

Getting Ready for Life After Putin

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There was a brief period during the tenure of former President Dmitry Medvedev when Russians like myself began to hope that the country would finally become a part of Europe. Now I feel nothing but fear.

Russia according to President Vladimir Putin is indeed following a "special path." However, Putin does not afford Russian citizens the same freedom he grants himself: in questions of politics, they must obey the state and submissively follow the path chosen by politicians. That would be alarming enough even if the country were headed in a definite direction, but it is especially disturbing considering that Putin himself has no clear destination in mind.

The result is that Russia is driving down a road that has yet to be laid: workers add the next few feet of asphalt as they receive orders from the top — first in one direction, and then the next, with no clear plan or goal in sight.

Putin constantly reiterates that it is necessary to respect traditional values and that, when it comes to Russia's interests, other powers should stay out of the way. And although Putin's actions have shaken the established world order, he has given no indication of what type

of order he believes should replace it.

Many in Europe and the United States are concerned about Russia's actions in the international arena, not only because they dislike what is happening, but, worse, because they see no rationale or logic guiding the Kremlin. The West has become so nervous about Putin's unpredictable behavior that at times it seems diplomats would feel relieved if the Kremlin pursued an openly destructive policy with understandable objectives.

How should the Russian people fill this vacuum? It is essential that the Russian people publicly discuss the future of their country. If that proves impossible, it is imperative that those who disagree with the status quo are able to find others who share their views.

We have certain advantages in this regard. Yes, state propaganda is ubiquitous and effective, but anyone can avoid it by simply turning off their television. By controlling the airwaves, the government managed to prevent earlier generations from gaining access to information it considered undesirable. However, we have the Internet, and that enables us to preserve our freedom of choice.

We should use every opportunity to discuss our ideas: social networks, personal meetings, universities and nongovernmental organizations such as the All-Russia Civil Forum. We should also use official venues when we have the chance for dialogue with state officials. We must defend our rights by all non-violent and legitimate means available.

The Putin era will eventually end. It has often happened in Russian history that the departing ruling elite has taken the old ideology with them, giving the country the opportunity to choose a new path. When that happens, we will need to employ all the skills and resources of civil society. Now is the best time to develop them.

How can the West help? First off, it can refrain from sending its experts to teach and advise their Russian counterparts. We have already been through that. Russians are capable of independent thought and are able to diagnose and correct these errors.

Russia must converse with the West as its equal, and not as its protege. Both share the same problems connected with democracy, market economy and social life. Russia should put itself in the mainstream by generating ideas that could guide liberal-democratic states around the world. Our goal is to improve Western political thought and not to simply assimilate it.

That is an inspiring goal, especially if Russians, Europeans and Americans will work on it together. The current cooling of relations is the result of a struggle between the imperfect Western system and the unpredictable Russian one. The only way to end that confrontation is to find an alternative to both.

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