

EXCLUSIVE TO CPF: Rt Hon Sir Malcolm Rifkind MP: Russia – Democracy and Human Rights

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When Alexander Litvinenko was murdered on the streets of London with a radioactive poison, memories were rekindled of the bad old days of the Cold War. This incident, coupled with Moscow's political interference in the business dealings of TNK-BP and the closure of two British Council Offices, suggests that, in many ways, Russia is reverting to a nationalist, paranoid and aggressive posture. That bodes ill for the West. But, perhaps more importantly, it would bode ill for the Russian people themselves.

Modern Russia is not a totalitarian state, as the Soviet Union was. It has, however, become an authoritarian regime, built around the power of an elite of former KGB officers. They have had little hesitation in deploying the police to quell public demonstrations, to seize and incarcerate dissidents and to manage the political system in a way that eliminates any trace of genuine pluralism.

In many ways, the Russian people have been quite content, appearing to accept the choice put to them by Putin that they can have security or they can have democracy, but they cannot have both. Indeed, his party, United Russia, had no need to rig elections in the way that it did. Dmitry Medvedev, as Putin's anointed heir, would have secured a comprehensive victory even under free and fair conditions.

In the mind of the KGB, however, what can be controlled must be controlled. Risk should be eliminated as far as possible, and politics 'managed'. Anything that is beneficial to the West cannot be a good thing for the Kremlin. These are the guiding beliefs of many of those who hold power in today's Russia. Will Medvedev be any different? Six months after the presidential elections, the answer to that question is still not clear. It was deeply disappointing to see the Russians veto tougher sanctions on Zimbabwe at the UN Security Council, especially as he had agreed to them at the G8 meeting. Was he overruled by Putin on returning home? Similarly, Medvedev's aggressive rhetoric on the proposed missile defence system in Poland and the Czech Republic has not departed from Putin's.

In other areas, however, there are signs that a softening may yet occur. A number of eminent observers, including Henry Kissinger, argue that a power redistribution is taking place in Russia. Medvedev represents a move towards the rule of law. He is a response to the political demands, not only of the emerging middle class, who fret about the security of their investments and property, but also of the oligarchs, who would like to see the gains accumulated under Putin entrenched under a functioning legal system. The new Russian president has articulated a strong desire to introduce the rule of law, and that is to be welcomed. But actions speak louder than words and his record since coming to power suggests that he has a long way to go to deliver on his election pledges.

Medvedev will also need to address some of the major foreign policy issues that confront Russia today. The murder of Alexander Litvinenko is one such issue. I tabled a motion in the House of Commons, which was signed by 58 MPs, reaffirming Britain's determination to see Litvinenko's killers brought to justice and calling on the Prime Minister to raise the issue with the Russians. At the recent G8 summit in Japan, Gordon Brown discussed the situation with Medvedev and also raised the issues of TNK-BP and the British Council's operations in Russia. The meeting was frosty, with Medvedev refusing to concede ground. On his return to Britain, Gordon Brown told me in the House of Commons that he agrees that the current Russian position is not acceptable. The Russians have a choice: they can choose to work alongside their partners in the West on the wide array of issues where interests coincide, or they can choose to adopt a self-defeating bunker mentality, believing cooperation with the West to be a sign of weakness.

The one issue in recent years on which there has been a shameful lack of attention has been Chechnya. The destruction of Grozny was treated by governments in the West with an alarming lack of urgency. In Britain in the late 1990s, declarations of a new, ethical foreign policy did not extend to the Caucasus. Today Chechnya is governed by the brutal Ramzan Kadyrov. He has imposed more order than Moscow was able to achieve, but only because of a reign of fear that has further cowed the war-weary people of that republic. Human rights groups accuse him of personal involvement in torture and abduction. It is clear that normality has yet to return to Chechnya.

On all these issues, Russia has not yet demonstrated the mature approach to politics that its return to the global fold requires. The next American president, whoever it may be, is likely to take a tougher approach to Moscow than the current one. Working together in a spirit of cooperation, Medvedev and the new US administration could achieve serious progress on a host of global problems, from nuclear proliferation to Islamic terrorism to energy security. Carrying on in the way that we have seen over the past couple of years will damage Moscow's standing in the world, and, eventually, in the eyes of its own people.

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