



# RESPONSE

## **Russian Democracy, Revisited**

Stephen J. Blank

Concluding his incisive essay on Russia in the last issue of *The Journal*, Nikolas Gvosdev stated, “Let the debate continue.” So, with our editor’s forbearance, let us discuss Russian policy again.

Gvosdev defends his brand of realism as a moral policy based on prudential calculations that seek to maximize benefits and minimize losses. In other words, while Russia is admittedly far from an ideal state, we can live with it as it is. But is this policy towards Russia realistic in Gvosdev’s own terms? In fact, Russia’s foreign policy is fundamentally adversarial to America and to Western interests and ideals. Moreover, thanks to Russia’s domestic political structure, not only will this foreign policy trend expand if unchecked, it will almost certainly lead Russia into another war.

Russia’s conduct in 2006 serves as a microcosm of this problem. Last year, Russia gratuitously provoked international crises by threatening Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus and Georgia over energy. It showed neither the will nor the capacity to arrest or reverse proliferation in Iran or North Korea. It displayed its readiness to amputate Georgia by force and annex its former territories to Russia. It attempted to undermine the OSCE and block it from fulfilling its treaty-mandated functions of monitoring elections. It refused to negotiate seriously over energy and economics with the European Union. It recognized Hamas as a legitimate government, gave it aid, and sold it weapons. And it sold weapons to Iran, Venezuela, China and Syria, knowing full well that many of these arms will be transferred to terrorists.



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At home, meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin is widening state control over ever more sectors of the economy, including defense, metals, and the automotive industry. Foreign equity investment in energy and many other fields is increasingly excluded from Russia in favor of Kremlin-dominated monopoly. Russia is even seeking to convert the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) into an oil and gas cartel that supports its own interests, rather than those of other producers.

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Possibly, the United States can abide such a Russia. But it is clear that America's partners and allies, particularly those in Eastern Europe and the "post-Soviet space," cannot long live with a government whose policies seem essentially driven by a unilateralist quest for unchecked power. Russia's current objectives seem to be incompatible with any notion of world order based on the principles accepted by it and its partners in 1989-91. Russia evidently covets recognition as a great power or energy superpower free from all international constraints and obligations and answerable to nobody. As the political scientist Robert Legvold wrote back in 1997, Russia "craves status, not responsibility."<sup>1</sup>

It should come as no surprise that this irresponsibility still characterizes Russian diplomacy. After all, it is the hallmark of the Russian autocracy which Putin has restored with a vengeance. Autocracy logically entails empire, an autarchic and patrimonial concept of the Russian state that is owned by the Tsar, controlled by his servitors, and which survives only by expansion. Just as autocracy means that the Tsar is not bound by or responsible to any domestic institution or principle, it also means that in foreign policy, Russia does not feel obligated to honor its own prior treaties and agreements. The struggle to get Moscow to adhere to the 1999 OSCE Summit accords it itself signed—as well as its conduct during the Russo-Ukrainian energy crisis of 2006—fully confirms that point; whatever else happened in both cases, Moscow broke its own contract with the OSCE and with Kyiv.

These are far from anomalies. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov himself said not long ago that Russia refuses to be bound by foreign standards, or conform to them.<sup>2</sup> He has also insisted that the West respect Russian interests in the CIS, but shows no reciprocal respect for the treaties Russia has signed and since violated. Nor does he say that Russia must respect the interests of CIS governments themselves.<sup>3</sup> By doing so, Lavrov has confirmed the warnings of analysts like Dmitry Trenin of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, who caution that Russia does not want to *belong* to a larger institutional grouping.<sup>4</sup>

Under these conditions, as both Western and Russian firms are learning all too well, property rights are conditional—if not entirely absent. Property is the Tsar's to control, and he or his agents grant rents to their

subordinates in return for service, which tragically is generally inefficient, self- and rent-seeking, and utterly corrupt. Today, this formula is visible in Russia's pervasive official corruption, widespread criminality, and the absence of any sense of national interests among the country's new "boyar" class.

Such a system also entails an autarchic economy hostile to foreign investment and influence. Democratic and civilian control of Russia's multiple militaries likewise is absent, and critics of the regime or reformers are routinely killed or threatened by those forces. The most recent examples of this tragic phenomenon are the assassinations of former FSB agent Alexander Litvinenko and journalist Anna Politkovskaya, and the attempted poisoning of former Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar.

Russian and Western observers both recognize that the Tsarist model is back, albeit with some Soviet accretions. And true to this model, the Kremlin today operates largely by fiat and fear. Much of Vladimir Putin's popularity clearly derives from the state monopoly over a large swath of the national media, growing fear of the police among ordinary Russians, and the sense of prosperity provided by seven years of (largely energy-based) economic growth. Absent the official cult of personality and with a free media, undoubtedly things would be rather different.

All of which is to say that it is clear that, while the United States must engage with Russia, America cannot simply accept these deformities as the necessary price for doing business with Moscow. It is not simply a matter of "lecturing" Russia, as its elites have accused Washington of doing for decades. Genuine realism requires

an engagement with Russia that respects its interests but which tells the truth and responds to its numerous violations of international obligations.

Such realism also requires understanding that the reversion to Russian autocracy is not merely a matter of Russia's sovereign choice, as Putin's ideologues pretend. It is a threat to all of Russia's neighbors because it inherently involves a quest for empire, since Moscow understands its full sovereignty to be attainable only if that of its neighbors is diminished.

It is deeply ironic that Russia can pursue such policies today largely because of the West. In order to maintain its empire, Russia must offer all kinds of hidden and overt subsidies in energy, weapons, or other forms of economic and political currency. It can only afford to do so by charging its European energy customers full market price, even as it refuses to do the same at home. Likewise, for all its benefits, U.S. funding for Cooperative Threat Reduction enables Russia to spend ever more on its armed forces, which it otherwise could not afford to do. By itself, Russia cannot pay for the rising outlays on its armed forces, its ambitious goals for re-equipping them and converting them into a power projection force beyond its borders, or their current, bloated size.

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Under the circumstances, a realistic Western policy cannot abandon the borderlands to Moscow. If it has reason to believe that it enjoys free-

dom of action there, Moscow will promptly extend its dysfunctional political system to those lands, either directly or indirectly. In either case, it will create security vacuums which are ripe for conflict and which threaten both its own and European security. Russia's inability to quell the Chechen uprising despite twelve years of utterly brutal warfare illustrates this quite clearly. Indeed, both wars with Chechnya (in 1994 and again in 1999) were launched to secure the domestic base of first the Yeltsin and then the incoming Putin regimes.<sup>5</sup> Since then, the fighting has engulfed the entire North Caucasus, putting Russia, thanks to its own misguided policies, at greater actual risk of terrorism.

It is precisely to avoid Russian expansionism and support for rogue regimes and proliferation that it is necessary to press Russia to return to the spirit and letter of the treaties it has signed and which make up the constitutional basis of Europe's and Eurasia's legitimate order. We should not pressure Russia because it is insufficiently democratic, but rather because it has freely given its word to treaties and conventions that must be upheld if any kind of international order is to be preserved.

Admittedly, this means that America must reorient its policies to stop seeking to extend or impose democracy. No matter how deeply held, the ideas of the current Administration enjoy no special legitimacy abroad, whereas international obligations do. Likewise, we must make clear that while the interests of the kleptocracy that passes for government in Russia are advanced by lawlessness and imperial predation, neither the interests of the Russian people nor the security of Eurasia is advanced by such policies. Quite the

contrary; those policies entail long-term stagnation and war, not progress, peace, or security.

Thus a realistic policy towards Russia necessarily means realigning the values which we promote. They should be those of international law and of enhanced security for both peoples and states, not untrammelled unilateralism or that might makes right. But such realism also means fearlessly proclaiming and acting upon the truth that Russian scholars themselves know and admit: Russia today remains a risk factor in world politics.<sup>6</sup> This is largely because its domestic political arrangements oblige Moscow to pursue a unilateral and neo-imperial policy fundamentally antithetical to the security of Eurasian states, including its own.

Accountability is an important virtue for all states, but for Russia it is indispensable. Without it, the Kremlin could very well succumb to imperial temptation, at the cost of international catastrophe.



1. Robert Legvold, "The 'Russian Question,'" in Vladimir Baranovsky, ed., *Russia and Europe: The Emerging Security Agenda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 67.
2. "Lavrov: West Needs to Acknowledge Russia's Interests," Interfax (Moscow), November 11, 2005.
3. Ibid.
4. Dmitri Trenin, "Reading Russia Right," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace *Policy Brief* no. 42 (October 2005), 8 (italics in the original).
5. For more, see Stephen Blank, "The 18th Brumaire of Vladimir Putin," in Uri Ra'anan, ed., *Flawed Succession: Russia's Power Transfer Crises* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006), 133-170.
6. Timofei Bordachev, "Russia's Europe Dilemma: Democratic Partner vs. Authoritarian Satellite," in Andrew Kuchins and Dmitri Trenin, eds., *Russia: The Next Ten Years* (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 2004), 120.