



RESPONSE

A Dose of Realism on Russia

Nikolas K. Gvosdev

I would like to thank Professor Blank for his thoughtful comments and reasoned propositions (“The Great Russia Debate,” Spring 2006). All too often, the “Russia debate” is characterized by personal attacks and ad hominem arguments. However, not surprisingly, I do disagree with a number of points raised in his essay.

First, let me object to the characterization of the “realist approach” as “one of expediency.” *Expediency* is a loaded term, implying a lack of principles or consistency in one’s approach to policy. Expediency as a guiding principle in foreign affairs fails Hans Morgenthau’s own test that “a rational foreign policy minimizes risks and maximizes benefits and, hence, complies both with the moral precept of prudence and the political requirement of success.”

It is in that spirit of morality and practicality that contemporary American realists assess policy towards Russia.

One failing in the U.S. debate over “what to do about” Russia is to confuse realistic assessments with desired preferences. Stephen Blank and others have a long list of very legitimate grievances about the way in which Russia is governed and how it conducts its foreign policy. Most American realists likewise have profound disagreements with many actions taken by Putin. But structuring the Russia debate around a clash between “Putin apologists” and his critics is counterproductive. My 2004 *National Interest* article, “The Sources of Russian Conduct,” did not argue that developments in Russia were our ideal preferences, but rather posed the question: “Yet even with all these disappointments, is this a



NIKOLAS K. GVOSDEV is Editor of *The National Interest*.

Russia with which we can live?”

One component of a rational, realist foreign policy is being able to draw a distinction between one's preferences and one's priorities. This is why, in answering the question I posed, I noted, "If Eurasia were the only item on the agenda, things might be different. But it isn't. 9/11 made sure of that."

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Let's take the discussion about the Putin regime. Throughout this essay, Blank seems to work from the assumption that we have a viable choice between Putin's managed pluralism/soft authoritarianism and full-fledged, developed liberal democracy. I disagree. My so-called "ringing endorsement" for managed pluralism is based on my assessment—shared by noted Russian scholars and political liberals like Dimitri Trenin and Mark Urnov—that Russia needs time, continued economic growth and further development of its civil society before it can sustain developed democracy. Under those conditions, managed pluralism seems preferable to an outright dictatorship of either the red or the brown variety. It is also, in my opinion, better than the chaotic and unsuitable pseudo-democracies of the Yeltsin type which in abstract terms might be freer but leave the bulk of the population with no ability to exercise or

enjoy these liberties. Yes, there are no guarantees, but the East Asian experience indicates that managed pluralist systems have better odds at transitioning to long-term, stable democracy than the repetitive cycle of democratic revolutions, coups and dictatorships that have characterized democratization attempts in Latin America and Africa.

And despite Western support, liberal democratic forces have steadily lost ground in Russia since the 1993 Duma elections. The 2005 Moscow city elections should have been a wake-up call. The liberals tried to make this ballot a "referendum" on democracy, yet, in the richest, freest, most liberal, best-educated city in the country, under conditions far less onerous than those in 1990, when the *demokraty* were swept into power, these forces received just one-fifth of the vote. It was not a particularly ringing endorsement of the notion that liberals are waiting in the wings, lacking only sufficient encouragement from Washington.

We must also avoid falling into the trap that being in political opposition to Putin makes one a liberal democrat. At the "Drugaya Rossiya" (Alternative Russia) conference held prior to the G-8 summit in St. Petersburg, plenty of criticism of the Kremlin was heard from anti-democratic and anti-American political movements, such as Viktor Anpilov's revolutionary communists and Eduard Limonov's neo-fascist National Bolsheviks.

Similarly, we should not confuse apples and oranges. From the U.S., British or German perspective, the Putin government is indeed "dysfunctional" and unable to address for the longterm the "most urgent challenges to Russian society." But compared to Yeltsin's pseudo-democracy

of the 1990s or Gorbachev's failed *perestroika* of the 1980s, the Putin regime has been quite successful at slowing, halting and even reversing some of the most damaging trends. Most Russians today have no difficulty in answering the question, "Are you better off today than you were eight years ago?" with a resounding affirmative. This, in turn, helps to explain the continued support Putin enjoys—including, significantly, a high approval rating among the 18- to 24-year-old demographic, Russia's first post-Soviet generation.

Blank also glosses over the very real challenge of how to move a society from embracing authoritarian solutions that provide short-term stability and a modicum of prosperity to a more open, pluralistic and law-governed country that guarantees much greater amounts of peace and prosperity for the longterm (a subject extensively examined by Ian Bremmer, president of the Eurasia Group, in his forthcoming work *The J Curve: A New Way to Understand Why Nations Rise and Fall*, and whose prescriptions for Russia are strikingly different than those put forward by Blank).

Blank dismisses Anatol Lieven's admonition, "If Putin weren't there we'd soon miss him," but never answers Lieven's challenge: "Putin may be an uncomfortable partner, but the West is unlikely to get a better one." Realists don't assume that the forces of history will automatically produce a better alternative, if only we encourage the Putin regime to go. Those who do are under an obligation to present real evidence supporting this contention.

What about the Russian role in the Eurasian space? Blank cites with disapproval my comment that "neither the United States nor Europe is

prepared to undertake the massive effort to displace Russia as Eurasia's economic and political center of gravity." This, however, is the very crux of the debate. Yet he provides no answer at all.

If he disagrees with my assessment, there are two possible responses. The first is that it won't take a massive effort at all, only a relatively minor one on our part. But I think that the Kremlin called our bluff—in a very ham-handed, clumsy way—when it terminated a preferential price for Ukrainian consumption of its natural gas and demanded an immediate shift to the world market price. Against U.S. aid of \$174 million to Ukraine in 2005 stood a Russian natural gas subsidy of \$3 billion—slack the West was unprepared to take up.

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Fine, then, the second response is that the West is now, or soon will be, prepared to undertake this effort. There is no evidence of this so far. Let's again take the case of Ukraine. I wrote in the November 26, 2004, issue of the *International Herald Tribune* that if the Orange Revolution were to succeed, a Yushchenko government "would have to demonstrate that [its] westward-oriented policies would generate results. And here the United States and the European Union would have to lay down clear benchmarks for facilitating Ukraine's closer integration with

the Euro-Atlantic world—and be prepared to commit real resources. Even if European leaders hold out the prospect of EU membership decades in the future, there is no reason that tangible benefits cannot be offered now—such as a free-trade agreement, or a guest worker regime that allows Ukrainians to live and work legally in Europe or in the United States.” None of this happened. And even talk about eventually offering Ukraine a Membership Action Plan for NATO is no substitute for concrete aid. Why are we surprised, therefore, at the outcomes of the 2006 Ukrainian elections?

Given our commitments elsewhere, the goal of the United States ought to be to strengthen the states of the periphery to give them a greater degree of independence and leverage vis-a-vis Russia, rather than to hold out quite unrealistic expectations that the West is prepared to break them out of the Russian sphere altogether—or support them against Moscow in violent conflicts where the U.S. has little or nothing at stake.

If fundamentally changing the geopolitical and geo-economic orientations of the states surrounding Russia is a task that the West is unable and unwilling to undertake—and Blank and others offer nothing to challenge this assessment—then why are realists taken to task for their stance that the job of government is to shape policy to what is achievable?

Blank argues that the American realist position—starting from a

recognition of the reality of Russia’s political and economic dominance in the region—is “music to more than a few Russian ears.” Actually, it is not. American realists call for continued U.S. engagement in the Eurasian space, not total and complete withdrawal altogether, which is the real Russian preference. I argued in 2004 that “the United States can undertake a targeted, limited and successful intervention into the Eurasian space and obtain Russian acquiescence.” This is a far cry from engaging in wholesale transformation of the region, and there should be no illusions about what we can achieve. Given our commitments elsewhere, our goal ought to be to strengthen the states of the periphery to give them a greater degree of independence and leverage vis-à-vis Russia, rather than to hold out quite unrealistic expectations that the West is prepared to break them out of the Russian sphere of influence altogether—or support them against Moscow in violent conflicts where the U.S. has little or nothing at stake.

Let me now turn to the case for (Russian) democracy. A consistent point that is raised is that “how Russia governs itself decisively shapes its foreign policy,” and that a long list of less than desirable policy choices made by the Russian government is directly connected to Putin’s soft authoritarianism—the implication being that a more democratic Russian government would make fundamentally different choices.

I see no evidence for this conclusion. As I wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* this past May, “It is difficult to conceive of any Putin foreign policy decision of the last several years that would have been reversed by a more democratically accountable Russian government”—a statement

based on careful assessment of opinion polls and what Russians say and write about foreign policy. Note here a deliberate choice of words: democratically accountable Russian government. It is very easy to find in Russia politicians and movements that use the label “democratic,” and who espouse domestic and foreign policy prescriptions that would meet with our enthusiastic approval. But this does not mean that they could win elections or govern with a mandate from the people. How do we get around data that suggests that 60 percent of Russians see the United States as having a negative influence in the world and more than half believe that the U.S. is unfriendly to Russia?

Surely events in the Middle East and Latin America have disabused us of the notion that free and fair elections automatically produce pro-American governments! Democracy is not the antidote to an anti-American and anti-Western policy orientation in Russia (or anywhere else); I still believe Thucydides was right when he argued that “identity of interests is the surest of bonds whether between states or individuals.”

But what about values? American realists have never argued that questions about democratic governance cannot be raised; no one I am aware of has advocated what Blank terms a “policy of silence.” What we have consistently maintained, however, is that democracy promotion cannot be placed at the center of the U.S. foreign policy agenda. The Bush administration has opened itself up to charges of hypocrisy, but not because of what the realists have advocated. Vice President Dick Cheney’s contrasting Vilnius and Astana speeches this spring were more than sufficient in that department.

I subscribe to the old Russian proverb that “if you chase after two different rabbits at the same time, you’ll catch neither.” This is why I do not have much faith in proposals that argue that the United States can somehow actively engage in opposition to the Putin regime while at the same time securing Russian cooperation on matters of vital importance to Washington. At some point, a decision has to be made—to overlook the blemishes in favor of cooperation, or to conclude that the costs of engagement outweigh what might be obtained.

In the case of Pakistan, for example, we are prepared to live with Pervez Musharraf’s version of “managed pluralism,” not only because of the benefits the U.S. receives (especially in the War on Terror) but also because we understand that what might replace this unelected general would be far worse, not only for U.S. interests but also for the promotion of our values. Does this stance irritate Pakistani democrats and their U.S. supporters? Most certainly. Yet I have no doubt that this course of action is both prudent and moral.

Blank says simply, “[S]ound leadership can and should endeavor to overcome and reconcile those tensions.” My apologies, but that is a wholly insufficient response. This provides no operational guidance whatsoever. It is just like General Wesley Clark’s stump speech in the run-up to the 2004 presidential primaries where he would claim that if he were president, he would have captured Osama bin Laden by now—empty words!

Is the Bush/Cheney tack of this past year an example of this “sound leadership?” I attended the G-8 summit in St. Petersburg as an observer. I saw nothing that indi-

cated any sort of “reconciliation” between these tensions in a way that concretely advanced both U.S. interests and U.S. values. Instead, this so-called “selective cooperation” approach has alienated and even irritated the Putin government without doing much to strengthen the cause of liberal democracy in Russia. It has undermined efforts to enlist more active Russian support for U.S. objectives vis-à-vis Iran and North Korea. The United States is neither safer nor are its values on surer footing because of this muddled policy.

Those who argue that we do not have to choose between our values or interests (or at least to assign priorities)—and who suggest that increased pressure on Russia both promotes our values and enhances our security—have to present compelling evidence that this strategy has a reasonable chance of success (or that the consequences will be minimal). Realists, of course, are being pilloried because they point out a number of inconvenient truths—the “democracy paradox” of Putin’s authoritarian measures enjoying broad-based public support in Russia, making the likelihood of a neat and simple “color revolution” highly unlikely; that, in the absence of the United States and the European Union extending substantial amounts of aid, Russia remains the dominant power in the region, and; that forgoing Russian assistance in dealing with a number of intractable global issues raises the costs of action higher than the American public is willing to pay.

So why such a negative response to the realist call for a businesslike relationship with Russia that pursues cooperation wherever possible and tries to manage and minimize potential conflicts? Aren’t enough strains being placed both on American

resources and capacities in upholding our existing global responsibilities? Sure, a more democratic and friendly Russia would be wonderful. But a more confrontational approach with Russia can only be justified if this clearly serves the vital interests—not the hopes and dreams—of the United States.

Let the debate continue.

