

Losing Russia

By Charles William Maynes

It's hard to believe it was just last September when President George W. Bush stood beside President Vladimir Putin at Camp David and announced, "I respect President Putin's vision for Russia." Since then, things have turned decidedly sour.

In recent telephone conversations with his Russian counterpart, Bush has expressed his displeasure over Russian actions in Chechnya and the nation's "failure to pursue democratic reforms." The U.S. ambassador to Moscow complained publicly in December about Russia's "breach of values," saying that recent Russian actions "could limit possibilities of expansion of our cooperation." And when Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Russia last month, he wrote a front-page essay for *Izvestia* in which he prodded Moscow on its human rights record in Chechnya, for its increasing media controls and for the arrest of Yukos' former chief executive, Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

To understand why Russia and the United States are drifting apart again, it's crucial to understand just how differently Russians and westerners view the 1990s. The West saw the decade as one of liberation and burgeoning democracy for Russia. Western observers felt that Russia was finally rejoining Europe politically and economically.

But for Russians, it was a decade of disintegration and false promises. At the beginning of the 1990s, Russia was an uninspiring, drab and politically repressive place, but it had a strong middle class

and functioning institutions. By the end of a decade, it was something close to a failed state. Russians were glad to be able to speak their minds, but they watched helplessly as crime and other social ills took hold and the economy became wildly unstable. Tens of millions of Russians found themselves impoverished, as the government could no longer pay pensions and factories could no longer meet payrolls because of the disruption of internal trade. "Price reforms" led to massive inflation and overnight wiped out family savings accounts.

Even as they witnessed Russian suffering, most western experts showed little concern for the pain inflicted and urged Russia to stay the capitalist course. The West held this position until the very day the financial dam finally burst in August 1998, when the government devalued the ruble and suspended payment on most of its foreign debt.

Many Russians now see that disastrous era as the consequence of pursuing western-style democracy and following western-proffered advice. By contrast, they associate the current era of growing prosperity with Putin's coming to power.

To Russians, Putin's record of successes is impressive. Back wages and pensions are being paid. Growth is vigorous. Consumer goods are again being manufactured at home. Russia has paid off most of its foreign debt. And if high oil prices have been the single most significant factor in reversing

Russia's fortunes, so what? Russians still credit Putin with the reversal, pointing to an impressive growth in domestic production and sound taxation policies that have also contributed to both growth and the restoration of health in public finances. Russians are pleased that their country is again a major player in foreign relations and that foreign leaders take Putin seriously in a way they never did his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin.

Yet there is abundant cause for concern about many of Putin's actions. He shows no signs of modifying Russia's brutal suppression of Chechnya's Muslim population, which is particularly incendiary in the current international framework. He has clamped down on fragile media freedoms. He has continued to act imperiously against his immediate neighbors, which undercuts Russia's credibility with the rest of Europe. It is incumbent on the West to encourage Putin to alter his course, and the good news is that there are concrete steps that can be taken.

Russia's desire to be accepted as a western-style power gives western countries some leverage: That acceptance, and the closer economic and political ties that would follow, must be made contingent on Russia's continuing commitment to democratic reforms. The West must give Russia some incentives by spelling out more precisely how the rest of Europe is prepared to integrate Russia with its western neighbors. Will the West admit Russia into NATO, as the Germans have suggested? If not, what positive security role will Europe permit a democratic Russia to play?

The West must also continue to step back from Cold War policies that tip the debate in Russia against the Westernizers. For all the declarations in the West of the end of the Cold War, NATO forces still patrol Russian coasts, as if waiting for an imminent war, and 95 percent of the U.S. nuclear arsenal - which is still maintained at Cold War levels - remains dedicated to the potential destruction of Russia.

Washington, of course, claims these missiles are not targeting Russia, but the Russians know that

they can be retargeted within minutes and that their only possible purpose would be to attack Russia. Proposed cuts in the numbers of nuclear weapons dedicated against Russia will not take place for a decade.

The unwillingness of the West to scale back its nuclear arsenal from Cold War levels only reinforces hard-line Russian elements that insist that NATO, which is now proposing to establish bases in Eastern Europe, has aggressive intentions toward Russia. The U.S. should offer to remove at least 50 percent of its thousands of nuclear warheads, provided Moscow takes a reciprocal step. Such an offer would leave enough missiles to destroy every major city in both countries, but it would also convey to the Russian military a direction in the relationship that would encourage the more democratic voices in Moscow.

Another area of collaboration with Russia should be working to provide greater security and a better economic future for the countries caught in the middle between an expanding EU and NATO on the one hand and a resurgent Russia on the other. At this point, it is by no means clear that Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus will ever be allowed to join the European Union.

Cut off from any sizable market, many of these states could sink into deeper poverty and become pockets of instability and crime. Yet the U.S. and other western countries resist any effort by Russia to organize an appropriate economic space east of the EU, and they denounce Russian investments in these countries. The U.S. and EU countries could work with Russia to craft something like the Hoover-Roosevelt Good Neighbor Policy, under which the largest state in the region would begin to treat its neighbors as partners rather than as subjects.

To build and hold the democratic space that exists in Russia, western leaders must constantly engage the Russian leadership while also offering support to those inside Russia who are struggling to build a civil society. Plans by the U.S. and Britain to

curtail aid to these groups in the coming years should be reversed.

We should not hesitate to speak honestly, but we must speak fairly. Care must be taken to apply the same standards to Russia that we apply to close allies that do not always meet the highest standards. Otherwise, our criticism will be dismissed.

The West cannot allow the predictions of a "cold

peace" or a new Cold War to become reality. Today neither Washington nor Moscow enjoys a surplus of friends in the world. Neither capital needs a new antagonist.

Charles William Maynes is president of the Eurasia Foundation, which promotes political and economic reform in the former Soviet Union. This article first appeared in the Los Angeles Times, February 15, 2004.