



The Prospects for Russian Democracy

Remarks by Garry Kasparov

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I would like to thank the National Endowment for Democracy and the Foreign Policy Association for inviting me to speak here today. I would also like to thank the president of the NED, Carl Gershman, who is not able to be here today but has been working tirelessly to support our cause. It is essential to have voices around the world committed to the understanding that human freedom is the most important of society's values. I hope that together we can bring that message to every corner of Russia and the world.

What is left of Russian democracy is on the endangered list and this crisis has implications for the world, not just for Russians and our neighbors. It matters because of the harm a dictatorial or chaotic Russia can cause. It matters because of the benefits a free and democratic Russia could provide as a true member of the free world. It matters because "justice" and "freedom" are not mere words. History teaches us they are ideas worth fighting for and worth dying for. History also teaches us that injustice and oppression rarely obey borders, especially where Russia is concerned. Instead they spread like a cancer.

The current Kremlin regime under Vladimir Putin is in some ways a new and difficult cancer to diagnose and treat. But it is not completely resistant yet and I hope we may yet force it into remission, or cut it out entirely, without killing the patient. It will take strength and courage to achieve this. As Dwight Eisenhower said in his 1953 inaugural speech, "History does not long entrust the care of freedom to the weak or the timid."

I am here to talk about the prospects for democracy in Russia, but it is also important to think about why we should all care about Russian democracy. I, like many of you, believe that democracy and liberty are simply good and essential human values that should be promoted to the maximum for their own sake. But there are many so-called pragmatists among us and in many administrations. They have a vocabulary of values they say are much more important than human liberty, or worse, mutually exclusive. They use words like "stability" and "good partner." Those with good memories realize these are too often code words for "repression" and "dictator."

The word "partner" implies a choice. People who are not free cannot be good partners. People who are not free have little say in their destiny. They are manipulated, ignored, and oppressed. We must distinguish between an administration and the citizens it dominates. We must

distinguish between the actions of the Putin regime and the many millions of Russians whose liberties are disappearing and whose standard of living is in severe decline.

The modern history of Russia and the Soviet Union make it clear that its ideas and its ambitions matter a great deal on the global stage. The shocks after the 1917 revolution were felt around the world. Mussolini followed in Lenin's footsteps. Several generations, including my own, grew up behind an Iron Curtain of fear. Those who say that the current Russian economy is a success should realize that GDP is not the best measure of achievement. The most important measurements for Russia today are the lack of a free press, the persecution of political opposition, and the steady demolition of democratic institutions. With every new billionaire Kremlin crony we have tens of thousands of ordinary Russians, out of sight and falling fast.

There have been other major reversals. The oligarchs today are themselves top state officials. Aristotle himself couldn't find a better definition of "oligarchy" than what we have in the Kremlin today. Top Putin administration members chair some of the largest corporations in the country, such as Gazprom, Rosneft, and Transneft. You might even wonder if there's a Russian term for "conflict of interest."

Russia likely has the richest government in the world on an individual level. In the West many millionaires enter politics; in Russia they usually become wealthy after joining the administration. First Putin's bunch took justice into their own hands and then they put the state coffers into their pockets. With his expertise in creative money management, perhaps Putin can retire and run a hedge fund.

The stagnant Soviet economy has been replaced by energy wealth for a very few Russians, but as you heard from Putin himself just two days ago in Munich, intimidation is again becoming an important export. Russia is again becoming a haven and ally for world's most dangerous regimes. We all know that much of the world, especially the United States, is distracted with the catastrophe in Iraq. But do not forget it is only one small area of the global chessboard, and not even, in my view, not even the most important part, though I am sure some disagree.

It is hard to believe anyone could underestimate the potential danger of a wealthy, aggressive, and nuclear Russian petro-state that has no respect for the rule of law inside or outside its borders. And yet I constantly read about Russia's stability and Putin's popularity, which are really two sides of the same myth.

Regarding Putin's popularity you first have to stop making comparisons about polls between Russia and other countries. We only recently escaped the oppression of the all-seeing Soviet dictatorship and our president was a KGB spy. When someone – "who?" – calls you at home and asks you what you think of the top man, what answer are you going to give? I'm happy and surprised that even 25% are willing to give a negative answer to this question.

No, you can't ask about the president like that, you have to ask about his policies, and about the direction of the country and how people feel about their situation. When you ask questions about the economy, crime, health care, or how Russians feel about the future of our country, you get a very different picture.

After I appeared on a panel discussion on BBC television last year, on a show recorded in Moscow, a British viewer wrote in amazed at how freely we said things that, he said, would have led to our execution not long ago. This perception – that Russians are better off now and shouldn't complain – has been very harmful to our democratic cause. Between the end of the Communist dictatorship and the crackdown under President Putin, there was a period of real democracy. It was brief and it was flawed, but it could have served as a foundation.

The myth of Russian stability has led many in the West to ignore what the Kremlin has been doing to maintain the only thing they really care about, the flow of cash and the price of oil they need to sustain it. The Kremlin knows they have led a charmed life thanks to the price of oil going from ten dollars in 1999 to sixty today, down from eighty. The energy revenue that supports graft, propaganda, and repression is the only thing keeping Putin and his friends in control, something of which they are all very much aware.

This should lead us to wonder if they really have the West's best interests at heart when it comes to global stability. Mr. Putin has had over six years to make good on his assurances to the West to help bargain with the various hostile regimes he is so close to.

He promised to help with North Korea and now they have missiles capable of reaching the American coast. As the result of endless negotiations with Russia, Iran is more belligerent than ever and is hurriedly enriching uranium. Meanwhile, Putin's Russia is selling advanced anti-aircraft missile technology to Tehran and Damascus. A few days after hostilities broke out between Israel and Lebanon, the Putin administration released its list of recognized national and international terrorist groups – the first time the list has been made public. Strikingly, both Hamas and Hezbollah were missing.

Every outbreak of violence pushes up the price of oil and puts more money into the bank accounts of Putin and his associates. This is the friend of the West that used to chair the G-8? – Or, by my count, still the G-7. Or G-7 plus one. [laughter]

The international instability encouraged by the Putin government is increasingly matched inside the Kremlin's walls. Two days ago at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, there was a precise definition of the regime. I quote: "However, what is a unipolar world? However one might decorate this term, at the end of the day it refers to one type of situation, namely one center of authority, one center of force, one center of decision-making. It is world in which there is one boss, one sovereign. And at the end of the day this is deadly not only for all those within this system, but also for the sovereign itself because it destroys itself from within. And this certainly has nothing in common with democracy. Because, as you know, democracy is the power of the majority in light of the interests and opinions of the minority."

I would like to thank professor Vladimir Putin for providing such an insightful definition of his government. He was referring, I believe, to the United States, but I am sure Freud would disagree. [laughter]

A mafia structure cannot bear uncertainty and the turmoil is beginning to spill over. Putin and his associates are approaching a dilemma. The President's term of office ends in 2008 and this

efficient machine is threatening to explode. You can't divide the presidency like you can the seats in the parliament. Should Putin stay or should he go? The chaos that will surely occur if Putin leaves office is relatively easy to understand. Any mafia-like structure is based on the authority of the top man. If he leaves, or appears weak, there is bloody scramble for his position. The new man won't be a puppet. Whoever wins the battle must then eliminate the others to consolidate his grip. Perhaps only ten percent of the combatants will pay in blood or incarceration, but nobody knows who will be in that ten percent.

We have already seen the shockwaves of these still-hidden battles with the murders of Anna Politkovskaya in Moscow and Alexander Litvinenko in London. There is little to be gained from speculating about who exactly ordered these murders. The system that encouraged the crimes, the logic that made it politically expedient for some of those in power, that is the true face of Putin's Russia.

The alternative is for Putin to stay, but the problem with this plan is that he is constitutionally prevented from staying in office beyond the end of his term in 2008. The main obstacle is not the Constitution, which can be easily bent to the Kremlin's will. But after he has made so many statements about his intent to step down in 2008 Mr. Putin would lose all his legitimacy in the West if he exercised this option. Of course his regime has never shown concern for the voices of America and Europe. But the money he and his associates have become so adept at squeezing from Russian assets resides almost entirely in western banks. If the Russian government loses its legitimacy completely, these accounts and transactions could begin to receive unpleasant scrutiny. Carl Gershman,

Lastly, Putin knows that if he wants to receive guarantees of immunity from his successor, he must appoint a weak leader to replace him. But the system needs a strong leader to function and if things don't go smoothly after 2008, Putin and his friends know their activities will be under the new leader's microscope.

In several ways this coming chaos gives us hope. The insiders grasping for power will fear losing so much that they will start looking for ways to reduce their risk. I expect them to begin to quietly court the democratic opposition. They may all hate the thought of an orange revolution, but at least they know that in the worst case scenario they'd be able to get a decent lawyer! This is a perfect opportunity for the West to send an unequivocal message to the Russian ruling elite that there will be consequences if they don't play by the rules in 2008. All their dirty deals and shady investments will be investigated.

I'm not asking for great acts of leadership or action from Western leaders. You cannot do what we cannot do for ourselves. All we ask is that the West stop helping Putin by providing him and his regime with democratic credentials at this critical time. At the very least America and Europe should draw a line in the sand to say that democracy and human rights matter. To say that they will no longer pretend Putin is a democrat, one of the club.

In March 1991 I said in the LA Times, "just leave us alone and soon there won't be any more Gorbachev or any more Communism." Once again, it is our job, the job of Russians, to get rid of Putin and his kleptocracy. We ask the West only to stop helping him squeeze his opposition, to

stop increasing his political capital. Every time Putin is treated like a member of the democratic club he uses it as a very different kind of club back home. “Look,” all state-run media cry, “how can you say he’s not a democrat when the leaders of the greatest western nations welcome him as a friend?”

Many opportunities were lost in the administrations of the first President Bush and Bill Clinton. I would call those periods the worst for American foreign policy because the great errors they committed were errors of passivity and omission. In the early 1990’s there was an opportunity for a great realignment toward democracy in the world. The Cold War was over and it was time for a new set of standards. The forces of democracy were ascendant, triumphant. It was a moment for big decisions and big actions, a moment of maximum opportunity to press the advantage.

Instead, Bush 41 and Clinton did very little. United Nations reforms went nowhere, global terror networks formed almost unimpeded. The West acted as though the war were over and there was plenty of time for a victory party. 9-11 ended that party officially, but the opportunity had already been lost.

Then, when a period requiring caution and diplomacy began, Bush 43 did too much – and in the wrong place. It is easy, and no doubt correct, to criticize the current Bush administration for many mistakes in Iraq and elsewhere, but you must give credit for the attempt, for saying that democracy and human rights matter and for trying to back up those words. My question is “but what about Russia?” Don’t we deserve democracy and human rights as much as any Iraqi, as much as any Palestinian?

Instead, we see the U.S. offering to help Russia enter the WTO, talking about revoking Jackson-Vanik. All of this at a time when democracy is disappearing in Russia. What kind of message does this send to Russians and to the world? That the U.S. will reward the destruction of democratic institutions? We have already seen the consequences of attempts at pacification. Putin accepts every concession and returns nothing. He grows only bolder when he sees such weakness from western leaders.

We have not yet arrived to the dark ages, but the next stop on this train is something like Belorussia and our speed is increasing. Perhaps worst of all, this dictatorial system doesn’t function correctly. It’s not just corrupt – the corruption IS the system. State profits are privatized while expenses are nationalized. Outside of the rich centers of Moscow and St. Petersburg the country is in an economic crisis. As the need for active repression increases the potential for an explosion increases as well.

This sounds like a depressing, even hopeless situation. Indeed, when I first entered the Russian political arena full time nearly two years ago I had the feeling of sitting down to a chess game in progress with my side facing checkmate in every variation. I realized that our first task as an opposition force was simply to survive, to get out our message that we existed, that we did not agree and that we were still fighting. With every television station and major newspaper under state control this has been a very difficult task, as you might imagine.

The opposition was in disarray – small political and non-governmental groups each with their own issues with the government. The one thing we all had in common was the knowledge that democracy was our only salvation. Liberals, human rights activists, even the Communists – they all now rely on the fact that given a choice in a fair election the Russian people will reject Putin’s attempt to turn our country back into a totalitarian state.

To have a real impact it was necessary to unite on the core issue: you were either working with the Kremlin or dedicated to dismantling the regime. We also needed to find a way to reach out beyond the Garden Ring, the wealthy center of Moscow. I traveled Russia from Vladivostok to Kaliningrad to spread our message, to talk about why the countryside was so poor and the elites so rich. And, most importantly, to say that it was not too late to come together and fight for our civil liberties and democracy, because only those things will improve the deteriorating standard of living.

In a way, the key step was taking a page out of the Kremlin’s book: a non-ideological movement. Forces from across the political spectrum came together. In the summer of 2006 we had enough momentum to go on the offensive, hosting the Other Russia Conference in Moscow in advance of the G-7 meeting in St. Petersburg. We knew we had achieved significant progress when the administration made efforts to harass us at every turn. Well, if this is truly a measure of success I should be proud that my humble United Civil Front offices were raided by security forces two months ago, a few days prior to our December 16 march in Moscow. Thousands came out in peaceful support under our “We Do Not Agree” banners despite being outnumbered four to one by police.

Clearly the regime is worried, and as unfavorable as our position may still be, my evaluation of our opponents’ forces discovered that they are not without their own weaknesses. Unlike the old Soviet regime, this ruling elite has a great deal at stake **outside of Russia**. Their fortunes are in banks, stock markets, real estate, and football teams, mostly foreign. This means they are **vulnerable to external pressure and also worried about what will happen to them if they fall from grace**. They literally cannot afford the cutting of ties that would come with open hostility between an increasingly dictatorial Russia and the West.

Apart from our organization’s continued efforts at home, The Other Russia is working to establish a communications structure beyond the long reach of the Kremlin. We need to expose the daily crimes that are occurring and press them into the hands of the right people, like the people right here in this room. Our hundreds of activists on the ground in Russia are also in need of support. We are building a legal defense fund to force the regime to at least follow their own laws, however draconian they may be.

We take inspiration from many different sources. Today, February 12, is the date of the founding of Chile by Pedro de Valdivia in 1541. A few days ago I was in Washington DC where I met Genaro Arriagada, the Chilean man who led the referendum movement against Augusto Pinochet in the late 1980s. I told him that his grand coalition, a non-ideological movement against dictatorship, is something of a model for us in the Other Russia. He said that today he is trying to have Russia and Venezuela removed from the World Democratic Council, and I very much hope he succeeds.

The reaction of new U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates to Putin's remarks in Munich shows how another supposed expert is getting Russia wrong yet again. Let us hope that Munich's cycle as a site of international tragedies does not continue. Appeasement in 1938, KGB-sponsored terrorism in 1972, and now? Jokes about a new Cold War aren't going to convince Putin and his gang that the West means business. And I mean exactly that: business.

Although Gates and Putin are both former Cold War spies, Putin is now speaking an entirely different language, one that's all about power and profit. Yesterday Gates said that in the Cold War, America's most effective weapon was the "shared belief in political and economic freedom, religious toleration, human rights, representative government, and the rule of law." He then added that "These values kept our side united, and inspired those on the other side."

Wonderful, true, and inspiring words, but does he think Putin cares about such rhetoric today? The Cold War was about big ideas. As discredited as they are today, the USSR had ideas that conquered minds. There is no comparison for today's Kremlin's philosophy of "let's all steal and get rich."

Putin's hysterical remarks in Munich seem quite logical to me. He feels betrayed. He's continuing on the same path as ever and nobody ever complained before. They looted Yukos and jailed Khodorkovsky four years ago and nobody said anything beyond the usual "we are very concerned," – meaning to him, "do what you like." So why, Putin wonders, are people paying attention now if they want to squeeze Khodorkovsky for more money and add years to his sentence?

And they've been selling military technology to Iran for years, why fuss about it now? Putin wonders how they could turn on him after celebrating with him in St. Petersburg just half a year ago. Maybe it is time to learn that entry into the club of democracies can be revoked when you turn your country into a dictatorship! It's time for Putin and his friends to learn there are rules in the West, where all their money is kept.

Perhaps the turning point was last October when Angela Merkel turned down Putin's typically gangland offer to hand over all the Russian gas rights to Germany. He couldn't believe it, she turned him down. Russia is the biggest supplier, Germany the biggest distributor, so why not step on everyone else? Let's just divide up the territory and the profits. Today Putin "the energy CEO" is trying his luck elsewhere, in Saudi Arabia. Perhaps they will be more cooperative when it comes to helping keep the prices of oil and gas high enough to keep him and his friends in power.

The shared beliefs that Gates listed are still vitally important today and they must still be backed up with courage and action. If there is no action you are only further convincing the Kremlin that they can get away with anything. The level of repression in Russia today is very close to shooting people in the street. I base this statement on the series of overreactions that show the growing cracks in the façade of Putin's circle. Sending over ten thousand soldiers from all over Russia for a peaceful march? Detaining hundreds of activists headed for a peaceful

demonstration, ranting about an Eastern European missile shield while selling missile technology to Iran.

Putin recently addressed the FSB, the successor of his old KGB and now the dominant force in Russia. He told them they would receive more pay, but they had a responsibility to keep a close eye on those who might, quote, “jeopardize the democratic process” and, quote, “spread extremist ideas.” This after seven years of making it clear that the worst extremist idea is promoting the democratic process! The president of a G-8 nation telling the secret police to directly participate in the political process and no comments from his foreign colleagues? They must know that when the Russian president says something to his subordinates it isn't just wishful thinking. This is a regime on the edge and we don't know which direction it will fall.

The many investors rushing to make a quick buck in Russia will not escape their share of responsibility either. You need only look at what happened to Yukos and Mikhail Khodorkovsky to see how the game is played. Foreign companies and investors are not immune, as Shell found out when the Kremlin pushed them out of the Sakhalin 2 gas fields at the end of last year. If you want to invest in “KBG Incorporated” you must remember that they are very, very active shareholders. [laughter]

Also remember that when a new government comes in, a liberal one or a new mafia boss, all the old deals are going to be opened up. That quick buck could, if you are lucky, end up costing you slow years in litigation, or in prison.

One thing is certain: If Western leaders continue to ignore the signs and to enable the Putin crackdown, they will be complicit in the crimes to come. If you do anything to reward Putin's regime during this period you share the responsibility when they use brutal force to preserve their power. Putin only respects action and action from the top man. Not from the State Department. As long as Bush remains silent, Putin will understand that he can always get his way.

We are going to fight regardless, no matter what Bush and Blair say, or don't say. We do not ask too much. If the West wants to live up to its rhetoric, it must be made clear to Russia, and from the very top, that the free ride is over. Send a message to Putin and those who would succeed him, that the world is watching. Stop pretending there is a dialogue with Putin when in reality there is no common language with this Kremlin regime. Let Mr. Bush defend the words of the founder of his party, Abraham Lincoln, who was born on this very date, when he said, “No man is good enough to govern another man without that other's consent.” Mr. Putin, you do not have our consent.

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