



Russia

Assessment: Poor

Trend: ↔

Capital: Moscow

Type of Government: Federation

Chief of State: President Vladimir Vladimirovich PUTIN (acting president since 31 December 1999, president since 7 May 2000)

Minister of Foreign Affairs: Igor Sergeyevich Ivanov

Population: 145,470,197

Human Development Index Ranking: 60



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russia has a **poor** record of democracy promotion as evidenced by its willingness to ignore manipulation of electoral processes, to disregard violations of basic democratic norms, and to support decidedly undemocratic political forces in neighboring countries. In international organizations, Russia has voted for resolutions condemning abuses of democracy in countries that are peripheral to its national interests. In the case of countries deemed of strategic importance (mostly former Soviet Republics), Russia abstained from taking a principled stand in support of democracy.

Overall, with the notable exception of the first few years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia has been, at best, indifferent to the cause of democracy promotion abroad. Considerable weakening of its international power and status led Moscow to develop ties with many authoritarian regimes that could contribute to its economic advancement or help it restore the vanished aura of a great power. As a result, Russia's initial interest in promoting democratic development in the rest of the world was quickly subordinated to the goal of reasserting itself in the international arena as a consequential actor.

FOREIGN RELATIONS BACKGROUND

In the first euphoric years following the early 1992 break-up of the Soviet Union, Moscow's foreign policy was closely aligned with the West. Government discourse was supportive of promoting democracy beyond Russia's borders. In the view of most analysts, this period lasted from 1991 to 1993-1994.¹ It was dominated by Russia's attempts to adapt to the new international environment by unquestionably accepting basic foreign policy precepts of the West and Moscow's discarding its former ideological allies in Asia and Africa. But Russia's early rhetorical commitment to democracy promotion was not matched by actual policy behavior. Russian involvement in the separatist-minded TransDniester region of Moldova and later in Georgia and elsewhere belied official statements. To the extent Russia did exhibit modest interest in democracy efforts internationally, prospects for meaningful action were all but eclipsed by the economic crisis engulfing the country. Russian diplomacy and foreign aid flows were both adversely affected.

Even before the issue of NATO enlargement caused friction in Russia's relations with the West, Moscow was becoming increasingly frustrated by U.S. and NATO actions that it viewed as seeking to take advantage of Russia's weakened international position. NATO's military campaign against Yugoslavia's Milosevic regime exacerbated tensions. Moscow adopted a more assertive, less cooperative stance toward the West and tried to reclaim some of its lost influence notwithstanding the constraints facing Yeltsin Administration decisionmakers. Moscow focused more of its attention on the post-Soviet republics (the so-called "near abroad") as rhetoric and the need for democracy promotion abroad was pushed to the recesses of foreign policy thinking.

President Vladimir Putin's ascendance to power in 2000 marked the beginning of the third period in Russia's relations with the outside world. So far, it has been characterized by Moscow's more cooperative stance in dealing with the US and Europe and emphasizes pragmatism, making Russia a more reliable partner.² Putin's pragmatic approach leaves little if any room for the country's engagement in democracy promotion



efforts abroad. Violations of democratic norms in a foreign country would hardly merit Russia's attention as long as its economic, security and other strategic interests were being served.

Lingering neo-imperial ambitions, continued economic limitations and a goal of reintegrating the post-Soviet space have also contributed to the disappearance of international democracy objectives from Moscow's foreign policy lexicon.

Russia's official foreign policy strategy, adopted in July 2000, proclaims that the country is "a great power... one of the most influential centers in the world... responsible for maintaining security in the world both on a global and regional level." Seeking to reclaim its lost influence on the international stage and eager to challenge U.S. hegemony, at least rhetorically, Russia demonstrated a readiness to cooperate with some of the world's most repressive regimes, including Iraq, Iran, North Korea, Cuba and Belarus.³ Moscow hoped that increased exports of oil and natural gas, together with deals such as the \$800 million contract with Iran to build a light-water nuclear reactor, would revive Russia's economic fortunes and thereby remove a major obstacle to reclaiming its rightful place among the great powers.

Notwithstanding Russia's precipitous decline, the country remained an influential actor in the former Soviet republics, where it continues to maintain a number of military bases. It holds regular joint military exercises with some of the Central Asian countries and supplies arms and equipment to them. Russia also remains a major trading partner of all of the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and a critical energy supplier to the Western New Independent States. In an attempt to jumpstart economic reintegration of the post-Soviet republics, Russia organized a Customs Union with Belarus and three of its Central Asian allies. In October of 2000 this Union was upgraded to a Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC) with Russia exercising veto power on all policy issues. Moldova and Ukraine are now official observers.

Finally, the Russian government consistently provided unequivocal support to Moscow-friendly ruling elites in the former Soviet republics, disregarding their tainted human rights record, glaring violations of the electoral process, and overall indifference to democratic norms and principles. This helped to legitimize local elites'

undemocratic accumulation of power, a development openly condemned by many Western governments and institutions. Russia's political backing was especially consequential in those countries with a large ethnic Russian minority, such as Belarus and Ukraine.

Overall, Russian policies towards the post-Soviet states serves as a litmus test of Moscow's commitment to promoting democracy abroad, since this is the region where Russia continues to exercise its greatest influence. Putin left little doubt about the region's importance to Moscow, remarking in his 2002 State of the Nation address: "Cooperation with the CIS countries is Russia's main foreign policy priority."⁴ For Russia, the hard logic of geopolitics, accentuated by its neo-imperial ambitions and traditional security concerns, has overridden any tangential interest in promoting democracy and human rights internationally.

RESPONSE TO OVERTHROW OF DEMOCRATICALLY-ELECTED GOVERNMENTS

Russia has generally condemned the takeover of democratically-elected governments, but took few if any steps to help restore democratic rule and almost always opposed or abstained from application of sanctions against the offending regime, particularly when security or economic interests were seen to be at stake.

Russia's reaction to the military coup in Pakistan is representative of Moscow's policy. Immediately after the overthrow of civilian government, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a communiqué emphasizing its serious concern about developments in Pakistan.⁵ The document expressed the hope that Pakistan "will manage to avoid excesses and that constitutional and democratic norms will be restored." In addition, Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov voiced his hope that Pakistani nuclear arms would remain under reliable control.

Two weeks after the coup in an interview with the state news agency Itar-TASS, Russian Deputy Foreign Ministry Grigory Karasin said that "Russia has taken up a rather reserved and watchful attitude toward Pakistan's new military regime of General Musharraf."⁶ He added that the future "will depend on concrete political actions" by the new Pakistani authorities, specifically a willingness "clearly to define time parameters for a transfer of power to a democratically elected



government.” The Russian government was also concerned about the broader security environment in South Asia. As Karasin noted, “the advent of military to power in Pakistan has qualitatively changed the picture in the subregion and brought on very many misgivings, which are well known.” Following a series of high-level discussions between U.S. and Russian diplomats focusing on events in the sub-continent, the two sides issued a joint statement calling on the military authorities in Pakistan “to take decisive steps to return the country to civilian, democratic and constitutional government, including the announcement of timetable.”⁷

Russia did not break diplomatic relations with Pakistan nor did it take any active measures to encourage democratic restoration. Karasin emphasized that it is in Russia’s national interests “to ensure the existence of a belt of neutrally friendly states along the perimeter of our borders.”⁸ The character of the Pakistani regime ultimately was a secondary consideration to stability, particularly once the new military regime proved to be a relatively predictable partner.

RESPONSE TO MANIPULATION OF ELECTORAL PROCESSES

Over the past decade, Russian governments have proven unwilling to condemn any electoral malpractice, which helped pro-Russian political forces maintain power. Worse still, Russia has helped to organize monitoring missions to some of the former Soviet Republics, seemingly with the aim of providing legitimacy to rigged elections. These missions reached conclusions about the electoral process that were invariably opposite to the findings of Western monitors and the OSCE. The Russian leadership has often provided tacit and even explicit support during election campaigns to undemocratic forces in the neighboring countries. This was done largely out of fear that if democratic forces were to gain power, they would be more likely to pursue a pro-Western foreign policy.

In the case of parliamentary elections in neighboring Belarus in October 2000, the Russian Foreign Ministry ignored overwhelming evidence to the contrary and pronounced the pre-election environment in compliance with internationally recognized norms. It dismissed US criticisms of the election campaign as “gross interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state, which is

incompatible with the obligations of the U.S.A. as a member country of the OSCE.”⁹

The day after the election, the chair of the Russian Duma’s CIS committee, Boris Pastukhov, a parliamentary observer, said the group did not witness any gross violations during balloting, though did note “a number of technical failures.” Russia’s official recognition of the Belarusian election was confirmed in a telephone conversation between the leaders of the two countries. President Putin congratulated President Lukashenko on “the successful holding of free and democratic parliamentary elections.”¹⁰ At the same time, categorical statements by the U.S. and OSCE, calling the elections neither free nor fair were dismissed by the Russian Foreign Ministry as indicating, “a politicized and biased approach aimed at justifying the policy of international isolation of Belarus.”¹¹ In Moscow’s view, individual reports of irregularities “should not cast doubt on the overall results of the elections.”¹²

Moscow adopted a similar stance in Belarus’ 2001 presidential elections. Moscow’s staunch ally, Aleksandr Lukashenko, had already taken the necessary steps to ensure victory at the polls. With the announcement from the decidedly partisan Belarus Central Election Commission that the incumbent received over three-quarters of the vote, President Putin called his counterpart to congratulate him on being re-elected.¹³ A number of prominent Russian government officials issued congratulatory statements, as did several parliamentarians.

Meanwhile, the head of the OSCE observer mission in Belarus, Hans-Georg Wiecek, provided details of widespread violations.¹⁴ The OSCE monitoring team also found that the opposition was not given an equal share of media time and highlighted the government’s attempt to outmaneuver opponents by hindering voter registration and banning rallies.¹⁵ The report concluded that the election “failed to meet the OSCE commitments for democratic elections and the Council of Europe standards.”

In contrast, a senior official of the Russian Central Election Commission, who served as an observer, stated that “no one has any serious reasons to doubt the results of the Belarusian presidential election...no one can assert that the Belarusian election campaign does not comply with the current international standards,” adding that these standards are “ambiguous and outdated.”¹⁶



The Russian government's response to comparable manipulation in presidential and legislative elections in Kazakhstan followed a familiar pattern. In the run-up to the January 1999 presidential election, Russia expressed unequivocal support for the incumbent and authoritarian leader, Nursultan Nazarbaev. A month before the vote, Russian Foreign Minister Primakov visited Kazakhstan and, while emphasizing that elections are "internal affairs," declared that "Russia and the Russian leadership feel great empathy for [President] Nazarbaev."¹⁷ Primakov made special mention of Nazarbaev's support for Russian policy regarding CIS integration. Preliminary results from the flawed election having been announced, Yeltsin called his Kazakhstani counterpart to offer enthusiastic congratulations, wholly indifferent to transgressions of basic democratic principles and practices.¹⁸ The Speaker of the Upper House of the Russian Parliament also congratulated Nazarbaev on his "sweeping victory" and expressed the hope that his leadership will contribute to the "consolidation of Kazakhstan's fraternal relations with Russia."¹⁹

Not surprisingly, the OSCE monitoring team reached a very different conclusion about the elections. The team leader had fallen far short of the organization's standards, citing such violations as the electoral commission's refusal to register opposition candidates, intimidation of opposition groups, and biased media coverage in favor of the incumbent.²⁰

The story was virtually the same in the 1999 parliamentary elections in Kazakhstan. Moscow turned a blind eye to pre-electoral developments, to say nothing of the general repressive nature of the Nazarbaev regime, which made a free and fair election a virtual impossibility. The Russian government cooperated with the Kazakhstani authorities in carrying out the arrest -- on highly suspect charges -- in Moscow of Kazakhstan's leading opposition figure, former Prime Minister Kazhegeldin, who was later released but barred from participating in the campaign, prompting his party to boycott the elections. OSCE cited this and other serious problems in criticizing the Kazakhstani government and concluded that it had not lived up to an explicit commitment to conduct elections consistent with international standards.²¹ Predictably, the Russian government uttered not a critical word about the flawed electoral process.

In Ukraine, Moscow did not hesitate to make clear its unqualified support for President Kuchma in his re-election bid in the fall of 1999, notwithstanding mounting evidence of high-level corruption, an increasingly heavy hand politically, and campaign-related malpractice.²²

The OSCE observer mission concluded that in both the first and second round of voting "the law was violated along with Ukraine's commitments to the OSCE with regard to democratic elections."²³ It cited "comprehensive interference" in the campaign from the state apparatus including pressure on the media. A representative of the Council of Europe stressed that "the presidential election in Ukraine can hardly be called a free and democratic one."²⁴ Another member of the delegation noted that "Ukraine is in breach of its obligations under international law to secure the right to free elections for its people."²⁵

None of this seemed to bother the Yeltsin team. Once again, the Russian leader offered his congratulations to Kuchma following his victory, as the international community voiced concern about the Kuchma government's commitment to democratic rule.

PROMOTION OF INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRACY

Russia has been, at best, a reluctant participant in international efforts to promote democracy abroad. Due to the low priority Moscow attaches to such efforts, its comfortable relations with numerous authoritarian regimes, especially in the former Soviet Republics, and limited financial resources, Russia has shown little interest in taking part in or funding democracy-building efforts beyond its borders. In international fora, including the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Commission, it has been cool to attempts to condemn the human rights records of individual countries. Russia has sought to enlist the support of the international community in instances where it felt that ethnic Russian minorities faced legal or other discrimination as in the Baltic countries.

Foreign assistance, much diminished since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, is closely tied to traditional conceptions of national interest grounded in economic and geo-strategic calculations. It is worth noting that Western aid to Russia, while



predominantly linked to economic reform in moving to a market system, did include a significant portion for democracy building programming.

Yeltsin's and now Putin's Kremlin proved unwilling to use its influence with non-democratic states such as North Korea, Iran, Iraq, Belarus and countries of Central Asia to push them towards greater openness and democratic reform.

Moscow's contribution to international democracy promotion has been limited to peacekeeping operations in the Balkans, which arguably has permitted fledgling democratic regimes to consolidate their authority.

POLICY TOWARDS ENTRENCHED DICTATORSHIPS

Russia has not shied away from active engagement with dictatorial regimes but rarely attempted to use its influence to try to leverage change in the direction of democratic rule. From Moscow's vantage point, the introduction of democracy in these societies might actually be contrary to Russia's interest given the cordial relations the Kremlin has established with many authoritarian governments. Russia appears to place little priority on the internal character of the countries with which it deals. There is no evidence to suggest that democracy and human rights are part of Moscow's policy dialogue with any of the authoritarian regimes with which it maintains relations. A relatively weak civil society also has not pressed the Russian government to elevate the importance assigned to fostering democracy around the world. When relations with authoritarian regimes have deteriorated, as in the case of Uzbekistan, it is almost always a function of diverging strategic interests and not concerns on the part of Russian decisionmakers about the absence of democratic rule and lack of respect for human rights.

Over the past ten years Belarus became Russia's closest ally among the former Soviet Republics. President Lukashenko, head of a Stalinist-type regime, went so far as to declare his support for reunification with the Russian Federation, prompting the December 1999 Treaty on Creating the Union. While many knowledgeable observers at the time were skeptical that union would ever come to pass, Moscow exhibited few qualms about the highly repressive nature of the Belarusian government under an increasingly autocratic Lukashenko.

Neither the Yeltsin nor Putin government, which all but scuttled the idea of unification, communicated publicly any concerns about the deteriorating political situation in Belarus, a country where Russia exerts enormous influence. Nor did Moscow establish any ties with the democratic opposition forces in Belarus. This overall approach toward Belarus prevailed at a time when Belarusian activists, Western governments, the OSCE and other institutions fully documented and loudly criticized Lukashenko's repressive rule.

That Belarus has been a compliant geopolitical and strategic ally is the principal reason Russia shows no interest in generating friction with the Lukashenko government over its democracy-related failings, even if Moscow were so inclined to raise such issues. It also used active military cooperation with Belarus in response to NATO's eastward enlargement. Economically, Belarus was Russia's second largest trading partner. Finally, Belarus plays an ever-greater role in servicing Russian energy export to Western Europe. Minsk proved to be a reliable and disciplined partner, an attractive option for new transit infrastructure investments.

Relations between Russia and Uzbekistan since 1992 have been marked by competition for the leadership role in Central Asia. That Russia made considerable progress in erecting a democratic society while Uzbekistan traded its communist past for an equally repressive post-independence system under President Islam Karimov has not had much impact on the quality of relations. The Karimov regime's harsh treatment of real and imagined Islamic radicals does not appear to trouble the Kremlin, which has waged its own bloody conflict against the would-be separatist and Muslim-majority Republic of Chechnya. The jointly perceived threat posed by Islamic radicals is the main reason for a recent upturn in bilateral relations.

As in Belarus, the Government of Uzbekistan has been the object of severe criticism from many corners of the international democratic community as well as from courageous non-governmental local actors. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that tensions between Tashkent and Moscow have been a function largely of Uzbekistan's insistence that it is the rightful leader in Central Asia. Re-establishing Russia's sphere of influence in Central Asia and not the internal character of the Uzbekistani regime is of



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consequence to Moscow. Were Russia to alter its policy approach and give attention to democracy promotion in Uzbekistan or elsewhere in the trans-Caspian region, it is almost certain to be for

instrumental reasons rather than any genuine commitment to expand freedom for the region's citizens.

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 - ² Legvold, Robert. "Russia's Unformed Foreign Policy." Foreign Affairs 80.5 (September/October 2001).
 - ³ According to CIA director George Tenet, "Russia is the first choice of rogue states seeking the most advanced technology and training." See Lowry, Richard. "Iran's Supplier... and Our New Ally: The Problem of Russia." National Review 22 Apr. 2002: 20.
 - ⁴ Tretyakov, Vitalii. "Putin's Pragmatic Foreign Policy." International Affairs 3.48 (2002): 22.
 - ⁵ "Russia is 'Seriously Concerned' About Situation in Pakistan." Interfax News Agency 13 Oct. 1999.
 - ⁶ Sitov, Andrei. "Russia Watches Pakistan's New Regime Vigilantly." ITAR-TASS News Agency 28 Oct. 1999.
 - ⁷ "US, Russia Call for Return to Civilian Rule in Pakistan." Agence France Press 29 Oct. 1999.
 - ⁸ Sitov, Andrei. "Russia Watches Pakistan's New Regime Vigilantly."
 - ⁹ "Russia Slams US 'Gross Interference' in Belarusian Elections." BBC Summary of World Broadcasts 12 Oct. 2000.
 - ¹⁰ "OSCE Says Elections Undemocratic, But Moscow Disagrees." RFE/RL Newswire 16 Oct. 2000.
 - ¹¹ "Moscow Says Criticism Must Not Cast Doubt on Outcome of Belarussian Election." Interfax News Agency 18 Oct. 2000.
 - ¹² "Moscow Welcomes Belarus Poll, Slams European Criticism of Vote." Agence France Presse 18 Oct. 2000.
 - ¹³ "Russia Hails Lukashenko Re-Election." United Press International 10 Sep. 2001.
 - ¹⁴ "OSCE Observer Details Belarus Vote Fraud Charges." Agence France Presse 11 Sep. 2001.
 - ¹⁵ "Russia Hails Lukashenko Re-Election."
 - ¹⁶ "Russia, Eastern Europe Do Not Doubt Outcome of the Belarussian Presidential Elections." Interfax News Agency. 10 Sep. 2001.
 - ¹⁷ "Russian PM Voices Support for Nazarbaev." Interfax News Agency 23 Dec. 1998.
 - ¹⁸ "President Yeltsin Congratulates Kazakh President Nazarbaev on His Victory in the Election." Russian Television Vesti, 12 Jan. 1999.
 - ¹⁹ Yermakova, Lyudmila. "Nazarbaev's Re-Election Ensures Stability, Stroyev Says." ITAR-TASS News Agency 12 Jan. 1999.
 - ²⁰ "Nazarbaev Handily Wins Disputed Kazakhstan Poll." Deutsche Presse-Agentur 11 Jan. 1999.
 - ²¹ "OSCE Mission to Kazakhstan Critical of Kazakhstan Elections." Financial Times 17 Sep. 1999; "Opposition Says Parliamentary Election Results Rigged." Radio Russia 13 Oct. 1999.
 - ²² "Russian Foreign Minister Backs Kuchma's Re-Election Bid." Interfax News Agency. 9 Oct. 1999.
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 - ²⁴ "OSCE Declares Elections Undemocratic." Eastern Economist Daily. 16 Nov. 1999.
 - ²⁵ Gorhinskaya, Katya. "Observers Claim Second-Round Voting Rife With Violations." Kyiv Post. 18 Nov. 1999.