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COMMENTARY

Putin's Soul

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When President George W. Bush meets Vladimir Putin this weekend at his father's home in Kennebunkport, he will be trying to improve relations with a Russia that is becoming increasingly dangerous to the security interests of the West.

Mr. Bush is apparently counting on his "friendship" with Mr. Putin. But the relationship works in only one direction -- to confuse and limit the policy options of the United States. Mr. Putin will become increasingly hostile not because he has tragically misinterpreted our intentions, but because he is the architect of a corrupt bureaucratic system in Russia that needs an anti-Western policy in order to survive.

George Bush and Vladimir Putin.  
Russia wants to stop the U.S. from installing an anti-ballistic missile system in Eastern Europe on the grounds that it undermines the Russian deterrent. Mr. Putin offered instead to share the Russian early warning radar station in Azerbaijan to help the U.S. protect itself against Iran. But the offer made no sense: The radar is too close to Iran to be secure and cannot guide interceptors based in Poland.

At the same time, Russia continues to lend support to Iran. At a June 20 press conference in Tehran, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that Iran was not a threat and that Russia would continue cooperation with the regime, including construction of the Bushehr nuclear plant scheduled to come on line in October.

Western officials have often been mystified by Russian actions that, by undermining Western security in the face of Islamic fanaticism, undermine Russia's security as well. But the Putin regime is concerned first of all with its own security. Russian interests are often not taken into account.

At first glance, the position of the Putin regime appears impregnable. Russia was the single largest beneficiary of the world commodities boom of the 2000s. GDP has grown by 6% to 7% a year, from \$200 billion in 1999 to \$920 billion in 2006 (in current dollars.) Reserves now top \$300 billion. Average salaries under Mr. Putin have doubled and his approval rating is above 70%.

Despite this, the Putin regime is actually quite fragile. It sits at the apex of an unjust social system and tolerates just enough liberty to make it extremely vulnerable to a serious investigation of its apparent crimes. Mr. Putin has systematically eliminated other centers of power. As a result, the bureaucracy rules alone -- without interference from society but also without its support.

Under Mr. Putin, the handful of people who run Russia also own it. Government officials are on the board of Russia's largest state-run companies. First Deputy Premier Dmitri Medvedev is chairman of the board of Gazprom, Igor Sechin, deputy head of the Kremlin administration, is chairman of the Rosneft oil company, and Igor Shuvalov, an assistant to the president, is chairman of Russian Railroads. The capitalization of Gazprom is \$236 billion, Rosneft \$94 billion and Russian Railroads \$50 billion. It is estimated that the people around Mr. Putin control companies that account for 80% of the capitalization of the Russian stock market.

The country is the scene of gross income inequality. In 2006, the average income of the top 10% of the population in Moscow was 49 times greater than that of the bottom 10%. Despite the oil boom, 83% of the Russian population is poor.

Historically, income inequality has been dangerous for Russia and seldom has wealth been flouted in Russia the way it is now. The income gap also has grim consequences because of the government's failure to invest in social services. Those with money obtain high quality medical care. Those without it give up on their lives and wait to die, aware that decent medical care is out of reach. One result is that there are 160 deaths in Russia for every 100 births. Male life expectancy in Russia is now 58, lower than that of Bangladesh. Russia's murder rate is nearly five times that of the U.S.

Because the oil boom has guaranteed a gradual improvement in conditions and Russians were traumatized by the chaos of the Boris Yeltsin years, they have been accepting of conditions under Mr. Putin. But a collapse of the oil price would plunge Russia into recession and change the social and political situation overnight.

At the same time, the Russian leaders know that if the social situation in the country becomes unsettled, there are several terrorist acts and political assassinations that could be re-examined with far reaching consequences. Russia has been the scene of many crimes and unexplained deaths in the last eight years, but the best known were the 1999 apartment bombings, the hostage takings in Moscow and Beslan, the apparent poisoning of the investigative journalist Yuri Shchekochikhin, the murder of Duma deputy Sergei Yushenkov, and the recent murders of Anna Politkovskaya and Alexander Litvinenko.

The government has done virtually nothing to investigate these events (the refusal to extradite a suspect in the murder of Litvinenko was typical.) But private citizens and journalists have continued to turn up information. It has been reported, for example, that law enforcement was informed in advance about plans to take hostages in Moscow and Beslan but did nothing to disrupt them. There is also a videotape, which was not widely broadcast, of two of the persons who shadowed Politkovskaya before her murder.

Opposition political figures have taken an interest in these cases. Mikhail Kasyanov, the former prime minister who may run for president, has called for a new investigation of the apartment bombings and the hostage takings in Moscow and Beslan. Even supporters of the regime may use these crimes to eliminate their opponents. When Vladimir Ustinov was removed last year as prosecutor general, his opponents proposed reopening the

investigation into the apparent poisoning of Shchekochikhin, who had investigated corruption in the FSB. This was a way of attacking their enemies in the FSB.

Under these circumstances, the anti-Western policies of the Putin regime, far from being a mystery, actually make perfect sense. By insisting on the right to give orders to countries it once dominated, such as Georgia and Ukraine, Russia guarantees a series of needless conflicts that can be used to distract the Russian population from massive corruption while playing to primitive nationalistic instincts. A sign of the success of this policy is the mounting xenophobia in Russia and the tolerated attacks on dark-skinned foreigners in the streets. Anti-Western policies are also useful because they guarantee that Russia will absorb the West's attention. This can be depicted, with the help of state-controlled television, as a return to Russian greatness.

Finally, anti-Western policies set the stage for unrestrained demagoguery that can be used to undermine the ability of Russians to draw even the most basic moral distinctions. The most recent example was Mr. Putin's remarks to a delegation of teachers that no one should try to make Russia feel guilty about the Great Terror of 1937 because in other countries even worse things happened.

There will undoubtedly be an attempt in Kennebunkport to put a good face on U.S.-Russian relations. But this should not come through a self-censorship on the U.S. side that changes nothing in Russia's behavior and denies us the possibility of influencing it. In fact, the best President Bush can do is speak frankly to Mr. Putin about the obstructive and self-defeating character of his policies. By telling Mr. Putin the things he needs to hear, Mr. Bush may provoke a boorish response. But he will be behaving like a true friend.

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