

CHANGE OR DECAY Russia's Dilemma and the West's Response

Executive Summary

The Book in a Nutshell

Two decades after the fall of communism, the West is still struggling to come to terms with post-Soviet Russia, where power is highly centralized, corruption is rampant, and political freedoms are severely restricted. In their new book, *Change or Decay: Russia's Dilemma and the West's Response*, Lilia Shevtsova and Andrew Wood assess Russia's trajectory and Western attitudes toward Moscow. They make the case that Russia urgently needs to renew itself through modernization and liberalization or face the dangers of stagnation and decay—and the West, like it or not, will be involved.

Key Themes

The Beginning: Russia and the West failed to prepare for the Soviet Union's demise and what would come next. Under Boris Yeltsin, Russia missed a golden opportunity to build strong democratic institutions, and the West missed its chance to create sufficient external incentives to promote them.

Enter Vladimir Putin, 1999–2004: During his first presidential term, Vladimir Putin slowly eradicated any doubts about the true nature of the Russian system. Despite a democratic facade, power grew more centralized and the state assumed an increasingly direct role in running the economy.

Russia is Rising From Her Knees, 2004–2008: During Putin's second term, the Russian leadership began to see itself as leading not a newly constituted country but rather the legitimate successor to the Soviet Union. Buoyed by soaring energy prices, Moscow grew more assertive abroad and its view of the West hardened. The delusion of Russia becoming a "great power" took hold.

The Russian Tandem Changes Its Tactics, 2008–Present: Since the global financial crisis and during the presidency of Dmitri Medvedev, the Kremlin has emphasized modernization and improved ties with the West. Little concrete has been done to change the underlying structures. The essential aim has been to preserve the power of the current rulers.

The U.S.-Russian Reset: While the reset with Washington has produced its successes—including the New START agreement and cooperation on Afghanistan—it has not changed the Kremlin's anti-Western trajectory and has even legitimized it.

Europe and the Russian System: The European approach to Russia is a muddle, with attitudes varying greatly from country to country. EU policy toward Moscow has been incoherent and ineffective.

Realpolitik vs. Constructive Realism: Russia's undemocratic political system poses a dilemma for Western leaders who, when engaging Moscow, must strike an awkward balance between their immediate interests and their democratic values. Western elites have often been ready to credit President Medvedev's talk of reform and modernization and been slow to recognize the darker side of Russian reality.

Why the West Won't Poke the Bear: Western governments and societies have an important role to play in encouraging Russia's transformation, first of all due to the fact that the Russian elite has been personally integrated into the West. But they have been held back by the misconception that Russia either cannot change or will not do so under outside pressure.

Recommendations for Western Policymakers

Look beyond Putin and Medvedev: The West tends to fixate on Russia's national leaders. The West should instead engage more directly with the business community and Russian civil society.

Embrace Russia's neighbors: American and European leaders should support reform in the newly independent states—above all in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. A stable and democratic belt around Russia would serve as a model for liberal reforms.

Incentivize Russian elites: The Russian political class has deep ties to the West—many accumulate capital, buy equity and real estate, take their vacations, and educate their children in the West. The United States and Europe should balance continued access to these assets against Russian elites' behavior at home.

Impose targeted sanctions: Efforts by Congress and the European Union to sanction human rights violators—most notably those responsible for the death of lawyer Sergei Magnitsky—have drawn enormous attention in Moscow. Western officials should continue this targeted approach, where appropriate punishing Russian officials rather than the country as a whole.

Hold Russia to its word: Russia should be held to the commitments she has signed up to, including in joining the Council of Europe and the World Trade Organization.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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