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Review

A Russia that can say "no"?

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Abstract

A rather consistent picture of Russian domestic politics and foreign policy in Putin's second presidential term emerges from the four works discussed. Elements of authoritarian rule, welcome or at least acceptable to large segments of a public weary of the political and economic disorder of Yeltsin's time, combine with Russia's growing energy-driven economic strength to provide a stable environment, and broad support for the regime. These strengths are expressed externally in a more assertive foreign policy, whose manifestations in both trade and security areas pose challenges for the US, and its EU and NATO allies.

Keywords: Russia; Politics; Foreign policy; US-Russian relations

Andrew Jack, *Inside Putin's Russia: Can There Be Reform Without Democracy?* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004; 2006) xvi, 362 pp, $17.95.

Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, *Kremlin Rising: Vladimir Putin's Russia and the End of Revolution* (New York & London: Scribner, 2005), 453 pp, $27.50.

Lilia Shevtsova, *Putin's Russia* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment, rev. ed., 2005), xvi, 457 pp, $19.95.

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Council on Foreign Relations, Russia's Wrong Direction: What the U.S. Can and Should Do (Independent Task Force Report No. 57) (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2006), 95 pp, $15.00.

Halfway through its second post-Soviet decade Russia was, to all indications, politically stable, *and* economically stronger than it had been since well before 1991. The reasons—that the one was attributable to the authoritarian rule of a nonetheless popular Vladimir Putin, and the other as much to global energy demand as to the successful adoption of new economic policies on Putin's watch—were less important than the results themselves. On both political and economic dimensions, it was a Russia very different from the avowedly free and democratic, but unstable and weak polity of the 1990s, from the near-broke, crisis-prone economy of the Yeltsin years, a cranky supplicant in the world economy making uncertain progress toward a "civilized" market. This new Russia, energized by success, was still occasionally defensive, but on the whole increasingly assertive, in ways guaranteed to produce international discomfort. The mid-2005 celebrations of the end of World War II in Europe saw Putin adopting the Soviet-era interpretation of its meaning—one bound to agitate Poland, the Baltic states and others whose understanding of the war and post-war years differed radically. A year later Putin would, in Russia's 2006 turn at the head of the G-8, host the club's leaders in a St. Petersburg summit. His assurances of Russia's reliability as energy supplier to most of his guests there ran counter, however, to other evidence, new and old, of Russia's readiness to use energy as an economic and political weapon. As with Ukraine at the outset of 2006, so with Belarus at New Year's 2007. Russia cracked the energy whip at a state of the "near abroad," and produced a loud report further West among NATO and EU members—which seemed, despite pious denials, to be part of its intent. It was no longer a Russia whose leader seemed eager to please his Western counterparts.

At home…

The first three books under review here—one, Lilia Shevtsova's—with a strong dose of foreign policy, the other two focused mainly on domestic affairs—both contribute to, and reflect, an emergent consensus, both on the state of Russian political life under Putin, and the likely stability of that state. Without excessive handwringing over "what might have been" in Russian political development from a 1991 (or late 1980s) perspective, all three depict a state and society settling into a statist-authoritarian mode, with a concomitant re-emergence of Russian nationalism, and economic confidence flowing from "energy superpower" status and the benign effects of important Putin-era economic policies.

This is the *second* new Russia since the Soviet collapse, the strongest Russia of the last 16 years. But it gets poor grades on political liberty. Freedom House's 2006 ratings give it a 6 on "political rights" and 5 on "civil liberties"—a score of 7 being the nadir—and classify Russia as "not free." It fares badly as well on "economic freedom," placing 122 out of 233 rated economies in the Wall Street Journal/Heritage Foundation's *Index of Economic Freedom*. Though more "orderly" than in Yeltsin's