington and Moscow evaporated, however, in the run-up to the US-led invasion of Iraq, which Russia opposed. Since then, Bush has asserted three foreign policy priorities: fighting the global war on terrorism, preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and spreading liberty. Russia's contribution to the first two priorities is seen by most in the Bush administration as marginal at best. As for spreading liberty, a close relationship with Moscow is a liability, not an asset.

The basis on which to deepen US-Russian ties, therefore, is not currently apparent. Bush himself seems disappointed with Putin and his autocratic ways, yet also unsure of how to recalibrate American policy toward Russia at this late stage in his presidency. The current drift in US-Russian relations—stable, but stagnant—seems likely to endure for the remainder of Bush's term in office.

To be clear, the main impetus for the drift in US-Russian relations is not the growing authoritarianism within Russia, but the shifting American foreign policy priorities. Today, the Bush administration has a clear geographic focus when pursuing the war on terrorism, counterproliferation, or democracy promotion: it is the greater Middle East, not Russia or the postcommunist world. For Bush and his senior foreign policy advisers, the magnitude of the problems in Iraq simply eclipses any time or attention devoted to other issues and places.

After Iraq, Afghanistan, and the greater Middle East, dealing with China as a rising power and repairing relations with allies in Europe and Asia all rank higher than Russia on Bush's list of foreign policy priorities. The new dynamism in US-Indian relations may even have catapulted this once neglected country above Russia among Bush's priorities in his final years in office. The threat to US-Russian relations is not that Washington will develop a hostile or ineffective policy toward Russia. It is that Washington will develop no policy at all.

EUROPE LOOKS INWARD

Just as American foreign policy makers have turned their attention way from Russia, so too have European leaders. If American diplomats are focused on the greater Middle East, European diplomats are focused on saving Europe. The "no" votes against the European constitution in France and the Netherlands this spring, followed by a major budget crisis at the European Union summit in June, have rocked confidence in the future of the EU and especially its expansion. For the foreseeable future, the central priority for diplomats in European capitals will be the successful management of this current crisis, not engaging Russia.

No one in either Moscow or Brussels has seriously entertained the idea of Russian membership in the EU within the next few decades. As the recent referenda clearly demonstrated, Brussels has its hands full digesting the EU's 10 new member states. Consideration of even beginning talks about acces-

sion for non-EU Balkan states now seems premature, while many consider the agreement to begin negotiations with Turkey also premature if not a mistake entirely. A new amendment to the French constitution, requiring a referendum on any future new EU members, may delay Turkey's membership for decades, if not forever. Any discussion of Russian membership, therefore, is simply naïve.

There was hope in the past of developing some kind of special relationship between Russia and the EU, especially regarding issues of travel and trade. Russian officials decided not to join the EU's new European Neighborhood Policy, believing it was insulting to group a mighty country like Russia with the likes of Morocco or Syria. Instead, a creative yet ill-defined "four spaces" program was invented as a unique mechanism to dock the EU and Russia. To date little has been accomplished under this rubric.

With the EU now looking inward rather than outward, there is little reason to anticipate any new developments in the near future.

Meanwhile, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, occurring against the backdrop of Russia's autocratic drift, has created a new psychological border for Europe in the east. In the imagination of many, the new border between West and East is now between Ukraine and Russia, even if Ukraine and Russia (let alone Russia and Belarus) share cultural, linguistic, and historical attributes. The Orange Revolution altered Europe's map, pushing Donetsk closer to Paris and St. Petersburg closer to Beijing. Ukraine will not become an EU member for decades, but discussion about Ukraine in the EU (and NATO) is not considered farcical in the way that a similar discussion about Russia is.

In addition, the inclusion into the EU of several former communist countries with long and difficult relations with Russia has already had an impact on the way that Brussels deals with Moscow. For instance, the EU and its high representative for foreign policy, Javier Solana, might have played a much more conciliatory role toward Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma and his supporters in Russia during the Orange Revolution had Poland not been a member of the EU and Poland's President Alexander Kwasniewski a part of the mediation team in Kiev.

Heads of state in London, Paris, Berlin, and Rome still actively pursue bilateral relations with other countries, including Russia, independent of the EU. But leaders in these four capitals do not share a common strategy toward Russia. Tony Blair

Bush has asked much of Putin but has been unwilling to give much in return.

made great efforts to develop a personal rapport with Putin at the beginning of the decade, but the British prime minister has now reassessed Putin and has become seriously concerned about his autocratic policies. French President Jacques Chirac has moved in the opposite direction, initially concerned about Putin's war in Chechnya but now eager to court his Moscow counterpart as part of his strategy to balance American power.

German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder has remained supportive of Putin, in large measure because of Germany's reliance on Russian gas. But relations with Russia could sour somewhat after the recent German elections. The resurgent Christian Democrats do not have the same admiration for Putin that Schröder does. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi was shameful in his embrace of Putin's practices in Chechnya for reasons that remain mysterious, though he too may not be in power after the next Italian elections. Prime ministers and presidents in Nordic countries and the former communist world are much more skeptical about Putin. In other words, there is no common approach in Europe for how to deal with Putin and Russia. The likely result, especially given the current crisis within the EU, is greater drift in European-Russian relations.

BEYOND DRIFT

Should Western leaders try to stop this perilous drift of disengagement? Yes. Can they stop it anytime in the foreseeable future? Not likely. The United States and its European allies became significantly more secure when Kremlin leaders abandoned their dreams of building an alternative to the West and instead sought to integrate into the West. A democratic Russia anchored in the Western community of states would serve the long-term security and welfare interests of citizens in both Russia and the West. Conversely, a Russia disengaged, especially a future Russia ruled by autocrats, would become a new threat to the West.

Yet it is not obvious that a new transatlantic agenda for greater integration of the Russian state could be pursued at this precarious historical moment for the EU, the United States, and Russia. Given the range of enthusiasm in various capitals both for engagement with the Russian state and for cooperation among states within the West, it is also not clear that a common Western strategy for engaging Russia could be pursued.

Nor is Russia, for its part, eager to reinvent American and European foreign policies at a time

when Moscow elites already have become consumed with the question of who will succeed Putin and how. President Putin and his foreign policy team, as well as many others in the Russian foreign policy elite, have become deeply disappointed in what they have achieved from their close cooperation with Bush and his agenda. Bush has asked much of Putin but has been unwilling to give much in return, such as recognition for Russia's role in defeating the Taliban in Afghanistan, better trade conditions for Russian exports, or a higher profile more generally for Putin as an ally in the global war on terrorism. Few in Moscow therefore have an appetite for crafting a new grand agenda for Russian-American relations. Putin also is content to maintain the status quo in his various bilateral relations with European leaders. He wants above all to make sure that no common Western strategy for dealing with Russia emerges, especially regarding democracy and human rights.

In the current climate, the best that might be hoped for is engagement and integration of Russians, not Russia, into Western institutions. The battle for democracy within Russia will largely be won or lost by internal forces. In the margins the United States and Europe can help to tilt the balance in favor of those who support freedom. In seeking to influence economic and political developments inside Russia, the United States and Europe have few coercive tools available. Comprehensive, sustained, and meaningful engagement of all elements of Russian society, therefore, must be the strategy.

Moreover, Russian society wants to engage with the West. In an opinion poll conducted in January 2004, 75 percent of Russian respondents reported that they wanted their country to be an ally or friend of the West. Only 17 percent thought that the West should be treated as a rival, and less than 3 percent viewed the West as an enemy of Russia. Consequently, policies that promote contact between Russians, Europeans, and Americans—be they student exchanges, internships in Western businesses, policies that facilitate trade and investment, or NGO partnerships—must be pursued with greater rigor and more financial assistance.

It was common wisdom a decade ago to think that the integration of the Russian state into Western institutions would facilitate changes in Russian society. Now is the time to consider the opposite sequence—that the integration of Russian society into the West may in turn facilitate the Western integration of the Russian state. ■