



**Testimony before the
U.S. Commission on
Security and Cooperation in Europe**

“Where is Russia Headed?”

December 6, 2007

A Statement by

Sarah E. Mendelson

Director,
Human Rights and Security Initiative,
and Senior Fellow,
Russia and Eurasia Program

CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, 1800 K STREET, NW, WASHINGTON, DC 20006
TELEPHONE: (202) 887-0200 FACSIMILE: (202) 775-3199 WWW.CSIS.ORG

Chairman Hastings and Members of the Commission:

Thank you for inviting me to participate in this session on Russia and the implications of last Sunday's events. My name is Sarah Mendelson. I direct the Human Rights and Security Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, where I am also a senior fellow in the Russia and Eurasia Program. It is an honor to be here.

My comments today begin with an assessment of where I think Russia is politically. I will then talk a bit about the Putin ideological platform, its appeal to young Russians, the "Putin generation," and what that means for our relations with Russia.¹ I then address what I think will be the major policy dilemmas for U.S. and European policy makers going forward.

I. An Election?

If I may, I'd like to begin on a personal note. I have spent the better part of nearly 14 years working along side many colleagues to support the development of democracy and human rights in Russia. Over a dozen years ago, I worked in Moscow with the National Democratic Institute. Since then, I have observed nearly every post-Soviet Russian election. I was the expert adviser in fall 2003 to the election monitoring team from the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE) during the needs assessment phase for the last round of national elections in Russia. I am well aware of how imperfect previous Russian elections have been, and I've been monitoring a range of human rights abuses for nearly a decade. In other words, I have not been sanguine about the state of democracy and human rights in Russia.²

Some commentators have said that the events of last Sunday are signs of a robust democratic Russia. I believe nothing could be farther from the truth. I regard the events of the last several months, weeks and days as a qualitative shift. The comprehensive nature, the brazenness and the impunity with which the Putin administration executed the events of last Sunday—coupled with all the other assaults on people and institutions we associate with democracy over the last several years—to my mind, truly mark a new stage in Russia's post-Soviet trajectory. While I don't want to give up on the dream of a democratic Russia embedded in the Euro-Atlantic community, that dream does, for the time being, seem to have been interrupted.³

II. The Putin Generation

On what do I base this gloomy assessment? We are all waiting to see whether Vladimir Putin will stay in power and for how long. I want to suggest to you today that this preoccupation, while understandable, masks a larger dynamic inside Russia.

As the eminent Soviet-era dissident Sergei Kovalev has observed, "Putin" now stands for an entire set of policies and a "web of political concepts generated in the bowels of the KGB."⁴ And Russians, even young Russians like those policies and concepts. At CSIS, we have representative national survey data from 2005 and 2007 that suggest 16 to 29 years old

¹ Portions of this testimony will appear in Sarah E. Mendelson and Theodore P. Gerber, "Us and Them: The Putin Generation and Anti-American Sentiment," (working title) *The Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2008.

² See <http://www.csis.org/ruseura/humanrights/>.

³ Sarah E. Mendelson, "Dreaming of a Democratic Russia," *The American Scholar* 77, no. 1 (Winter 2008), pp. 35-43.

⁴ Sergei Kovalev, "Why Putin Wins," *New York Review of Books*, November 22, 2007.

Russians are very enthusiastic about Putin's ideological platform. These young people, born between 1976 and 1991, are "the Putin generation." Instead of a Helsinki generation or a fall-of-the-Berlin-Wall generation bound together by an embrace of international human rights norms and democracy as core values, young Russians support the values and aspirations expressed by Putin. They favor the restoration of a hyper-sovereign Russia that remains outside the Euro-Atlantic community and resists or rejects international legal norms. Even if Putin himself left the national stage today, his views will live on in the Putin generation for years.

The first building block in Putin's national concept is the production of Soviet nostalgia: a systematic effort to restore a sense of pride in the putative accomplishments of the Soviet Union and to link this pride to the current Russian state. One manifestation is the theme that "the collapse of the Soviet Union [was] the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century." First pronounced during Putin's State of the Union address in April 2005, this sentiment has become so familiar and widely accepted that even in casual conversation with western reporters, young Russians discuss why they agree with it.⁵ Another aspect of Soviet nostalgia is ambivalence toward Stalin. Our 2005 survey suggested that four out of five young Russians agreed with Putin's assessment of the Soviet collapse as catastrophe, and a majority failed the Stalin test, by agreeing, for example, that Stalin did "more good than bad."⁶ Our 2007 survey data confirmed these findings, providing additional evidence that these Putin themes resonate deeply with young Russians.⁷ The rewriting of history effaces historical memory and facilitates Russia's development as an authoritarian state.

The second building block involves the manufacturing of enemies within and outside Russia. Kremlin authorities and Putin himself repeatedly invoke anxiety among the population concerning the "dangers" of foreign influence, suggesting that Russia is being encircled by enemies and that foreign governments are seeking to meddle in Russia's internal affairs by financing Russian nongovernmental organizations.⁸ More recently, official rhetoric has turned explicitly anti-American. Putin has accused the United States of seeking to impose its ideas and interests on the rest of world, going so far as to liken recent American policies to those of the Third Reich.⁹ An important organization helping to manufacture the belief in enemies (and therefore one to monitor) is the Kremlin-supported youth group "Nashi"

⁵ Vladimir Putin, "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation," April 25, 2005, available at: http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/04/25/2031_type70029type82912_87086.shtml. For journalist's interview of young, pro-Putin Russian, see "Viewpoint: Pro-Putin Cheerleader," BBC, November 26, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7113253.stm>.

⁶ Sarah E. Mendelson and Theodore P. Gerber, "Soviet Nostalgia: An Impediment to Russian Democratization," *The Washington Quarterly*, 29: 1 (Winter 2005-2006), pp. 83-96; Sarah E. Mendelson and Theodore P. Gerber, "Failing the Stalin Test: Russians and Their Dictator," *Foreign Affairs*, 85: 1 (January/February 2006), pp. 2-8.

⁷ The 2007 survey was supported by grants from the Ford Foundation and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and was written in collaboration with Russian media organization, MEMO.RU as part of an on-going project. The Levada Analytic Center implemented the survey, interviewing a nationally representative probability sample of 1,802 young Russian adults in 44 oblasts from April 19 to May 13, 2007. The survey instrument was developed in part drawing on four focus groups we conducted with young Russians in Moscow and Yaroslavl in January 2007. For details on the 2005 survey (N=2000), see Mendelson and Gerber, "Soviet Nostalgia."

⁸ Vladimir Putin, "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly," April 26, 2007, available at: http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/04/26/1209_type70029type82912_125494.shtml

⁹ Vladimir Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," February 10, 2007, available at:

http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138_type82912type82914type82917type84779_118123.shtml ; Vladimir Putin, "Speech at the Military Parade Celebrating the 62nd Anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War," May 9, 2007, available at: http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/05/09/1432_type82912type127286_127675.shtml.

[Ours].¹⁰ Given that young Russians are generally apathetic and apolitical, our survey suggests a surprising jump in awareness of this group and desire to join its ranks.

Why such appeal? The Putin generation was very young when the last of the travel bans were lifted, and shortages of material goods ended. Most likely cannot recall a Russia without foreign imports. Yet this generation came of age during the 1990s, a time of rampant political chaos and economic crisis, including crippling inflation. The failure of Russian leaders during that period to construct and promote an alternative, positive concept of the Russian state likely contributes to the current appeal of the Putin path; it fills an ideological vacuum. Its themes of past glory and achievement, blame for Russia's troubles on external and internal enemies, and promise of economic growth and political order—topics much discussed in focus groups I've observed—seem to satisfy a visceral yearning, even a psychological need, for a radiant future in response to an unstable and troubled present. The petro dollars flowing into the country do not hurt either. To any recent visitor, Moscow seems to be a capitalist dream.

It is hardly the picture of liberty and freedom. My expectations for the near future are that public political space will continue to shrink steadily inside Russia. Foreign assistance will come under continued threat. Look for nationalist and xenophobic sentiment to grow. Major state investment from gas and oil revenue may or may not go into army personnel, but I believe we are likely to see it go to defense-related research and development. While television is already under government control, we should watch closely to see what happens with Internet access. We are seeing some selective signs of websites being affected.¹¹ I hear nearly every day about colleagues who are harassed, beaten, and in the case of foreigners, expelled or threatened with expulsion. Even some foreign news outlets are increasingly nervous. The other night, the BBC decided that it was too risky to have experts comment on political events in Russia on its Friday evening broadcast around the world because the network had been given instructions by the Russian Central Election Commission, and they were nervous about violating local election laws. This anxiety temporarily yet effectively silenced them on these issues.¹²

III. A Future Russia Policy?

Policy makers in the United States and Europe need to calibrate their approach to Russia based on where Russia is today politically rather than where we wanted Russia to be when the Soviet Union collapsed. If you accept my argument that the dream of a democratic Russia is, for the time being, over, then this reality raises several delicate and interconnected policy dilemmas for the United States and Europe. Chief among them: how can we avoid a new Cold War? How should we continue to engage Russia on issues related to human rights and democracy—and particularly, how best to support human rights defenders? And how stable and long-lasting does the current political situation appear to be?

Putin's Russia is not the Soviet Union. Russia does not currently pose an existential threat to the United States, despite its weapons of mass destruction. There is no inherent reason why, at this moment, a return to the Cold War is necessary or likely, notwithstanding recent studies

¹⁰ "Nashi Brochure," <http://www.publicoffender.livejournal.com/755.html> (May 14, 2007), as cited in Johnson's Russia List, 2007-105, 13 May 2007. Hard copy available upon request.

¹¹ On October 25, 2007, the human rights website HRO.org came under assault. For details see <http://www.kavkaz.memo.ru/newstext/news/id/1200276.html>.

¹² Author's correspondence with BBC producer, November 30, 2007.

that document potential fault lines.¹³ Policy makers in the United States and in Europe should continue to engage Russia, as they did even during the Soviet period, on issues of common interest and where possible engage in joint projects, such as on health. The ambiguous nature of the relationship, where Russia is not exactly friend yet not exactly foe, is, however, politically difficult to navigate especially when Russia seeks to balance against American or European interests—a phenomenon I predict we encounter more often.

Russia has exerted greater influence on the international human rights and democracy machinery than the reverse. There is an urgent need to recognize and document the Russian government's divide and conquer strategies with regard to numerous international organizations, such as the United Nations Security Council, the Council of Europe, and the European Union to name a few.¹⁴ There is also an urgent need to generate recommendations and political will to repair the weakened human rights monitoring capacity of these organizations. When Russia demands special rules or departs from accepted norms, such as international election observation conducted by the OSCE, then member states should respond accordingly. The United States ought to coordinate its strategy with European states on such matters.

I am sorry to say that in our recent survey of Russian youth, we found some evidence that Russia's departure from international norms has been enabled by American policies. Part of the repair work, as I suggested to this Commission in May, requires new U.S. policies on a range of issues, and should be driven by a desire to opt back in to the international legal framework that generations of Americans helped create. While not intuitively connected to a new Russia policy, repairing U.S. soft power, and re-establishing the United States as a generator of human rights norms will have important repercussions for engaging this Kremlin and authoritarians around the world. Our own shift back toward the international legal framework will require a dramatic departure from current U.S. policies on counterterrorism—including adopting new detention and interrogation policies for alleged terrorism suspects.

The repair work will also require a radical shift in how the United States approaches the thorny issue of “assistance” and particularly democracy promotion. The Russian government is rich, with plans for not one but two stabilization funds worth hundreds of billions of dollars.¹⁵ But assistance should not end for important groups in Russian society that will surely see none of the oil wealth. Instead, U.S. assistance requires radical restructuring. The top-down approach of the Bush administration's “F” process offers a poor model.¹⁶ New approaches must instead be shaped by local needs and designed to encourage Russian civil society to engage local populations. What forms of engagement do Russians need and desire? Are they hostile to all forms of assistance? To date, we have found that young Russians are generally neutral or positive about Russian organizations that accept foreign financial contributions for work on health issues such as HIV prevention or human rights

¹³Mark MacKinnon, *The New Cold War: Revolutions, Rigged Elections, and Pipeline Politics in the Former Soviet Union* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2007); Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War: How the Kremlin menaces both Russia and the West*, to be published in February 2008 by Bloomsbury (UK) and Palgrave (USA).

¹⁴ See Sarah E. Mendelson, “Anatomy of Ambivalence: The International Community and Human Rights Abuse in the North Caucasus,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, 53:6 (November/December 2006), pp.3-15; Mark Leonard and Nicu Popescu, “A Power Audit of EU-Russia Relations,” European Council on Foreign Relations, November 2, 2007 available at http://ecfr.3cdn.net/456050fa3e8ce10341_9zm6i2293.pdf.

¹⁵ “Stabilization Fund to be Converted into National Prosperity,” *Kommersant*, August 2, 2007 available at http://www.kommersant.com/p791856/r_500/new_fund_to_specialize_on_portfolio_investments/.

¹⁶ See, Randall Tobias, “Foreign Assistance: A Strategic New Direction,” February 5, 2007, presentation at CSIS, http://www.csis.org/component/option.com_csis_events/task.view/id,1191/

issues that they care about (such as police abuse). They feel negative about support for political organizations (like those that protest against the government). Policy makers will need to find a way to respect the wishes of Russians, while at the same time not enabling the hyper-sovereign tendencies that reject international norms and laws. Again, the need for U.S. policymakers to repair the damage done by current policies in the human rights sphere will be critical to any future engagement with Russia (and other authoritarian states) on these issues. Equally important, reliable opinion data on what Russians support in terms of foreign engagement can form the basis of new U.S. policies based on listening and responding.

Contacts between the United States and Russia need to be multiplied and diversified, rather than relying mainly on high-level meetings, as the Bush administration has done with the encouragement of the Kremlin. The over-personalization of presidential politics that marked both the Clinton and Bush administrations has not helped U.S.-Russian relations. The new approach should, if the Russian government is willing, support concrete cooperation between different parts of societies (mayors, legislators, university presidents) on a range of issues of common concern, for example, public health, counterterrorism, youth alienation or even urban decay, where stakeholders may share best practices. Youth exchange programs might be highlighted to reverse the trend in anti-Americanism revealed in the current generation of 16 to 29 year old Russians. Additionally one could imagine a sister school program bringing children in the United States and Russia into direct contact over the Internet. In recent years, Congressional contacts with the Russian Duma and Federation Council have dropped off and need to be restored to counter widespread misperception of Congress's relationship with the executive branch. This lack of understanding of how politics works in the United States is another ingredient feeding Russian misperceptions. Is this situation something that the Kremlin seeks to perpetuate or will there be willingness to challenge misperceptions? Will the Kremlin allow, support or be neutral about diversifying or multiplying contacts? The answers to these questions offer a metric to gauge the Russian government's desire for hostile or neutral relations with the United States. I suggest we pursue these programs and track how the Russian authorities respond.

We may well be in for a decade of Putin or Putin-like policies—with Russia slipping farther from the Euro-Atlantic community, creating its own set of allies and networks, lubricated by gas and oil, while silencing voices of opposition internally. Burdened by dissent, corruption, and poorly functioning public institutions, the future could be less bright than the current oil-flushed economy suggests. A day may come, if not next year or the year after, then perhaps within a decade or two, when either a middle aged Putin generation tires of the manufactured Soviet nostalgia or the children of the Putin generation, having grown up with more knowledge of the world outside of Russia, demand political structures that are more consistent with the dreams many of us had for Russia when the Soviet Union ceased to exist. Perhaps the most we can hope for is that young Russians might share the nuanced vision of the United States expressed by Andrei Sakharov: "...we don't idealize America and see a lot that is bad or foolish in it, but America is a vital force, a positive factor in our chaotic world."¹⁷ From where we stand now, that would be progress.

Thank you.

¹⁷ Andrei Sakharov, *Memoirs*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), p.563.