

OPINION | JULY 7, 2009

Don't Abandon Russia's Democrats

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By BORIS NEMTSOV

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's apologists in the West like to suggest that, for all the shortcomings of his authoritarian regime, there is no viable alternative. Such a position is false and dangerous.

Those who accept the concentration of power and corruption under Mr. Putin are condemning Russia to backwardness, lawlessness, social and economic instability and, potentially, territorial disintegration. They are also condemning the world to continued unpredictable actions by the Kremlin's unaccountable leaders.

This is not an outcome President Barack Obama or his advisers, who are in Moscow this week to "reset" relations between the U.S. and Russia, should want.

Just like the Iranians who refuse to have their votes stolen, many Russians are not willing to accept an undemocratic destiny for their country. They are ready to stand up for freedom. These Russians are found among the educated urban dwellers and students, the entrepreneurs and the democratically minded people of all ages.

These are the people who understand that Russia's success will only be possible with democracy, rule of law, independent media, political competition and free elections. Their voices are beginning to be heard.

In April, I ran for mayor of Sochi, host city for the 2014 Winter Olympics. Despite heavy manipulation by the regime, I came in second place, surpassing both the communist and nationalist candidates. The forthcoming legislative elections in Moscow this October will be another test of what the democratic opposition can do even in today's repressive environment.

The regime still has its sources of strength: oil and media censorship. But these two pillars are weaker than they seem.

The persistent and courageous efforts of independent journalists, lawyers and opposition activists -- some of whom have been murdered -- will eventually allow public discussion of Mr. Putin's most abominable actions. Mr. Putin, for instance, was not only responsible for the order to fire at the school during the 2004 Beslan

hostage crisis but is also reportedly involved in corrupt dealings with Kremlin-connected oligarchs. Public discussion of this could lead to a collapse in support for the regime.

As for oil, even today's relatively high price of \$70 a barrel is no longer able to support the Russian economy.

In April, Russia's gross domestic product contracted by 10%, according to government statistics, while industrial production fell by 17% in May. Unemployment has already surpassed 10%. It seems that \$70 oil may not save the regime and prevent social unrest. The origin of these troubles lies in the unprecedented level of bureaucracy and corruption in the Russian economy. According to Transparency International, an NGO that compiles statistics on corruption, Russia under Mr. Putin has descended to a shameful 147th place in the world corruption index.

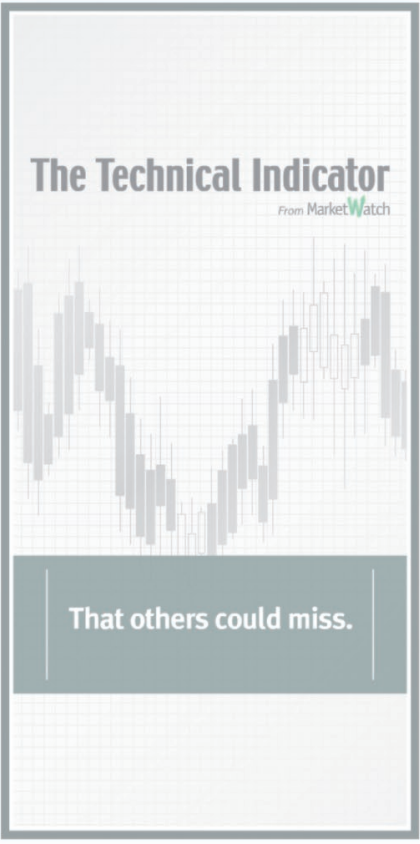
Thanks to his weak personality and (to put it mildly) the questionable legitimacy of the 2008 election, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev is unable to exercise his formal constitutional powers. For all intents and purposes, Mr. Putin continues to be the real ruler of Russia and his authoritarian course remains unchanged.

Media censorship is as severe as ever, elections are a meaningless farce, judges are subservient to the executive, and the economy is dominated by corruption and state-connected monopolies.

In recent remarks, the U.S. president referred to democracy and free speech as "universal values." This gives us a hint of how he would like to remake America's relationship with Russia.

Mr. Putin, however, sees these values as a dangerous threat to his rule -- his values are power and money. As long as American and Russian leaders continue to be separated by such an enormous values gap, it is terribly naïve to expect a serious "reset" in our bilateral relationship.

Mr. Nemtsov was deputy prime minister of Russia (1997-1998) and is a leader of the Solidarity opposition movement.



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