

What would a democratic Russian foreign policy look like?

Mark Katz predicts substantial continuity of international approach in a fully democratic Russia.

If Russia was fully democratic, what would its foreign policy look like? Would it be greatly different from what it is now? Would it be much more in tune with American foreign policy? Would it share the values that the European Union espouses in dealing with other countries? Or would there still be important differences between Russia, on the one hand, and the West, on the other?

Just asking these questions, of course, assumes that Russia can and will become a full-fledged democracy. Many will immediately object that this is not likely — or even that it is not possible. But no country began as a democracy. All were originally authoritarian. Democracy, where it exists, is something that countries had to learn — often slowly and haltingly. Some happened to learn it sooner while others happened to learn it later. It appears to me that claiming that a particular country, such as Russia, either will not — or worse, cannot — become democratic is far more dubious an assumption than that it will become democratic some day.

But while predicting that Russia will become fully democratic in the future may be more reasonable than predicting that it never will, predicting how and when Russia might become democratic is far more difficult. Perhaps it will occur quickly and surprisingly as a result of a ‘colour revolution’. Or perhaps it will occur in an evolutionary process that unfolds over the course of several years or even decades. Perhaps it will occur sooner. Or perhaps it will occur later.

There would be a dramatic difference between the domestic policies of the Putin/Medvedev administration now and a democratised Russia in the future. Unlike the present Russian government, a democratised Russia would witness real competition in elections both for the presidency and for the Duma, would protect human rights as well as property rights, and



Dmitri Medvedev and Vladimir Putin

would promote religious and ethnic tolerance. Of course, how successfully a democratic Russia would be at this last task is unclear. Even long-established democracies have trouble promoting and maintaining tolerance. But like them, a democratic Russia would at least try to do so.

Basic similarity

But how different would the foreign policy of a democratic Russia be from the foreign policy of Russia now? While some aspects of a democratic Russia’s foreign policy would be different from that of the Putin/Medvedev regime, much of it would be the same. After all, not all democracies agree with American foreign policy. France in particular has proved that on many occasions. A democratic Russia might well also disagree with Washington on foreign policy issues. Of course, a democratic Russia, on the one hand, and France (as well as the European Union as a whole), on the other, might also disagree on various matters.

And it is important to understand this since identifying how a democratic Russian foreign policy would be similar to as well as different from Putin/Medvedev’s helps us to distinguish between what are Russia’s core foreign policy interests — no matter what kind of regime is in power — and what are the pe-

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cular interests of an authoritarian Russia which might change as democratisation occurs. This article will explore just what a democratic Russian foreign policy might be toward several areas, including: Europe, the Middle East, Asia, Latin America and Africa, the Near Abroad, and — of course — the United States.

European relations

Some of the issues that currently disturb Russian–European relations could be expected to diminish or even disappear altogether if Russia became democratic. Some differences between them, though, would probably remain. A few might even grow worse.

If Russia became democratic, then — quite obviously — current European concerns about its not being democratic at present would disappear. And since a democratic Russia would presumably work to protect its citizens' human rights and uphold the rule of law, these issues would also diminish (though some differences, or discussions, over how best to achieve these goals might remain).

A democratic Russia and Europe, though, are quite likely to have important differences concerning Russia's relationship to the European Union (Russian–NATO relations might also be a source of division, but this will be discussed in the section on Russian–American relations).

Concerning a democratic Russia and the European Union, the question that will arise is: should Russia join it or not? Russia would have to weigh the costs and benefits to itself of doing so. The benefits would include the freedom for Russian citizens to travel, study, and work throughout the European Union. Part of the cost of Russia's admission, though, is that it would not only have to allow European corporations the freedom to trade with and invest in Russia but also have to protect their rights to do so despite whatever objections Russian corporations or public opinion might have to them doing so. While it may well be in Russia's long-term interest for better-run European firms to buy up poorly-run Russian ones, replace their managers, and completely reorganise them, this will undoubtedly be painful to certain categories of Russians (especially in the managerial ranks) in the short run. What a democratic Russia will have to decide for itself is: are the benefits of Russia joining the European Union worth the costs?

Probable objection

But even if a democratic Russia is willing to join the European Union, it is by no means certain that the European Union would be willing to accept a democratic Russia. Those in the European Union who object to admitting Turkey and Ukraine because they do not want to extend EU benefits to two such populous but relatively poor countries will have the same objection to admitting Russia. Latent fear of Russia may also remain in some East European states, resulting in them seeking to block Russian entry to the European Union. Of course, the more powerful West European states that currently brush aside East European fears about authoritarian Russia are even more likely to ignore them when it comes to a democratic Russia. Even in West Europe, though, the main benefit of discussing with Moscow just the prospect of Russian admission to the European Union (much less actually doing so) is that this would be the best means of changing Russian



The Duma in session

behaviour so that it conforms with European norms.

Specifically, the European Union would probably expect a democratic Russia seeking membership in the European Union to support the democratic transformation of Belarus, reduce the Russian troop presence in Kaliningrad and end it in Transdnistria, work toward a resolution of the Transdnistria problem resulting in its reintegration into Moldova, encourage Serbia to accept the independence of Kosovo and normalise relations with it, and renounce the idea of a special Russian sphere of influence in what were the western Soviet republics (the Baltics, Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova).

The European Union can best be seen as a club. The way clubs work is that those who join it first make the rules. Those who join it later may be able to change those rules after they become members (if they can convince the other members to do so), but they have to accept the rules as they are in order to be admitted in the first place. Clubs do not change their rules to accommodate the preferences of those seeking to join them.

Needless, to say: it is not at all certain that even a democratic Russia would be willing to accept the conditions that the European Union would undoubtedly impose for accepting Russia as a member. It is completely certain, though, that the European Union is not going to alter its existing norms to suit Russia.

Middle East

Russia's current foreign policy toward the Middle East is already quite complicated. That of a democratic Russia might even be more so.

Under Putin and Medvedev, Moscow has improved its ties with virtually all the major actors in the Middle East — Iran, Israel, conservative and radical Arab governments, and even Hamas and Hezbollah. Moscow, in short, has good relations with everyone in the region except al-Qaeda and its affiliates — and they, of course, do not get along with anyone.

Even now, there are different Russian domestic political actors that favour building or maintaining good relations between Moscow, on the one hand, and specific Middle Eastern countries, on the other. The Russian petroleum industry, for example, is particularly interested in improved Russian–Ira-



Vladimir Putin with Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

nian relations in order to expand its stake in the lucrative Iranian petroleum sector. The Russian arms industry would also like to be able to export more to Iran. Of course, these two industries also want to work with other Middle Eastern governments — many of which have poor relations with Iran. The Russian defence ministry has a special interest in improving Russian–Israeli relations since Israel has now become an important source of military technology for it. Russian arms exports to several countries are also enhanced with the addition of Israeli technology, and so the Russian arms industry also has a strong incentive to maintain good Russian–Israeli ties.

Important role

Up to now, though, Russian public opinion has had little impact on Moscow's relations with the Middle East. If Russia were democratic, public opinion might play an important role in shaping Moscow's foreign policy toward this region — just as public opinion does in other democracies. But also as in other democracies, the public in Russia may be sharply divided about policy toward the Middle East.

In a democratic Russia, the large Muslim population could

Russian Muslims at prayer



be expected to be strongly pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli — just as Muslim populations in other predominantly non-Muslim countries are. Because the Muslim minority in Russia is so large (about one-eighth of the country's population), and because Russia's Muslim population is much, much larger than its Jewish population, a democratic Russian government would have a strong incentive to please this large voting bloc. However, hostility between Russians and Muslims as well as the fear of Islamic radicalism inside Russia might also result in large numbers of voters seeing Israel as an ally against a common Muslim foe. The extensive cultural, trade, and tourist links that built up between Russia and Israel might also contribute to the emergence of an influential Israeli lobby in Russia (indeed, there already is one).

Just as in other democratic countries, then, a democratic Russian government might well face conflicting domestic pressures regarding how to formulate its foreign policy toward the Middle East. And like other democracies, a democratic Russia might strive to maintain good relations with conflicting sides in the Israeli–Palestinian as well as other Middle Eastern disputes.

Finally, it seems safe to predict that just like other democracies, a democratic Russia would be fearful that attempts at democratisation in the Middle East (as are occurring now) might result in the rise of Islamic radicalism there. And perhaps even more than other democracies, a democratic Russia would have reason to worry about the domestic impact of increased Islamic radicalism in the Middle East.

Asian approach

A future democratic Russia might well have the same interests vis-à-vis Asia that Russia under Putin/Medvedev does now. Whether it is democratic or authoritarian, Moscow is likely to be concerned about the rise of China and what it means for Russia. While seeking good relations with a rising China, both an authoritarian and a democratic Russia would see friendship with China's rival, India, as a hedge against Beijing. Further, both an authoritarian and a democratic Russia would see a Pakistan that continues support for the Taliban and other radical Islamist groups as a threat to Russian interests, and perhaps even to Russia itself.

Indeed, if American forces withdraw from Afghanistan, competition between Pakistan, on the one hand, and either an authoritarian or a democratic Russia, on the other, is highly likely to emerge — or more accurately, re-emerge — over that country. If Pakistan supports a likely bid by the predominantly Pushtun Taliban to regain power, Moscow — no matter what type of government is in place there — is likely to support the Uzbeks and Tajiks of northern Afghanistan in resisting this — just like it did during the 1990s. Natural allies for a democratic or authoritarian Russia in pursuing this endeavour are the United States (which may continue to provide military assistance to Kabul even if American troops leave the country), India, and perhaps even Iran (which also fears the virulently anti-Shi'a Taliban).

A democratic Russian foreign policy toward Asia might be similar to the current one on other issues as well. A democratic Russia, for instance, may be no more willing to make concessions to Japan on the 'Northern Territories' issue than the Putin/Medvedev regime has been. Indeed, popular opposition to



Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal (left) and Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov shake hands as they meet in Moscow on 7 February 2007

conceding any Russian territory may actually make resolving the Northern Territories issue even more difficult for a democratic Russian government. Similarly, a democratic Russia may be no more willing to pressure North Korea on the nuclear issue than the Putin/Medvedev regime since it too would not want to incur the wrath of its mercurial leadership. Finally, just as the Putin/Medvedev leadership does now, a democratic Russia is likely to concentrate on pursuing Moscow's commercial interests in Asia.

More sensitive

Perhaps one way in which the foreign policy of a democratic Russia toward Asia might differ from Moscow's current policy is that it might be more sensitive to any spike in the Russian public's fears about a rising China encroaching either on Russian interests or the Russian sphere of influence in Central Asia. Such fears might push Moscow to work more closely with other nations also worried about China — especially India, America, and even Japan. But just as now under Putin/Medvedev, the government of a democratic Russia would be loathe to see Sino-Russian relations deteriorate lest Beijing's incentives for maintaining good ties to Moscow be reduced.

With regard to Latin America and Africa, the foreign policy of a democratic Russia might be quite similar to that of the Putin/Medvedev leadership now. Just as now, a future democratic Russia's interest in Latin America and Africa is likely to be primarily commercial. Russia's ability to trade with and invest in Latin American and African nations will probably be Moscow's main concern in these two regions. Moscow is likely to focus on building its economic relations with the wealthier countries of these regions, especially Mexico, Brazil, Chile, South Africa, and possibly Nigeria. Due both to their historical ties as well as its petroleum wealth, Moscow is also likely to continue developing its ties with Angola.

A democratic Russia may be less sympathetic than Moscow is now toward anti-American leftist regimes in Latin America: Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua. So long as it is profitable to do so, however, a democratic Russia's business interests (especially those in the petroleum and arms sectors) will seek to trade with and invest in them. Indeed, even a democratic Russia may see some advantage in the continuation of adversarial relations between the United States, on the

one hand, and leftist regimes in Latin America, on the other. If American corporations are unwilling or unable (due to US government sanctions) to trade and invest in these countries, this gives more opportunity for Russian (as well, of course, as those from elsewhere) to do so. But if any of these Latin American leftist regimes move to seize the assets or otherwise unilaterally limit the operations of Russian firms operating in them (as Hugo Chavez has done with Western corporations), a democratic Russia is likely to side with Russian corporations in any dispute with it — just as the Putin/Medvedev leadership would as well.

Unlike the current Putin/Medvedev government, though, a democratic Russia is unlikely to object to the democratic transformation of any of Latin America's (or Africa's) anti-American authoritarian (or quasi-authoritarian) regimes. A democratic Russia, however, would probably do little to assist this process — just as the current Putin/Medvedev government would do little to prevent it. Both now and in the future, Latin America and Africa are not likely to be a particularly high priority for Russia.

Near abroad

Just as the Putin/Medvedev leadership does now, a democratic Russia would undoubtedly want to preserve Moscow's influence in the non-Russian republics of the former Soviet Union. In addition, a democratic Russia is likely to be just as concerned as the Putin/Medvedev leadership (indeed, perhaps even more so) about the status of Russians in these republics. A democratic Russia, though, might pursue these goals in a very different manner than the Putin/Medvedev leadership does now.

A democratic Russia might adopt a more enlightened approach concerning how best to preserve Russian influence in the Near Abroad. The Putin/Medvedev leadership tends to view this issue in zero-sum terms: increased Western influence in the Near Abroad is seen as resulting in decreased Russian influence, and is thus resisted. A democratic Russia, by contrast, might understand that increased Western influence in these republics may actually serve Russian interests. If Western influence helps these countries become more prosperous, their trade relations with Russia may well increase. And if Western influence helps these countries become more stable, this will be

Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in Delhi in December 2010. They signed nuclear and defence agreements and proclaimed the intention jointly to develop a fifth generation stealth fighter aircraft



better for Russia than if they are unstable.

Whereas Moscow now often has contentious relations with the three Baltic republics (all of which are now EU and NATO members), a democratic Russia might see having good relations with them as important for building and maintaining good ties with both America and the European Union. Nor would a democratic Russia be fearful of democratisation in Ukraine or Belarus — as Moscow currently is. Nor is a democratic Russia likely to see much value in maintaining troops in Transnistria or further maintaining an authoritarian regime in power there.

With regard to the predominantly Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union (the four Central Asian states plus Azerbaijan), however, a democratic Russia is likely to fear that the attempt at democratisation in them may result in the rise of radical Islamist regimes instead. This, of course, is something that is now feared not just by the Putin/Medvedev leadership, but by Western governments as well. Just as America and other Western democracies have found it expedient to support authoritarian regimes in the predominantly Muslim former Soviet republics, it would not be surprising if a democratic Russia did so too.

Continued support

It is highly likely that public opinion in a democratic Russia would push for continued Russian support for Orthodox Christian Armenia in its longstanding dispute with Muslim Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. A democratic Russia is also likely to continue having problematic relations with Georgia, which Russian forces bested in a short, sharp war in August 2008 resulting in Moscow's recognition of Abkhaz and South Ossetian independence from Georgia. While Georgia is likely to continue demanding the return of these two territories, it is not clear how this could be accomplished on a democratic basis. On the other hand, a democratic Russia is unlikely to go to war with Georgia again like the Putin/Medvedev leadership did — unless, of course, it views Georgia's government as authoritarian and aggressive if and when another crisis between them develops.

A democratic Russia is likely to have better relations with the United States than the Putin/Medvedev leadership does now. But relations between the United States and a democratic Russia are unlikely to be completely smooth either. Indeed, they may be similar to the relationship between the United States and France (before, at least, the rise of Sarkozy).


Like France, a democratic Russia is likely to continue seeing itself as a great power, and is likely to resist what Moscow sees as American efforts to set the foreign policy agenda for other democracies. The future of NATO could become even more contentious an issue for a democratic Russia than it is for the Putin/Medvedev leadership. For if Russia is truly democratic and hence not at all a threat to Europe or America, then what is the remaining purpose of NATO? On the other hand, a democratic Russia that is increasingly fearful of a powerful China that remains authoritarian may want to join NATO itself. The accession of Russia to NATO, though, is likely to prove difficult and contentious. While the United States might support this, Eastern European and Baltic states previously occupied by the Soviet Union and which have had problematic relations with it up to now might not be so enthusiastic. The

persistence of Russian–Georgian tensions will also pose an obstacle for Russia joining NATO (just as they have — and will continue to have — for Georgia joining it also). Finally, just as several Western European states seeking good relations with Moscow were less than sympathetic toward Eastern European concerns about Russia, European states — both Western and Eastern — seeking good relations with Beijing might be less than sympathetic toward a democratic Russia's concerns about China.

One path

One path that a democratic Russian foreign policy might take is to try to ally with France and Germany in attempting to limit what the United States does, just like they tried to do during the 2002–03 run-up to the US-led intervention in Iraq. This path, though, will not be possible if a democratic Russia seeks to join the European Union, but France and Germany either oppose or do not enthusiastically support this. Another path, though, may be that a democratic Russia and the United States work together in opposing EU efforts to limit them both. A third — and perhaps most likely — path is that a democratic Russia will more or less work together with America and other Western governments more than the Putin/Medvedev leadership does now, but differences among them on various issues will continue.

The projections made here about what a future democratic Russian foreign policy might look like are hardly definitive. What this discussion of it suggests, though, is that there is likely to be much in common between the foreign policy of a democratic Russia in the future and that of the Putin/Medvedev leadership now. Similarly, many of the current differences between the Western democracies, on the one hand, and the Putin/Medvedev administration, on the other, are likely to remain after a democratic transformation in Russia. If these two observations are correct, then the following conclusions can also be drawn:

- Any Western expectations that a democratic Russia is likely to lead to a more pliable Russian foreign policy that will follow the US and/or European Union lead are likely to be disappointed.
- Just as relations between the United States and France have often proved contentious, relations between both the United States and the European Union, on the one hand, and a democratic Russia, on the other, are also likely to be contentious.
- If, indeed, the foreign policy of a future democratic Russia is going to be similar to that of the Putin/Medvedev leadership now, what this suggests is that the current Putin/Medvedev foreign policy is by and large reflective of current Russian public opinion.
- This being the case, the Putin/Medvedev leadership is likely to prove unresponsive to American and European efforts to alter Russian foreign policy in ways that stray far from what Russian public opinion supports.
- Ironically, it is because the Putin/Medvedev leadership fears democratisation and will go to great lengths to suppress demand for it that Putin and Medvedev are unlikely to pursue foreign policies that are likely to arouse domestic opposition in Russia — no matter how much America and the European Union might urge them to do so. 

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