

July 10, 2006 Op-Ed
Contributor What's Bad for Putin Is Best for Russians
By GARRY KASPAROV

Moscow

WHEN observing the West's conciliatory dealings with Russia, I'm reminded of a quotation often attributed to Winston Churchill: "However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results."

For five years, President Bush has been talking about maintaining an open dialogue with Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, and about how hard he has worked to convince the Russian leader that "it's in his interest to adopt Western-style values and universal values." This sounds reasonable, but we don't have to go on theory. There's a track record — one that clearly shows that persuasion and appeasement toward Russia have failed.

It is long past time for Western leaders to take a tougher stand if they want their rhetoric about democracy to be credible. A perfect opportunity awaits at this week's meeting of the Group of 7 leaders in St. Petersburg. I say "Group of 7" rather than "Group of 8" because I continue to hope that the West will find its collective backbone and make Russia's participation contingent on its actually being a democracy.

The St. Petersburg meeting offers the visiting heads of state a chance to see for themselves how bad things here have become. The right of Russians to elect their governors and parliamentary representatives is steadily eroding, with more and more influence accruing to the executive. Even Aleksandr Veshnyakov, the chairman of the Central Electoral Commission who has rubber-stamped the results of every election under President Putin, recently said that if all the new legislation proposed by Mr. Putin's United Russia Party were passed, elections here "would be a farce." Opposition activists and journalists are routinely arrested and interrogated. The Kremlin, in complete control of the judiciary, loots private businesses and then uses state-controlled companies to launder the money abroad.

Mr. Bush and Europe's leaders apparently believe it is best to disregard such unpleasantness for the sake of receiving Russia's cooperation on security and energy. This cynical and morally repugnant stance has also proven ineffective. Just as in the old days, Moscow has become an ally for troublemakers and anti-democratic rulers around the world. Nuclear aid to Iran, missile technology to North Korea, military aircraft to Sudan, Myanmar and Venezuela, and a budding friendship with Hamas: these are the West's rewards for keeping its mouth shut about human rights in Russia.

It's time to stop pretending that the Kremlin shares the free world's interests. The high energy prices the Putin administration requires to keep its hold on power are driven by the tensions that come with every North Korean missile launching and Iranian nuclear threat. It's no surprise that Russia continues to block United Nations sanctions against these rogue states. The mystery is why the West continues to treat Russia like an ally.

Tomorrow and Wednesday, State Department representatives are scheduled to attend the Other Russia conference in Moscow. Organized by the opposition umbrella group of which I am a founder, the conference will bring together politicians and nongovernmental organizations from all over Russia and from every part of its political spectrum.

The primary aim of the conference is to document our national crisis for the Russian government, the Russian people and the widest possible international audience. It is equally important to discuss what is to be done and to make it clear that it is not too late. Our citizens must refuse to be bought off with a fleeting oil windfall and the false impression of a return to superpower status. Western leaders must live up to their rhetoric about human rights by stating in no uncertain terms that Russia's status as a trading partner, security ally and G-8 member are all at risk if the country continues its slide into dictatorship.

Just days ago, dozens of activists en route to Moscow to attend the conference were arrested, some beaten. Possession of opposition literature is being defined as an attempt to "overthrow constitutional order." Will the Western delegations sit silently? Will the American president say nothing?

Perhaps silence is the best option if the most Mr. Bush has to offer are weak expressions of concern and remarks about his personal relationship with Mr. Putin. President Ronald Reagan's hard public line on the Soviet Union let us know that someone out there was aware of our predicament and was fighting for us. Now this American president seems to be saying that Iraqis and Afghans are deserving of democracy, but Russians are not.

The darkest days of Communist rule are now a generation behind us. Between the end of the Communist dictatorship and the crackdown under President Putin, there was a period of freedom. It was brief and it was flawed, but it could have served as a foundation for a democratic Russia. Since 2000, however, Mr. Putin has done everything possible to dismantle that fragile edifice. In dealing with Russia, please don't confuse what's good for the Putin regime with what's best for the Russian people.

Garry Kasparov is the co-chairman of the All-Russia Civil Congress and the chairman of the United Civil Front of Russia.