



The Putin Generation

How Will Its Rise Affect US-Russian Relations?

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This year, young people are coming out in record numbers to support their political candidates, not just in the United States but in Russia as well.

Although the phenomenon has been relatively ignored by the Western media, young people in Russia have become markedly more politically active during Vladimir Putin's second term in office, a striking change for a country where young people (ages 18-35) have traditionally been among the most politically apathetic segment of the population. In the 2000 elections, for example, Putin's support among pensioners was significantly higher than it was among young people.

Recently, however, young Russians have begun to display new patterns of both political and economic behavior that have led pollsters to refer to them as the "Putin Generation." The importance of this generation is epitomized by the rise of Dmitry Medvedev who, at 42, is not only Russia's youngest president, but also the youngest leader in the G8. This generation's values will pose a fundamentally new and different challenge to the West—how to deal with an increasingly prosperous and self-confident Russia.

Respect for the Past, Hope for the Future

Some observers of post-Soviet youth have emphasized the values that they share with their parents. Writing in the *Washington Post* in August 2007, academics Sarah

Mendelson and Theodore Gerber, for example, warn that "a new generation of Russians who are nostalgic for the Soviet Union, ambivalent about Stalin, and hostile toward the United States may jeopardize US-Russian relations long after Putin is gone."

But a comparison of nine different surveys of Russian youth since 2005, conducted by the Fund for Public Opinion, the Yury Levada Analytical Center, and the All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM), reveals that what young people admire most about the past is not the regime or its ideology—words like "socialism," communism," and even "USSR" are perceived positively by less than 5 percent of young people, and only 6 percent say they would have liked to have lived in Soviet times. Instead, what they find admirable is the sense of common purpose their grandparents shared and how it united the country and made citizens feel proud. Young Russians growing up during the 1990s saw this inheritance, and along with it any sense of pride in the country's history, trashed in the mass media. Not surprisingly, as these young people mature, a counter-reaction has ensued.

One of the first to note the rise of conservative sentiments among young people was Alexander Tsipko, director of political programs at the Gorbachev Foundation. During his travels across the country lecturing to young audiences, Tsipko said he was struck by their yearning for a contemporary patriotic agenda. His own generation, the generation of the 1960s, discovered patriotism "through books, through

the beautiful minds and words of pre-revolutionary Russian thinkers.” By contrast, the current generation has embraced patriotism as a defense mechanism against the blanket criticism of Russia’s past that left them with nothing of their own to believe in. “Just as Christian asceticism was a moral protest against the debauchery and dissipation of decrepit Rome,” he writes, “our youth conservatism and youth patriotism is a protest against the defeatism of the liberal elite. We now see the emergence of a Russian conservative elite that we didn’t have in late 1980s and early 1990s, when the fate of the country was hanging in the balance.”

According to Dmitry Polikanov, Director of International Relations at the All-Russia Public Opinion Research Center, today’s youth patriotism combines a healthy respect for past Soviet achievements (especially for the sacrifices that their parents and grandparents made to achieve them) with an ambition to see Russia become a “great power.” Asked to describe specifically what will make Russia “great” again, roughly half point to Russia’s history, traditions, and “spirituality,” while the other half point to economic growth, security, and the overall well-being of its citizens. Less than 2 percent express any sympathy for skinheads or National Bolsheviks.

In the past, exhortations to restore past glories failed to make much of an impact on young people. The present generation, however, seems willing to translate their longing for a Russia they can be proud of into support for Putin’s political agenda.

“More Work, More Money, More Sex”

The Putin Generation is the first politically active post-Soviet generation. According to Alexander Oslon, general director of the Public Opinion Foundation, they are “entirely different” from previous generations. A 2006 survey conducted by the All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion focused on some of the personality traits that set the Putin Generation apart: They tend to be bolder than their parents, viewing aggressiveness as a manifestation of self-confidence and initiative. Unlike their parents and grandparents, who are appalled by the emergence of the “super rich,” they are proud that Russia has the world’s second largest number of billionaires, and they either hope to make the list of Russia’s richest individuals themselves or see their children on it.

Having only the vaguest memories of the end of the Soviet era, they have little or no nostalgia for it and are quite comfortable in this new era of capitalism, electoral and media pluralism, and travel abroad. They shift primary responsibility for economic welfare from the state to the individual. In morality

and religion, they “demonstrate almost Protestant attitudes,” emphasizing personal salvation and communication with God much more than participation in church life and the observance of religious customs. A 2007 study of 17-26 year olds, conducted by the Russian Academy of Sciences, concludes by describing them as “relaxed about planning for the future. They not only talk of wanting to achieve success in various forms—they actually believe they can do it.”

The emergence of this new personality type was foreshadowed by a little noted 2005 survey of college educated young persons, aged 18-31, conducted by BBDO Worldwide, one of the world’s leading advertising agencies. It compared young people in Russia to their counterparts in seven West European countries and came to some startling conclusions. Young Russians turned out to be much more optimistic about their future than their European counterparts (79 percent to 46 percent), and more motivated to achieve their ambitions.

While their European counterparts wanted to earn just enough money to retire as early as possible, young Russians were described as “active and optimistic. They are insatiable and they like the word ‘more’: more work, more money, more sex.” Notably, personal ambition was matched by a greater sense of patriotism, as well—64 percent of young Russians said they would be willing to protect their motherland, nearly twice as many as in Western Europe.

Vladimir Putin has somehow managed to tap into this heady brew of entitlement and patriotism and translate it into support for “the Putin Plan”—the sequence of economic and political reforms that have catapulted the country from bankruptcy into one of the world’s fastest growing economies. By simultaneously resurrecting economic growth and making the case that Russian democracy can be “sovereign,” (i.e. develop from indigenous roots and without apologies for



Opposite: Members of Russia’s Young Guards youth group demonstrate in favor of Dmitry Medvedev during the 2008 presidential election. **Above:** A young man embraces a cardboard cutout of former president Vladimir Putin.

the past) Putin and his advisors have tapped into the two main sources of what young people think of “greatness”: Russia’s distinctive history, traditions, and spirituality, as well as its economic growth, security, and well-being.

But it is not just economic stability for which young people give Putin credit. Nearly half say they are satisfied with how democracy works in Russia, and more than half say they would not sacrifice freedom of speech and democratic elections even to the cause of Russian greatness. Although still skeptical of politicians and political parties, young people are nearly twice as likely to join a political organization as any other age group.

The result has been a 20 percent increase of those who say that Russia is moving in the right direction since 2005, a rise that pollsters attribute less to a shift in public perceptions, than to the coming of age of a new constituency that began to participate in elections after 2003. These young voters, who came out in record numbers in the 2007 parliamentary and 2008 presidential elections, form the core of what pollsters now call “the Putin majority.”

By combining respect for the past with solid economic achievements, the government appears to have found a formula that appeals to young people. But, as Kremlin advisor Gleb Pavlovsky notes, while Russia today is indeed “the house that Putin built,” it is still unfurnished. That will be the task of Putin’s 42 year-old successor, Dmitry Medvedev.

What the Putin Generation Expects from Medvedev

Like most Russians, young people regard the political system Putin constructed to be more democratic and a better safeguard of human rights than what the country had under either Gorbachev or Yeltsin. More importantly, 73 percent of all citizens who voted for Dmitry Medvedev say they expect

him to further promote democracy in the country.

That is indeed how Medvedev structured his campaign. Whereas Putin defined his primary task as stabilizing a country in free fall, his successor has laid out a different agenda, to build “an effective civil society...composed of mature individuals ready for democracy.” To accomplish this task, Medvedev knows that he must motivate the Putin Generation to be more actively involved in Russian politics.

Using language that only the Putin Generation is truly comfortable with, Medvedev describes capitalism as “what people do if they are left alone.” He says that the “state, objectively, is a poorer manager than a private owner . . . [because] state-owned companies cannot compete with each other in a genuine way because they have the same owner.” His economic philosophy, he says, is a simple one: “If government participation is not essential, then the government should not be involved.”

Tapping into the appeal that private initiative holds for young people, Medvedev has pushed through tax exemptions for businesses that support both NGOs and charities, arguing that Russia’s five thousand plus charities serve “as a serious medicine against dependency and paternalism, which we have historically been disposed to.”

As head of four Priority National Projects (PNPs) in health care, education, housing, and agriculture, he championed the idea that government funding needs to follow the choices of individuals, rather than institutions, and lobbied to allow universities to set up their own small businesses, and endowments to ensure funding independent from the state.

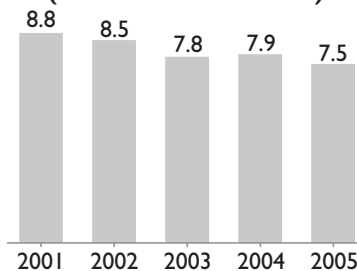
Why all this emphasis on private initiative? Because, he says, Russia now faces challenges that are qualitatively different from those faced by his predecessor: “to create the

A Generation of Growth

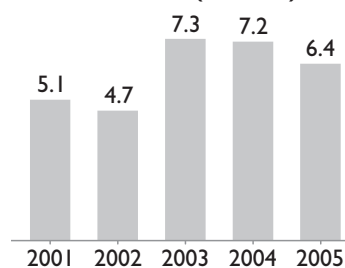
Russia by the Numbers

The following charts display key indicators of economic growth over the years 2001-2005. Inflation and unemployment decreased, while GDP and GDP per capita saw a modest rise.

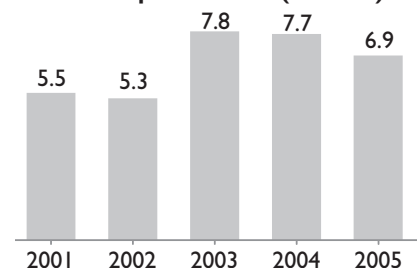
Unemployment (Percent of Labor Force)



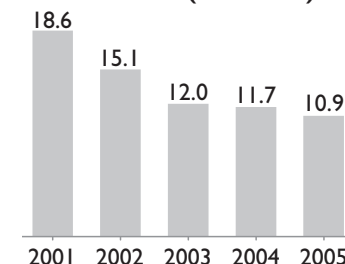
GDP Growth (Percent)



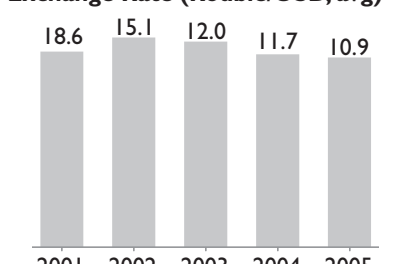
GDP Per Capita Growth (Percent)



CPI Inflation (Dec./Dec.)



Exchange Rate (Rouble/USD, avg)



OECD Surveys

kind of system wherein civic structures can take part in the development of government policy and in the evaluation of its quality.”

Western analysts tend to dismiss Medvedev’s statements as mere campaign rhetoric or claim that they point to a potentially dangerous split in the country’s leadership. Neither view is correct. In fact, Medvedev made government consultation of non-governmental organizations a personal priority more than two years ago, well before he became Putin’s potential successor.

And while it is tempting to regard Medvedev’s liberal rhetoric as a dramatic break with Putin, Medvedev himself does not see it that way. He fully agrees with his mentor that during the chaos of the 1990s, the first tasks of the central government were to re-establish authority, forge a “unified legal space,” shore up the domestic economy, liberate the political and media arenas from the stifling control of oligarchs, and lay the foundations for an independent foreign policy. Now that the situation in the country has stabilized, however, he says it is time for the government to shift the

lith.” The first describes Russia as a subspecies of Oriental despotism that has hardly changed over the centuries. The second seeks to reassure us that, while Russia may at times appear strong, it is really weak and headed toward crisis.

Both schools of thought vow that this time, unlike the 1990s, they are being “realistic” about Russia. For the first school that realism is manifest in a defeatism about any prospect for Russian democracy (the bane, they say, of the “romantic” Clinton era), while the second school argues that realism means taking advantage of Russia’s vulnerabilities and dragging it toward democracy.

Strikingly, neither school considers it necessary to consult the Russian people in this discussion of their own democracy. Instead, the consensus view among political analysts focuses on the need to contain Russia. “Russophobia,” as Senator Joseph Biden noted in the *Wall Street Journal* (March 24, 2008) is “back into fashion,” and along with it the idea of once again containing Russia.

There are, however, some practical reasons why a new containment strategy will not work. The first is that it

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focus from consolidation to liberalization.

Although he only assumed the presidency in May 2008, Medvedev’s seven year track record in public office points to a long-standing commitment to the historic challenge that Russia faces—the creation of that country’s first truly liberal society.

Young Russia and the West

Russia’s rise, however, has been greeted with suspicion more often than applause in the West. A February 2008 BBC poll shows how very differently Westerners and Russians view Putin’s political accomplishments. On the question of whether Putin’s presidency has had a positive or negative influence on democracy and human rights, for example, by a 2:1 margin individuals in G7 states feel that it has been negative, while by a 5:1 margin Russians feel that it has been positive. While ancient religious and cultural prejudices certainly play some role in the perpetuation of negative stereotypes about Russia (as the late historian Martin Malia aptly observed, these did not arise with communism and hence were not likely to disappear with its collapse), it is still remarkable how little Western thinking has moved beyond the assumptions of the Cold War.

Despite the tectonic political, economic, and social shifts that have taken place in Russia over the past two decades, the two most popular images of that country in the mainstream Western press remain what I would call, “the incorrigible Tsarist wasteland” and “the ever collapsing autocratic mono-

requires an implausible degree of unanimity and coordination among Europeans, many of whom derive considerable economic benefit from dealing with a capitalist Russia. The second is that neo-containment advocates never explain how isolating Russia from Europe will lead to the desired emergence of a more pro-European mindset in that country. Finally, there is the very real danger that, in today’s world, pushing Russia away from Europe will simply thrust it into the welcoming arms of China and India.

It would therefore be far better to fight against these Russophobic tendencies than to embrace them. A good place to start would be by recognizing that a new political consensus has finally emerged in Russia, as many in the 1990s hoped it would. It has achieved success where previous efforts failed, precisely because, instead of discarding the past, it combines a healthy respect for the Soviet past with the strategic goal of creating a modern, democratic Russia.

Western analysts, who view the Soviet past only as an impediment to change, have tended to overlook the degree to which acceptance of the past promotes psychological comfort during times of transition, thus generating broader public acceptance of the need for political and economic reforms. By offering such comfort to the older generation while at the same time offering greater political and economic opportunities to the younger generation, Putin has given Russia the broad social basis for democratic reforms that it has heretofore been missing.

We have failed to see this fact because Russian youths

have been simplistically portrayed as anti-Western, just because they are pro-Putin. This not only fails to grasp the extent to which Putin's eight years of consolidation made Medvedev's liberal agenda possible, but also falsely identifies Yeltsin's weak Russia as pro-Western and Putin's strong Russia as anti-Western. This suggests to many young Russians that the West prefers a weak and pliant Russia. It is hard to imagine how the West can build bridges to future Russian leaders on that basis.



Russian President Dmitry Medvedev speaks at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum. He called for international cooperation to deal with current global economic problems.

Mutual respect for each others' values is the only solid foundation for partnership. To date, unfortunately, such partnership has been derailed by an unwillingness to accept Russia's democracy on its own terms. Until this changes, the relationship between the US and Russia will be no different than it was a generation ago.

The election of Dmitry Medvedev to the presidency offers a unique opportunity to set this relationship on a new path, since he shows every sign of wanting to promote the kind of free market and liberal politics that the West says it has been looking for in Russia's leadership.

In addition to the economic initiatives already mentioned, in the political arena he has championed the creation of an independent public television channel, an independent judiciary, and parliamentary oversight of the executive branch. He has also stressed the role that non-governmental organizations must play, insisting that every level of government in Russia "use the experience of NGOs and public organizations which, among other things, have learned to control their expenses better than government."

A Plan for the Future

Finally, and no less importantly, the imminent generational shift in Russia's leadership (and perhaps America's leadership) provides a rare opportunity to re-conceptualize our security relationship. Indeed, one initiative that would allow us to do just that is already on the table.

Two years ago, as head of Gazprom, Dmitry Medvedev proposed a radically new way of thinking about energy security in Europe. Instead of basing policy on the fear of Russian investments in Europe's energy infrastructure and of Europe's dependence on Russian energy supplies, Medvedev suggested that Europeans and Russians transform their fears into a mutual dependence that would gradually begin to create what he called "a virtuous circle" of economic efficiency and security.

The key would be expanding mutual investment in each other's energy infrastructure, so that Russian investment in refinery and distribution in Europe and European investment in oil and gas extraction in Russia would be linked. By sharing risk, such an "asset swap" would enhance the confidence of all parties. As Medvedev put it in 2006: "The Europeans say that we are putting them in a tight corner because they come to depend too much on deliveries of Russian gas. Let us exchange assets then, and we will be dependent on them too."

If this proposal sounds familiar, it should. On May 9, 1950, Robert Schuman proposed something similar involving the strategic energy resources of his day—coal and steel. His words then evoked a broader vision:

"World peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it...Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity. The coming together of the nations of Europe requires the elimination of the age-old opposition of France and Germany...The solidarity in production thus established will make it plain that any war between France and Germany becomes not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible...there will be realized simply and speedily that fusion of interest which is indispensable to the establishment of a common economic system; it may be the leaven from which may grow a wider and deeper community between countries long opposed to one another by sanguinary divisions."

Schuman's proposal led to the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community, which evolved into the European Economic Community and eventually became the European Union. What Dmitry Medvedev has proposed is, in essence, a Schuman Plan for Europe.

Will Western leaders embrace such a bold proposal, envision Russia as part of the West, and finally put the Cold War to rest? It is too early to say. One thing, however, is clear: Developing Western policies that are conducive to such a vision will be the fundamental challenge, and opportunity, that the Putin Generation poses to the next US president. ■