

# No going back: Freedom, Moscow style

by [Robin Lovin](#) in the [August 7, 2007](#) issue

Despite assurances that the cold war is over, relations between Russia and the United States suggest a certain nostalgia for that era on both sides. The heightened tensions and lowered expectations may have consequences for Russian democracy.

What Americans miss about the cold war is having a bad guy who is more visible and more predictable than insurgents and terrorists. Spies poisoning one another in foreign capitals, restrictions on the press and dissidents under arrest give us a rare opportunity to feel unambiguous moral superiority, especially since we can't do much about the real abuses anyway.

The Russian nostalgia is more complex. The United Methodist pastor of the Moscow church I attended for several weeks in March and April began his sermon on Christ's passion with a slide that showed a map of the Gulag and a meditation on the suffering of people who are wrongly condemned. Nobody wants those days back. But there are not many who remember them firsthand, either. The last time there was a fully functioning Soviet system that everybody believed in, or at least feared, was in the 1970s. That regime undermined itself in Afghanistan, almost a decade before the Soviet Union actually broke apart.

Freedom is taken for granted today on the streets of Moscow, as it is on the streets of New York, Paris or anywhere else in the developed world. Cell phones are everywhere, Internet cafes are buzzing, and there is a steady supply of information and commentary from everywhere in the world. Of course, most people get their news from the predictable local outlets. That doesn't make them different from people in the U.S., though it does make it more worrying that the government is tightening control over the Russian media. Taking freedom for granted means assuming that when the news becomes important to you, you'll be able to get it. That may be a mistake in both Moscow and New York, but it reminds us that today's Russians do not see themselves shadowed by a history of dictatorship that might

come back again.

If Russians are nostalgic for the cold war, it might be because they were not nearly as enthusiastic as we were about the way it ended. The emergence of democracy in their experience was accompanied by economic collapse and lawlessness. Huge assets that were supposed to belong to everybody ended up in the hands of the oligarchs. It's not that people want to go back to the days of Soviet superpower, which are in any case a fading memory. It's that they do not want to go back to the more recent days when democracy meant that everybody had to carry a shopping bag all the time just in case something they needed was actually available to buy.

The Putin administration has been enormously successful in bringing those days to a close for many people, especially in the cities and in European Russia. That accounts for its continued popularity, despite the growing pressure the administration puts on dissidents. The greatest believers in democracy today may be in the Kremlin, where leaders have the means to keep power but know, unlike their Soviet predecessors, that they cannot keep it on their own terms. The Russian people are demanding secure jobs, better living conditions and less corruption. Authoritarianism is this government's way of showing that it intends to use its authority to deliver those goods. Its leaders have calculated that this is the way to win votes, and the polls suggest that they have calculated correctly.

Those who have experienced a little more democracy or a little less corruption may well question whether this is the right way to go. The government may have instituted some repressive measures for practical reasons, but it has also shown a readiness to buttress its authority by appealing to cultural traditions of nationalism and xenophobia. Like all cultural forces, these may be easier to take up than to lay aside. This is a good time for international human rights organizations to keep the spotlight on Russia. It is also a very important time for Americans with denominational, ecumenical, cultural or business connections in Russia to keep those contacts current, doing what we can to see that all those people with cell phones and Internet access stay connected to the wider world of which we are all now a part.

The only Russians with real nostalgia for the cold war are probably the communist demonstrators whom the police chased through Moscow streets a week before the arrests of dissidents that got much more publicity in the West. The Putin government does not seem to share the nostalgia for communism. The

demonstrators, interestingly, appeared to be mostly over 60 or under 30. The older among them remember Soviet times when they had secure lives, which are no longer available to them in a Moscow where prices are at Western European levels. They wore ribbons that read, "This Is Our City."

The younger demonstrators may merely have been looking for an interesting afternoon. (Moscow puts a lot of police on the streets for soccer matches, too.) Or, having grown up in a society where freedom meant looking out for yourself first, they may have been genuinely worried about an uncertain future. They do not doubt that they will be free. They are not certain whether they want to be democratic. One thing they want to know is whether democracy can provide universal health care. That, of course, is still an open question.