

Deal With It

Much less attention has been devoted to preparatory G-8 ministerial meetings, as is normally done. Few would know that consensus so far by those who participate is that the process is on track and flawless. For example, good progress has been made on agreeing to general principles for the supply of energy to global markets, despite differences around nuclear power and liquefied natural gas (LNG). Final details for the centerpiece summit in St. Petersburg next week, following successful meetings with foreign ministers last week in Moscow, are all on track. Mr. Putin, who was appointed the rotating chairmanship at the summit in Kananaskis, Canada in 2002, is expected to orchestrate a productive meeting with the standard of professionalism to which the G-8 is accustomed. As a nine-year member (the G-7 became the G-8 in Denver in 1997 and Russia became a full member in 1998), Russia learned something about customary institutional norms and will abide by them next week.

It might surprise many, on the eve of G-8, that Putin's approval rating for domestic and foreign policy is close to 80%. Curiously, those Western countries with the loudest chorus about Russia's wrong direction have leaders with some of the lowest approval ratings in history. Many might not be aware that Western investment and trade levels with Russia are higher than ever and that Russia's stock market is one of the highest performing in the world. On the precipice of entering the World Trade Organization (WTO), Russia now has a fully convertible

currency with an enviable trade surplus and stabilization fund. But given the loud drone of criticism, these basic facts are often obscured.

Normally in polite society, guests refrain from criticizing the party giver. Not so with Western press and editorialists, who have mostly launched a torrent of abuse against Mr. Putin and his country. It's noteworthy that G-8 leaders themselves haven't chosen to undermine a colleague and the country they've worked with for 9 years. They understand what a dilemma it would pose to the cohesiveness and survival of the institution, which they believe in deeply. Mr. Bush made clear early on he would attend St. Petersburg, despite calls for boycott from influential powerhouses in his party.

Negativism surrounding Mr. Putin's chairmanship of G-8 gives pause for the West to reconsider its policy and actions towards Russia. More than ever, the West, and especially the U.S., has embraced notions that it is entitled to control, criticize and remake Russian affairs. Putin has become our whipping boy. Clearly we are fundamentally uncomfortable with Russia's new-found status as key energy player and recovering economy, but we needn't be a spoil sport about it. Why should we think any self respecting sovereign nation would consent to interference in its domestic affairs, through a war of words or insinuations about "regime change"? Do we really think we can control Putin, producing desired outcomes through a strategy of negativism? We need to get beyond our zero sum game thinking. Right now, we look like a cranky naysayer. Every Russian success is a threat. By

verbally bullying Putin, we only strengthen Russia's will to go its own way on its own terms. This was made clear by Mr. Putin's recent foreign policy speech before his ambassadors and Ministry of Foreign Affairs last week.

As far as his performance as G-8 helmsman, Mr. Putin should keep on doing what he is doing. He should continue to operate within norms and guidelines of G-8 traditions, drawing attention to slates of issues he has identified as priorities. He should continue demonstrating his capabilities as team player and his commitment to key values he shares with Western peers, including global economic stability and anti-terror initiatives.

The West should deal with it and stop treating Russia as a pariah and rogue nation. In St. Petersburg, as world leaders gather as guests of Russian hospitality, an opportunity exists to engage in genuine dialogue and witness first hand the positive dimensions of hard-earned successes achieved by Russia. An opportunity presents itself to rethink our diplomacy and embrace a more businesslike attitude and policy of inclusiveness. This is much more sensible in a world where we fight terror, war in Iraq and Afghanistan and face threats from Iran and North Korea. Russia is needed as an ally of the West, by virtue of its geography, landmass, geopolitical significance, energy attributes, nuclear capabilities, experience dealing with the Middle East and future potential. We are better off working with the Russians than against them, and the grand finale July 15-17 will demonstrate that Russia is capable and worthy in its role as nine-year member and chair of the Group of Eight. □