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# The west's new russophobia is hypocritical and wrong.

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Picking on Putin over lack of democracy and energy exports is unjustified and counter-productive for both sides

With two weeks to go before Vladimir Putin hosts the G8's first summit in Russia, criticisms are pouring in from western thinktanks and politicians. Some

are legitimate, but many are wildly prejudiced. Russophobia is back. In the latter category was a speech by the US vice-president, Dick Cheney, in Lithuania. His denunciation of Russia's lack of democracy was the harshest US attack since the fall of communism, though it turned out to be a lesson in double

standards. Cheney went on to Kazakhstan and praised its president, whose elections are more flawed than Putin's.

Cheney's speech was designed to be provocative, a warning to Moscow not to take good relations with the Bush administration for granted. Two conservative

senators, the Republican John McCain and the Democrat Joe Lieberman, have even urged Bush not to attend the summit unless Putin cleans up his act. Three factors lie behind the new negativism on Russia: Putin's creeping autocracy; Moscow's international independence; and its growing role as a gas and oil supplier.

Putin's weakening of democracy is undeniable, as the Foreign Policy Centre points out in "Russia and the G8: a summit scorecard". He has tightened controls on the media; made it harder for new political parties to be registered;

and raised the threshold to enter parliament from 5% of the vote to 7%. By abolishing constituency contests in favour of party lists he has made it virtually impossible for independents to run.

Deplorable though these moves are, they continue the trend towards recentralisation of power in the Kremlin that began over a decade ago under Boris

Yeltsin. They do not justify a sudden change in western attitudes, especially as

western governments approved Yeltsin's use of tanks against the Russian parliament in 1993 and his biased control of TV coverage in the 1996 elections.

Without some self-criticism, western politicians who today attack Russia's faltering democracy carry little conviction.

Russia's independence in foreign policy is a new factor - and may be the real reason Washington is uncomfortable with Putin. His reaction to the Cheney tirade was significant.

Unruffled, he made only three mentions of the US in his state of the nation address a few days later. One was a flattering reference to Roosevelt's new deal as a partial model for Russia. The second was a coded attack, without naming names, on US global ambitions and unilateralism: "We see what's going on

in the world. The wolf knows who to eat, as the proverb goes. It knows who to

eat and is not about to listen to anyone, it seems". Finally, he mentioned the US as just one in a list of several countries and regional groupings that

Russia should consider important, including China, India, Latin America and the Asian Pacific. By contrast, he described the EU as Russia's "biggest partner".

This is an important shift. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union left the

US as the world's only imperial power, some western policy-makers view Moscow in condescending terms - as though Moscow needs the west more than vice versa. Flush with oil and gas money thanks to soaring world prices, Putin is signalling that this is wrong. A strong supporter of "multipolarity", he no longer

feels Russian relations with Washington have primacy. And he obviously enjoys having the Bush administration plead for his help over Iran. Energy exports are Russia's new strength, but it does not follow that Russia is bound to use them irresponsibly. The Russophobes seized on Moscow's sudden cut in gas to Ukraine this winter as a red alert. They talked of Russia using energy as a lever, a weapon or, in Cheney's words, "a tool of intimidation

and blackmail". The gas cut was a clumsy move in a negotiation over price. It

was not directly linked to politics. But the blow to Russia's image was done, and the cut was quickly reversed.

For energy to be sold it has to be bought. As a major supplier, Russia is as concerned about monopsony as western consumers are about monopoly. It makes commercial sense for Russia to look for new customers in China, Japan and India, as well as to seek to buy shares "downstream" in energy distribution companies in Britain and other European states. None of this is sinister. A single

mistake during the Ukrainian dispute should not outweigh Moscow's long-standing reputation as a reliable energy supplier, even during the high-tension early-Reagan period of the cold war.

Some suggest Europe should create a kind of "energy Nato", under which the west would minimise purchases from Russia and create an expensive new system of

pipelines within the EU so that any country cut off by Russia could receive emergency supplies from its neighbours. This is nonsense. Far better for the EU to develop long-term contracts with Russia at all points along the energy stream and create a network of integrated delivery and mutual benefit that no

one would wish to disrupt.

Margot Light, a specialist on Russia, recently pointed out: "Russia has discovered soft power." Other countries have long used economic, cultural and diplomatic strength to gain political advantage abroad, but Russia's predecessor, the Soviet Union, hastily resorted to the hard power of military force in the absence of other levers.

Now that Russia is adapting, the change should be welcomed rather than seen as a new "Russian threat". As Putin put it in a Moscow speech this week: "The principle of 'I'm allowed to do it but don't you try' is completely unacceptable." There are tensions between Russia and several former Soviet republics,

but these are natural. Relations between a one-time metropolis and its newly independent ex-colonies usually take decades to stabilise. Based on their own recent record, western European states should not demand unrealistic speed.

They ought not to provoke or entice countries into an anti-Russian camp.

Those who want Russia expelled from the G8 misunderstand the group. It was not set up in the cold war to spread democracy, but as a group of countries concerned about low growth, inflation and trade disputes. With the awareness that carbon emissions and climate change pose big dangers, it should be widened

to include India, Brazil and the big non-democracy, China. Instead of picking on Russia, let's turn the G8 into the club of leading polluters, and try to get some behavioural change all round.

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