The energy route to Russia democracy

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13 June 2006

The fight for democracy in Russia will be won only when western European states free themselves from dependence on the country's energy sources, says Ivan Krastev.

In an attempt to explain the Russian revolution to Lady Ottoline Morrell, Bertrand Russell once remarked that, appalling though Bolshevik despotism was, it seemed the right sort of government for Russia: "If you ask yourself how Fyodor Dostoevsky's characters should be governed, you will understand". In explaining the recent resurgence of authoritarianism in Russia one does not need to reread Dostoevsky or draw on the Bolshevik legacy. It is enough to take into account the rise of the price of oil.

At least this is what one might think when reading the new Freedom House study Nations in Transit 2006 (released on 13 June 2006 in Berlin) that rates the democratic performance in twenty-seven countries in the European Union and its eastern neighbourhood. The study shows that the skyrocketing of oil prices in the last year has led to deteriorating governance standards, restrictions on media and the judiciary, and rising corruption in all four energy-rich countries of the former Soviet Union – Russia, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan.

The study is a powerful illustration of Thomas Friedman's "first law of petropolitics" formulated in Foreign Policy magazine (March/April 2006 [subscription only]). According to this law "the price of oil and the pace of freedom always move in the opposite direction in oil-rich petroliast states". It follows that the worst enemy of Russian democracy is not the Kremlin or oligarchs but the high price of oil.

The soaring price of oil has made the energy-rich post-Soviet states more powerful, less democratic and more corrupt. The oil money that has floated the state budget dramatically decreases Russian state dependence both on foreign funding and on the taxes collected from its citizens. Russia's reliance on western credits has turned into Europe's reliance on Russian oil and gas. The result is that Russia does not want to be lectured any more; she wants to lecture.

Now when the Russian government has more money than it knows how to spend, the Russian government has lost interest in improving the quality of its governance, and concentrates instead on deciding whom to buy and whom to leave in the cold. More money means larger and better client networks. But even more important – the high price of oil has given birth to a new state ideology – oil nationalism. "We, the people" has been transformed into "We, the people who have oil".

The country's oil is at the core of the new Russian state identity. Oil, not history or culture, is at the heart of Russia's claim to great-power status. It is oil that
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makes Russians feel powerful, special and privileged. Any criticism of the government is simply dismissed as an attempt by foreigners to put their hands on Russian oil.

A green revolution

The combination of the "orange" fears of the elites and the new price of oil has produced a real regime change in Russia. In less than two decades Russia has been transformed from a communist one-party state into an oligarchic one-pipeline state. The monopoly of power is now fixed not in any article of the constitution but in the legislation regulating the use of the energy infrastructure. When at the most recent European Union-Russia summit, at Sochi in May 2006, Gazprom rejected EU demands for Russia to open its pipeline network to access by independent producers and other countries, this was a declaration of the new Russian philosophy of power.

The western response to the rise of Russia as a non-democratic energy superpower is a mixture of indignation, fear and double-standard politics. The visit in May of the United States vice-president Dick Cheney in Lithuania is a disturbing illustration of this new reality. Cheney went to Vilnius where he ferociously attacked Russia’s democratic record; the next day he flew to Kazakhstan and praised Nursultan Nazarbayev for stabilising his country.

If the American vice-president reads the democracy ranking in the Nations in Transit 2006 survey he will learn that in Kazakhstan there is even less freedom than in Russia. But what senior members of the American administration are reading these days is not reports of human-rights organisations but reports on the US’s energy-resource balance. The result is a policy that is at the same time morally appalling and strategically wrong. So, the "second law of petropolitics" (pace Thomas Friedman) is that the price of oil and the will of democratic governments to promote democracy in energy-rich states always move in opposite directions.

Now, it is clear that the democratisation of Russia is preconditioned on the fall of the price of gas and oil and the de-monopolisation of the Russian energy sector. The success of the west in overcoming its oil and gas dependency and moving towards renewable-energy sources will be the one and only indicator of the success of Europe’s democracy-promotion policies. Talking democracy without fighting high oil prices does not make sense any longer.

The European Union’s democracy-promotion effort will have results only if it is combined with a common EU energy policy. A coalition composed of old cold warriors, western-funded NGOs and freedom-loving youth is no longer capable of bringing democracy to Russia; a new, effective coalition needs to be more of an eclectic mixture of environmentalists, business leaders and innovative scientists.

In this context, Vladimir Putin is absolutely right to believe that the only real challenge that he faces is not from within Russian society but from outside. Where Putin is wrong is in fearing the spectre of an "orange revolution" that could be exported to Russia. What he should be afraid of is a green revolution in the west. Only when the price of oil falls in the west will freedom rise in Russia.

So, if you want to see Russia free and democratic, stop signing anti-Putin petitions and voting for hardline anti-communists. This will change nothing. What you should do is to turn down the lights when you leave your apartment, sell your American car and start using public transport. The fight for democracy today is a fight against the tyrannical price of oil.

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