



Outside View: Open letter to NATO, EU

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Outside View Commentators

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A response to the open letter to heads of state and government of the European Union and NATO of Sept. 28, 2004.

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As academics, business persons, journalists and former government officials specializing in Russian affairs, we take exception to the characterization of Russian political developments under President Vladimir Putin as a slow but steady slide into dictatorship.

We feel that, in their eagerness to have an impact on Western policy toward Russia, our colleagues have oversimplified Russia's complex reality, minimized the challenges that country now faces, and come up with the wrong prescriptions.

The core of their indictment is that, since coming to office, Putin has "systematically undercut the freedom and independence of the press, destroyed the checks and balances in the Russian federal system, arbitrarily imprisoned both real and imagined political rivals, removed legitimate candidates from electoral ballots, harassed and arrested NGO leaders, and weakened Russia's political parties."

None of these is an entirely fair or accurate portrayal of the issues.

While recent developments in Russian politics are cause for serious concern, it is important to keep them in perspective, and to remember that the end of Russian democracy has been confidently predicted each year since 1991.

The open letter calls upon Western leaders to "speak the truth about what is happening in Russia." Our goal is more modest; not to tell people what "the truth" is about Russia, but to urge a more balanced approach. Lopsided assessments cannot achieve our common goal of fostering Russian democracy and facilitating Russia's integration with the West.

A few examples will serve to illustrate the point. While they are by no means a full statement of the counter-arguments, upon which individuals may differ, they suffice to show that democratic development under President Vladimir Putin has had ups as well as downs.

On the press:











