

An Open Letter to the Heads of State and Government
Of the European Union and NATO
September 28, 2004

As citizens of the Euro-Atlantic community of democracies, we wish to express our sympathy and solidarity with the people of the Russian Federation in their struggle against terrorism. The mass murderers who seized School No. 1 in Beslan committed a heinous act of terrorism for which there can be no rationale or excuse. While other mass murderers have killed children and unarmed civilians, the calculated targeting of so many innocent children at school is an unprecedented act of barbarism that violates the values and norms of our community and which all civilized nations must condemn.

At the same time, we are deeply concerned that these tragic events are being used to further undermine democracy in Russia. Russia's democratic institutions have always been weak and fragile. Since becoming President in January 2000, Vladimir Putin has made them even weaker. He has systematically undercut the freedom and independence of the press, destroyed the checks and balances in the Russian federal system, arbitrarily imprisoned both real and imagined political rivals, removed legitimate candidates from electoral ballots, harassed and arrested NGO leaders, and weakened Russia's political parties. In the wake of the horrific crime in Beslan, President Putin has announced plans to further centralize power and to push through measures that will take Russia a step closer to authoritarian regime.

We are also worried about the deteriorating conduct of Russia in its foreign relations. President Putin's foreign policy is increasingly marked by a threatening attitude towards Russia's neighbors and Europe's energy security, the return of rhetoric of militarism and empire, and by a refusal to comply with Russia's international treaty obligations. In all aspects of Russian political life, the instruments of state power appear to be being rebuilt and the dominance of the security services to grow. We believe that this conduct cannot be accepted as the foundation of a true partnership between Russia and the democracies of NATO and the European Union.

These moves are only the latest evidence that the present Russian leadership is breaking away from the core democratic values of the Euro-Atlantic community. All too often in the past, the West has remained silent and restrained its criticism in the belief that President Putin's steps in the wrong direction were temporary and the hope that Russia would soon return to a democratic and pro-Western path. Western leaders continue to embrace President Putin in the face of growing evidence that the country is moving in the wrong direction and that his strategy for fighting terrorism is producing less and less freedom. We firmly believe dictatorship will not and cannot be the answer to Russia's problems and the very real threats it faces.

The leaders of the West must recognize that our current strategy towards Russia is failing. Our policies have failed to contribute to the democratic Russia we wished for and the people of this great country deserve after all the suffering they have endured. It is time for us to rethink how and to what extent we engage with Putin's Russia and to put ourselves unambiguously on the side of democratic forces in Russia. At this critical time in history when the West is pushing for democratic change around the world, including in the broader Middle East, it is imperative that we do not look the other way in assessing Moscow's behaviour or create a double standard for democracy in the countries which lie to Europe's East. We must speak the truth about what is happening in Russia. We owe it to the victims of

Beslan and the tens of thousands of Russian democrats who are still fighting to preserve democracy and human freedom in their country.

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