

Policy Watch: Putin and Europe

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The change of power from Jacques Chirac to Nicolas Sarkozy is important to France and to all Europe. But it is important for Vladimir Putin and Russia, too.

Chirac is the second of the two major European leaders to leave office who saw Putin as a potential partner for Europe; Germany's Gerhard Schroeder was the other, and he left office in 2005. Their replacements -- Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy -- are much more wary about Putin's Russia. This is not surprising considering the many differences the EU member states, including France and Germany, have with Moscow.

There are Russo-European disagreements and differences over a host of issues, including Russian efforts to control how and from whom Europe buys its natural gas; Moscow's restrictions on European investments in Russia at the same time it insists on increased access for Russian firms in Europe; Russian behavior toward several former Soviet republics (including Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and the Baltics) and former Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe (especially Poland); differences over how to deal with Kosovo, Iran and other issues; Russian objections to Europe's security relations with the United States; and European concerns over Putin's increasing authoritarianism.

Many of these disagreements were on display in the just concluded EU-Russian summit that took place in the Russian city of Samara. These EU-Russian differences, however, did not just appear with the election of Sarkozy or even of Merkel. They existed while Chirac and Schroeder were in office, too.

There is an important difference, though, between the Chirac/Schroeder approach to Russia on the one hand and the Merkel/Sarkozy approach on the other. While Chirac and Schroeder recognized that there were important differences between Europe and Russia, they appeared to believe that Putin could and would be tamed and civilized under French and German tutelage. In other words, the existing Russo-European differences would eventually disappear as Russia and its leadership underwent Europeanization. As it turned out, of course, Putin did not become Europeanized. And instead of disappearing, Russo-European differences have increased.

Putin, for his part, seemed to assume that the increased tensions between the United States and the EU (especially Germany and France) over American involvement in Iraq, policy toward Iran and other issues would result in Europe turning more toward Russia -- and respecting Moscow's wishes -- in order to counter-balance the United States. Much to Putin's chagrin, however, German-American and French-American relations remained remarkably strong despite their differences over Iraq, even when Schroeder and Chirac were still in office.

Neither Merkel nor Sarkozy has the illusions that Schroeder and Chirac had (or once had) about Russia. Nor, presumably, does Putin have the illusions about Germany and France that he had a few years ago when Schroeder and Chirac were both in office. Thus, even though European-American differences over important issues are likely to persist throughout the remainder of the Bush administration (and probably even afterward), EU-Russian relations are not likely to improve.

For that to happen there will have to be dramatic change for the better in Russia. And that, unfortunately, seems highly unlikely, under Putin or whoever he chooses as his successor.

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