

# U.S.-Russia Chill Felt At World Russian Forum

by William C. Jones

A meeting of the World Russian Forum in a Senate building in Washington on May 16 demonstrated the impact in leading Russian circles, of the latest round of attempted Russia-bashing by an ever more disoriented Vice President Dick Cheney. The belligerent posture of the Bush Administration, and Cheney's speech in particular, had senior Russian representatives talking in terms of "the lowest point in 20 years" in U.S.-Russian relations, even though the conference took place less than a week after President Vladimir Putin in his State of the Federation message invoked the very best in past U.S. policies, by quoting Franklin Delano Roosevelt on the resolve to overcome an economic depression. That contrast only serves to underscore what poison the neo-conservative dogmas and geopolitics of Cheney & Co. represent.

The World Russian Forum is an annual gathering of "friends" of Russia, which generally brings together Russian political figures and members of the U.S. Congress. While the Forum does attract a number of well-meaning individuals from both sides, it is also frequented by those who believe

that "engagement" is better than "containment" for keeping Russia in line.

The Bush Administration, however, has veered in a different direction, as expressed by Cheney in Vilnius, where he accused Russia of "intimidating and blackmailing" its neighbors, using their energy supplies to do so. Cheney followed up with a trip to Kazakstan, where he used his personal diplomacy for a blatant attempt to bring Kazakstan, a key country in Russia's energy and related Eurasian security policies, into oil and gas deals detrimental to Russian interests. While Cheney's Kazakstan gambit evidently achieved no decisive success—Putin went on to meet Kazakstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev on May 20 and arrange two major Russia-Kazakstan oil and gas deals—the gist of Cheney's mission was not lost on the Russian leader.

In his May 10 address, the same speech in which he quoted FDR, Putin alluded to the U.S.A. as a hungry wolf. "The wolf knows whom to eat, as the saying goes," Putin said, "he knows whom to eat and is not about to listen to anyone, it seems."

"Putin's reactions to the Cheney comments were rather gentle," commented Vyacheslav Nikonov, one of the speakers at the Forum. "It could have been worse. He could have responded with deeds. Or he could have said nothing at all, which would have been worse since it would have meant the end of U.S.-Russian cooperation." Nikonov is not just anybody. He is the chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Public Chamber, an organization set up last year by President Putin and headed up by Yevgeni Velikhov, the Russian physicist who directs the Kurchatov nuclear research institute, to analyze and monitor legislative and executive branch activities at all levels. Nikonov is the grandson of long-time Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov.

Most of the speakers at the Forum clearly indicated that the present crisis in U.S.-Russia relations occurred in spite of the attempts by the Russian



Presidential Press and Information Office

*Russian President Vladimir Putin (second from right), at the Russia-European Union Summit in Sochi, May 25. In his May 10 State of the Russian Federation address, he alluded to the United States: "The wolf knows whom to eat, and is not about to listen to anyone, it seems."*

President to keep the relationship on an even keel. Sergei Markov, deputy chairman of the Committee on Public Diplomacy, noted the contrast between Putin's popularity and the low public standing of Bush, not to mention the even less popular Cheney. "Putin's goal is to modernize and Westernize Russia," Markov said. "He believes that Russia should become a great power."

### **Minefields Ahead**

"U.S.-Russian relations are at the lowest point in 20 years," Nikonov said, but he clearly indicated that the Russian government wasn't going to abjectly accept any blatant humiliation from the Bush Administration in order to improve that relationship.

"Russia believes that we are living in a multi-polar world," Nikonov continued. "Russia represents one of those poles. Russia considers herself a Euro-Pacific superpower, an energy superpower, a nuclear superpower, a space superpower, and a national resources superpower," Nikonov said. "Although Russia is not in good shape, it is in the best shape ever. It is also in the best mood ever; 48% of the Russian people believe that Russia is heading in the right direction"—again, a clear contrast with the U.S. public, which thinks the Bush policy is moving the country in absolutely the wrong direction.

"Russia is a sovereign democracy and believes it is the right of each state to be sovereign in accordance with the rules of international law," Nikonov said. He also played down the refusal by both the European Union and by NATO to consider Russia as a member, saying that these organizations considered Russia "too big and too Russian" for them. With regard to NATO, Nikonov indicated that Moscow would not be interested in membership, even if it were offered, because Russia "wants a free hand in strategic matters." He warned, however, that Russia would not look blindly at any attempt by outside powers to organize its neighbors against it. "Nor will we permit any neighboring countries to drift into military alliances that may be aimed against Russia," Nikonov said, a reference to invitations, anticipated at the next NATO Summit, for Commonwealth of Independent States member nations like Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO, instead.

Nikonov warned that there would also be attempts to derail the upcoming G-8 summit meeting, which Russia will host in St. Petersburg July 15-17. He said that he had confronted Senator John McCain (R.-Ariz.) and former Democratic Sen. John Edwards at a late-April energy forum in Brussels, regarding their comments on Russia. McCain has said that Russia should not be chairing the G-8 because it was not "democratic." Edwards and Republican Jack Kemp headed the Council on Foreign Relations panel that produced the "Russia's Wrong Direction" report, released in March. Nikonov had wondered what they wanted to achieve by disengaging from Russia. While Putin has chosen the issue of "energy security" as the major theme of the gathering, there will no doubt be attempts by the Cheney-Rumsfeld crowd to launch

attacks against Russian "gas imperialism" and to turn the meeting into an attack on Russia's lack of "democracy." "Many people expect that there will be a scandal there," Nikonov said.

To return to Putin's "wolf" analogy, this particular specimen may be seriously wounded, with the Iraq policy verging on civil war, and the "economic prosperity hoax" now threatening to bring down world markets. But as any hunter knows, a hungry wolf, when wounded, can become a most unpredictable and dangerous creature.