

The Putin Generation

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In the mid 1990s, many in the West assumed that the older Soviet generation would soon be replaced by a younger, pro-Western, pro-democratic generation. This succession seemed to be the natural course of events, like gravity or snow in winter. A similar conventional wisdom about the younger generation in Russia holds sway today: iPods, lattes, skateboards and other artifacts of Western consumer culture will translate into a desire for independent media, justice, and human rights. Our nationally representative surveys of 16 to 29 year old Russians conducted in Spring 2005 and Spring 2007 suggest otherwise: most young people gravitate enthusiastically to President Vladimir Putin's ideological platform.

These young people, born between 1976 and 1991, are aptly labeled "the Putin generation." Instead of embracing international human rights norms and democracy, young Russians now tend to reflect and support the values and aspirations expressed by Putin. Russia's political trajectory has become a source of growing concern to Western observers, but young Russians voice increasing levels of support for the Kremlin's course. In 2005, 45 percent thought that Russia was "on the right path," while 44 percent

disagreed. By 2007, a solid majority (56 percent) concurred, while fewer than 3 in 10 disagreed.

While they are buying designer sunglasses and downloading music from the Internet, they are also buying the national concept advanced by the Kremlin that rests on manufactured Soviet nostalgia. For example, they agree overwhelmingly that “the collapse of the Soviet Union [was] the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century.” First pronounced during Putin’s State of the Union address in April 2005, this sentiment has become so widely accepted that young Russians discuss why they agree with it in casual conversation with Western reporters. Another aspect of Soviet nostalgia is ambivalence toward Joseph Stalin. In both of our surveys, a majority believed that Stalin did “more good than bad.” These troubling findings undoubtedly reflect the efforts of Kremlin authorities to rewrite Soviet history, erase or downplay the deaths of millions of citizens, and efface historical memory. These actions all facilitate Russia’s development as an authoritarian state.

Policymakers in the United States and Europe need to base their Russia policies on the Russia that exists today, not the one they expected to develop when the Soviet Union collapsed. The dream of a democratic Russia embedded in the Euro-Atlantic community is over, at least for now. This does not mean we should abandon those in Russia who embrace democracy and human rights. The task now is to figure out how best to support the democratic minority in Russia, who surely must be counted among the 30% or so of young Russians who disagree that the country is on the right path. What can we do for them?

For one, the West needs to once again stand for justice. The West, and especially the United States, needs to protect and defend human rights norms rather than abuse them. Our 2007 survey explored whether young Russians believe allegations of torture, indefinite detention, and rendition of terrorist suspects by American authorities. Those who believe these allegations are significantly more anti-American. While this correlation does not prove causality, it is consistent with the argument that the undermining of the United States' image as a beacon of justice has enabled the authoritarian drift in Russia. While not intuitively linked to how the United States deals with Russia, new policies concerning detention and interrogation may help repair some of the damage.

The United States and Europe need to also strengthen the international human rights machinery. The Russian government has used divide and conquer strategies inside international organizations to block the condemnation of gross human rights violations in Darfur and Burma, and inside Russia, to obstruct international election monitoring by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. And yet, following the brazen violations of free and fair electoral procedures by the Russian authorities in December's Parliamentary elections, Putin received calls of congratulations from French president Nicolas Sarkozy and former UK prime minister Tony Blair. These actions suggest at least some European policymakers are oblivious or indifferent to the threats human rights defenders and journalists experience in Russia today.

Support for the democratic minority should also involve asking young Russians what sort of engagement they want. Assistance provided by the United States and Europe must be rooted in understanding and responding to local needs. Our surveys show

that young Russians are neutral or even positive about foreign financial contributions to Russian organizations that work on health issues such as HIV prevention or police abuse, a human rights violation they care about. They reject foreign support for political organizations such as those that protest against the government.

Policymakers will need to find a way to respect the wishes of Russians while steadfastly resisting Russian government actions that violate international norms and laws. Equally important, European policy makers should work with the next U.S. administration to ensure that messages and actions concerning human rights and democracy reinforce one another. Perhaps one day a post-Putin generation will eventually view Russia as not so distinct from Europe. From where we stand today, that would be progress.

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