

RUSSIA'S REVISIONISM: DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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Changing Rules



Twenty years after the end of the Cold War, Russia seems intent on re-writing the rules on media freedom, democracy and security on which a new, more cooperative relationship with the west was to be built. Moscow's crackdown on freedom of expression may make conflict more likely.

THIS YEAR A SERIES OF CELEBRATIONS WILL MARK the events of twenty years ago, when eastern-European anti-communist revolutions changed the world. In place of the threat of nuclear war, people across the Eurasian continent could enjoy the promise of a world without war. United States President George Bush senior hailed the birth of a Europe 'whole and free'. Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev looked forward to the prospect that Russians, too, would be part of a 'common European home'.

For most of the next decade, there was a period of openness and mutual trust but that now feels like another age. Several years ago doubts were already being voiced about whether Russia still aspired to share the same values as the west. But government leaders, anxious to avoid further confrontation, were often cautious in public statements. Now Russia's new President Dmitri Medvedev has himself laid bare an intention to change the rules, by demanding a sweeping new security treaty on Russian terms to govern relations among states in Europe.

The Russian blueprint would downgrade commitments by European states to democratic and human rights standards, including media freedom. Civil and political rights, along with security and economic relations, became one of the three parts of a new framework for east-west relations agreed in the 1990s through the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Russia would like to weaken the Organisation's mandate to monitor the fairness of elections within member states and the media's reporting of those elections.

UNDER A SHADOW

Moscow argues that the OSCE's focus on standards of democracy has been manipulated as a tool to serve the interests of the US. America and most of its allies see the Russian proposal as a bid to replace or bypass NATO, which Medvedev now derides as a Cold War relic.

True, a generation has grown up across Europe for whom the age of nuclear-armed confrontation is history, not even a memory. The inter-dependence of east and west has grown through investment, trade and Europe's increasing reliance on energy supplies from Russia. Yet in some parts of Europe, this anniversary year begins under a shadow of apprehension or even fear of Russia.

The Kremlin, after fiercely criticising NATO's expansion and a string of other disputes, used massive force across its border with Georgia to fight and win the first war

of the century in Europe. The result left Russia and the west locked in an open-ended dispute.

After its crushing military victory, Russia has also sought unilaterally to re-draw Europe's borders by recognising the self-proclaimed independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. A hardening of attitude was displayed four years ago when then-president Vladimir Putin, accused the US of hostility to Russia over its backing for the pro-democracy Orange revolution in Ukraine; and he called the collapse of the Soviet Union 'the greatest geo-political tragedy' of the last century. Now in speeches the Kremlin demands that the rules of international relations must be re-written to take account of Russia's claim to a 'sphere of privileged influence'. In the eyes of much of the world, the new Russia has shown itself to be a revisionist power.

WHO NOW?

So instead of mutual congratulation across Europe's east-west divide, the diplomatic air is thick with fresh signs of antagonism and echoes of Cold War rhetoric. In this climate the anniversary is sure to prompt fresh arguments between Russia and its western neighbours about the significance of the events of 1989. And the old question: who won the Cold War? has taken on new relevance.

In the 1990s, a standard answer to that question was 'Ronald Reagan and the Pope' – that is, the military strength of NATO under US leadership and the inherent opposition of the Christian churches to communist ideology. The conventional interpretation says the Cold War was a trial of strength, and the Soviet system lost because the west's greater power and unity allowed it win the arms race, bringing Moscow economically to its knees.

That is certainly part of the answer. But it was also a breathtaking victory both for free expression and free political choice, brought about through mass movements across eastern Europe. Each of the popular revolutions that year, from Solidarity's stunning election victory to the Christmas overthrow of the hated Nicolae Ceausescu regime in Romania, projected the same sense of popular fervour and exhilaration, as nations freed themselves from decades of domination by Soviet military might.

That collective display of the desire for freedom of information and political choice astonished and impressed people around the world during the unfolding dramas in Warsaw, Berlin, Prague and other eastern European capitals.

But the popular will for freedom and self-determination in those 'captive' nations was not new. The forty years of Soviet

domination of the region were studied with the threat or use of force to suppress dissent and to enforce communist orthodoxy – in East Berlin, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland. What was new was the opportunity to demand freedom without the fear of severe punishment.

MANIFESTO FOR DISSENT

Only a narrow breach in the Soviet Union's ideological defences at the height of the Cold War led eventually to those 'people power' revolutions. And it came about not by design, but more or less by accident through the 1975 Helsinki Accords, a set of agreements arising from the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).

The Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev is reported to have rejoiced at the outcome because the Accords confirmed the principle of non-interference in the affairs of a dozen states under Soviet control. And they seemed to set the seal on the political division of postwar Europe. The human rights part of the Accords was seen at the time as a routine re-statement of formal commitments to uphold civil, political and other freedoms.

But instead, the Helsinki Accords turned into a manifesto for dissent. In 1976 dissidents in Moscow, including the scientist Andrei Sakharov, helped create the first of many Helsinki Watch groups to monitor Soviet compliance. The next year the writer Vaclav Havel and other Czechoslovak dissidents formed Charter 77, cheating the Soviet censors at home by publishing their criticisms of their government's failure to implement the provisions of Helsinki in a West German newspaper.

For many years, the struggle for free speech in various parts of the Soviet empire went hand-in-hand with that against political oppression and the totalitarian state, through samizdat underground publications and statements smuggled out to the western media.

The BBC, Voice of America and Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty reached millions of eager listeners behind the Iron Curtain, challenging the accounts put out by the Communist Party's politically directed news organisations.

FOR THE WORKERS

The first devastating challenge to the Soviet monopoly on power and information came from an illegal, non-communist trade union, Solidarity. Formed in 1980 at the Lenin shipyard in Gdansk, it smashed the fiction of the contented socialist workers' state.

Martial law suppressed Solidarity for some years but in 1989 elections it won overwhelming popular backing. That success was due in part to the popularity of the *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Election Gazette) newspaper published by Adam Michnik, who made it into Poland's leading daily paper after communism was swept aside.

Havel, the leader of the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia and later its president, had seen in advance how Soviet-style totalitarianism could be destroyed once the



fiction of its infallibility was exposed. 'When one person cries out "The Emperor is naked"...everything suddenly appears in another light', he said.

The pro-democracy movements were spurred-on by the growing access to television broadcasts from the west, including West Germany. In East Germany and Czechoslovakia, as demonstrations gathered pace and the Berlin Wall at last fell, people could watch their revolution unfolding.

Just two years later, Gorbachev's policy of glasnost claimed its ultimate victim, as the Communist Party and he himself were swept from power, and the Soviet Union broke up.

ANTI-WESTERN

Russia's present leaders point to that dismemberment and the subsequent economic collapse as proof that the west, liberal democracy and the western media are still out to fatally weaken their country. But in fact the 1990s produced remarkable successes towards achieving the very clear goal of President Boris Yeltsin's Russia, to join the European family of nations on the basis of equality, shared democratic values and freedom of expression and the media.

The OSCE, adapted from the CSCE of the Helsinki Accords, was accepted by all sides as the mechanism for bringing about that new constructive relationship. Russia acknowledged the OSCE's special merit in combining security-related tasks like disposing of dangerous nuclear installations and safe management of borders with impartial, multi-national missions for things like election monitoring – tasks suited to the expected era of mutual cooperation.

In view of the importance of fostering diverse and independent media as a pillar of democratic societies, Russia also agreed to the addition of an OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media. The current holder of that post, Miklos Haraszti, has criticised governments from all parts of Europe over various lapses, from Georgia's closure of a critical television station, Imedi TV, to Italy's tolerance



of excessive media holdings by interests linked to Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

Haraszi has also called on Russia for firm and transparent action to bring to justice the killers of the journalist Anna Politkovskaya and numerous other reporters, and objecting to the use of laws on extremism that he said risk stifling online media freedom.

Recently Haraszi sounded the alarm about what he called 'a certain meltdown' of member states' OSCE commitments. Concerns about human rights, he said, are sometimes dismissed as 'cold warish'. And he rejected any attempt to distinguish between different sorts of democracy, describing it as a way to evade international compliance with free elections or expression.

Inside Russia, the prominent journalist Yevgeny Kiselyov and other outspoken opponents of Putin's leadership say that he has consciously taken control of the nation's main media, especially the national television channels, as a tool for his rise to power. Such critics are dismayed that as they see it the west, including western media, have not paid enough attention to a trend which threatens to poison international relations and cut Russia off from the rest of Europe.

A Russian poll, published by the respected Levada Center a month after the August war with Georgia, gives some credence to that comment. Forty-seven percent of respondents said they regarded the major western countries as enemies of Russia. Levada's director Lev Gudkov attributed the anti-western sentiment to a 'propaganda' campaign in the state-controlled media which took shape after Putin first came to power.

Senior Russian officials have also accused the Council of Europe, the continent's main guardian of democratic standards and the rule law, which Russia joined in 1996, as being biased against them. Russia alone is currently blocking proposed reforms to the procedures of the European Court of Human Rights, which would help to clear the huge backlog of cases.

The largest number of those are from Russian citizens, many concerning torture or disappearances in Chechnya.

The Court's President Jean-Paul Costa responded recently in an interview in the Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta, saying 'There are no anti-Russian sentiments expressed in the verdicts. Similar crimes can occur in any country.'

CONFRONTATION COMING

Two more recent developments point to a danger that Russia, deprived of truly free and diverse media and a viable political opposition, may be headed for more dangerous confrontations with the west.

First, the Russians have spurned the rest of the 56-nation OSCE by saying that the Organisation's entire mission in Georgia, including monitors seeking to re-enter South Ossetia, should go home because other states refuse Russian demands for them to recognise the independence of both the breakaway territories which now house Russian troops.

And now Medvedev is using harsh language to press the demands for a new kind of security pact in Europe, including a sweeping overhaul of the way the OSCE works. Russia, like every member state, has a veto on OSCE activities, and plans are being prepared for a meeting this year to discuss Moscow's ideas, despite the opposition of many who believe they would emasculate the organisation.

In the past Russia has shown it does not mind confrontation. It refused to follow the usual rules for admitting official OSCE election observers for the most recent Duma and presidential elections, and when the OSCE said they could not fulfil the mandate because of this, officials made angry accusations of international bias.

In the end grave doubts were expressed internationally about the fairness of both elections. Analysis of media reporting on the Duma elections of December 2007 by the Russian Union of Journalists, found systematic bias in favour of the governing United Russia party on state-controlled television, the most influential media in Russia.

For several years after the end of the Cold War, Russia's government and leadership actively committed themselves to the universal principles of free expression and media freedom as integral aspects of their acceptance of democratic norms. The actions of its present leaders suggest that realpolitik considerations have trumped those commitments. Yet without the freedom of citizens and media to speak truth to power, other democratic freedoms can never flourish.



THE CENTRE FOR FREEDOM OF THE MEDIA WILL BE FORMALLY LAUNCHED AT A SPECIAL CONFERENCE TO BE HELD WITH THE RUSSIA EURASIA PROGRAMME AT CHATHAM HOUSE ON FEBRUARY 3 ON THE THEME **TWENTY YEARS ON: WHAT BECAME OF PRESS AND POLITICAL FREEDOMS?**