

## **Don't Give Up On Russia**

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For George W. Bush, meeting Vladimir Putin is no longer an uplifting opportunity to look into the Russian leader's eyes and glimpse a kindred soul. Their encounters have become exercises in damage limitation or unavoidable bits of scheduling during international conferences.

In private talks with aides and foreign leaders in recent months, Bush has voiced profound disillusionment with Putin, according to a half-dozen foreign and U.S. officials aware of the details of such conversations.

"We have lost Putin," Bush is reported to have said in several conversations. "Putin fears democracy more than anything else," the president added sadly in one comment describing the Russian, whom Bush had praised enthusiastically after their first summit in June 2001 as "straightforward and trustworthy" and a partner for "a new approach for a new era."

Bush and his aides work hard to observe diplomatic formalities and to keep signs of this disillusionment out of public view. So the two leaders exchanged smiles and a hug when Bush briefly stopped over in Moscow this week on his way to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Hanoi, where Bush and Putin are due to meet again on Sunday.

But the thrill is gone -- just as earlier attempts by Bush's father and Mikhail Gorbachev, and by Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin, to base White House-Kremlin ties on personal relations ended in disappointment and frustration on both sides. American and Russian presidents seem condemned to challenge and then confirm the maxim that nations have interests, not friends.

As recently as May -- when Vice President Cheney delivered a forceful but seemingly personal denunciation of Russia's backsliding on democratic freedoms -- Bush was still emphasizing the need to work with Putin. But by the time of the Group of Eight summit hosted by Putin in July, Bush had begun to echo in private Cheney's darker public vision, and he amplified on it later in closed-door sessions held in September at the opening session of the U.N. General Assembly and elsewhere.

And when Putin cavalierly dismissed the assassination of Russian dissident journalist Anna Politkovskaya last month, Bush made his own statement of concern about the killing rather than let an earlier, weaker State Department reaction stand as the U.S. response.

The turn by Bush has been cumulative rather than sudden, as I understand it, and is fueled primarily by the president's reluctant but hardening conviction that Putin has no desire or intention to make Russia's society more democratic. Russian

equivocation on the joint U.S.-European effort to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons is another important factor in the downturn.

It is easy to understand why Bush has dropped his earlier enthusiasm for Putin. But Washington and Moscow have two looming opportunities to put political and trade relations on a sounder footing and make their relationship less vulnerable to personal ups and downs.

At the NATO summit in Riga, Latvia, at the end of this month, Bush may be tempted to go back on a tentative compromise that Washington has struck with its European and Canadian allies concerning future alliance membership for Georgia and Ukraine. The United States has agreed not to push for the meeting to adopt a clear membership plan for the two former Soviet republics and to settle instead for a more cosmetic "intensified dialogue" with Georgia and silence on Ukraine.

The compromise still makes sense. Cooling the escalating tensions between Russia and Georgia should be the urgent priority, especially after Georgia's unsteady handling of recent border incidents and the publicizing of the discovery of a bumbling Russian spy ring in Tbilisi. The collapse of Ukraine's reform government robs that country of any national consensus on NATO membership.

The second opportunity will provide an early test in foreign policy for the new Democratic majorities in the U.S. House and Senate. The administration has reached a bilateral agreement with Russia on the latter's application to join the World Trade Organization. But Congress must drop the symbolic Cold War restrictions on trade contained in the 1974 Jackson-Vanik law for the new accord to come into effect.

Jackson-Vanik, which attempted to exert pressure on the Soviet Union to permit Jewish emigration to Israel, is a carryover from a time gone by. Its sentimental value is far less than the irritation it creates in a relationship that needs more ballast, not more burrs.

Bush's clearing vision of Putin's flaws and the American leader's candor with his peers are welcome developments. But they make it even more important for the United States and Russia to seize opportunities that reinforce a relationship that cannot for long be dominated by personal ties. Just ask George H.W. and Gorbachev, or Bill and Boris.