

# Russia's Weimar Syndrome

It is 75 years since Winston Churchill referred to Russia as "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." It is today a much reduced entity, but it is still a politically mysterious country. The struggle that has continued – sometimes quietly but flaring intermittently since the time of Peter the Great at the beginning of the 18th century – between the Western emulators and the nativists, continues yet. President Vladimir Putin has abandoned the tentative approach to democracy sponsored by Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin; he has done nothing to clean up the appalling corruption that spawned the oligarchs and beggared the excesses of the Romanovs and the commissars (and indeed he has taken a big chunk of the largesse for himself – not even Stalin did that); and he has done little to generate economic modernization and generalized prosperity.

Russia is creaking and groaning in its decrepitude, pillaged and oppressed for generations, an eminent culture and civilization and an unconquerable country that has never had one day of what would be considered in the West to be good government. Medical and educational and social services are deteriorating, transport is antiquated, and almost none of Russian industry is competitively efficient. Alcoholism is rampant, and life expectancy has declined. But, as is the Russian tradition, the armed forces are relatively strong, and Putin has revived his country's status as a serious armorer of the world's troublesome regimes.

In the absence of reform and tangible progress, Putin has maintained his popularity by recourse to traditional Russian ultra-nationalism, fueled and amplified by the vulnerability and paranoia generated when the Soviet Union disintegrated and all of the other 14 republics apart from Russia seceded. Russians do not really accept that these republics, most of which had been components of a Russian-led state for

centuries, are durably independent. And in the country's present decomposed condition, it is not difficult to elicit from the Russian masses, cynical and perpetually disappointed and oppressed though they are, support for the belief that their country is being patronized and ridiculed by the West, and has been unjustly deprived of its rights as a Great Power, and as the nation that bore the brunt of the fighting against Napoleon and against Hitler.

Not unlike the Arab governments that have distracted their populations for generations from the misgovernment almost universally inflicted upon them with the red herring of Israel, the Kremlin exercises its control of the media and of most of the economy (by elevating and demoting oligarchs) to whip up xenophobia and harvest national grievances in controlled confrontation of the West and, less frequently, of China and the Muslims. Part of the problem is the tendency of Russian governments, and of the Russian people, to interpret any action that might cause them any inconvenience as directed specifically and maliciously against Russia, which fans the more abrasive aspects of the nativist mythos.

In the last decade of the 20th century, after the USSR had fallen like a soufflé, Yeltsin – a pro-Western leader, but incapacitated by drink and by the chaos of the post-Communist scramble to steal everything that could be moved – sincerely promoted democracy. Putin, who succeeded him, at least gave lip-service to the Gorbachev–Yeltsin tradition of civility and some degree of popular sovereignty, and Russia's principal adversary was deemed to be the Islamic terrorists who stoked the revolt in Chechnya and committed outrages in Moscow and other Russian cities. Russia initially sought a strategic partnership with the West to fight terrorism. But after the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, Putin considered George W. Bush's crusade for democracy to be aimed at Russia and himself. In fact, Bush was not aiming at Russia at all, any more than the West in general was trying to

promote friction between Ukraine and Russia, although there was some effort to draw Ukraine toward, if not into, the European Union, which loomed as a rival for the affections of several of the former Soviet republics.

In furtherance of this anti-Western policy, Putin has resorted to some of the old pre-war German techniques, especially claiming mistreatment of and even atrocities against large Russian minorities in the former republics. This has enabled Putin to champion Russian pockets of Georgia, and to stir up the substantial Russian minorities in Ukraine and in the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. Putin has also been helping to fund fomenters of discontent in the West, including France's National Front (with which he has nothing in common except hostility to the U.S. and Israel) and the detritus of the old German Communist party. The formula is to feed on Russia's traditional paranoia, sense of inferiority, and desire to dominate its neighbors and be deferentially treated by the West.

A foreign-policy expert well known in the West, Sergei Karaganov, has warned of a "Weimar syndrome," a revanchism ostensibly justified by the slights of the West, with the implication that if Russia is not accommodated, frightful consequences could ensue. Karaganov and the vocal faction he represents claim that Russia is a rising phoenix. Aleksei Arbatov, whom many readers will remember as a po-faced spokesman for the virtues of an irreconcilable sequence of Russian regimes, blames the West for "the forcible dismemberment of Yugoslavia and Serbia" (thus implying the old Russian claim to a right of oversight of the South Slavs, which not even Tito accepted), "an illegal invasion of Iraq, neglecting the U.N." (a bit rich coming from the Russians), and "withdrawing from the ABM Treaty in 2002." The *pièce de résistance* of the Weimar argument (like Hitler's claim that Germany had not been defeated in World War I, or de Gaulle's that France had never quit World War II and had largely

liberated itself) is Arbatov's claim that "Russia is being treated as a losing power, although it actually dealt the final blow to the Soviet Empire and the Cold War." Other grievances from the same school are that Russia was scorned in the Libyan intervention, in the Russian war with Georgia, and even in German chancellor Merkel's supposed support for Putin's lieutenant, Dmitry Medvedev, as Russian leader in place of his chief. Russian officials have been particularly offended by lessons on democracy from former satellite spokesmen, especially Poles. (Who would be better qualified to give that message?) Even the fraud that Stalin was conceded a Soviet sphere of influence at Yalta is dragged out, and although Russia is constantly represented as being belittled by the West, the decline of the West is also endlessly proclaimed. The whole fracas begs the question of what these hypersensitive Russian Weimarites are doing to alleviate their sense of humiliation by opposing Putin's despotism and corruption, and how, despite all the calls to patriotic solidarity, the instantly rich Russians have so swiftly assimilated to the West, where they buy British football clubs and newspapers.

Fundamentally, the problem has been at least latent since the end of the Cold War: The Russians are trying to pretend and persuade themselves that they have the same importance in the world today as when they had twice their current domestic population and had satellized an additional 125 million people in neighboring countries. They do not accept the departure of these jurisdictions from their influence and claim that they ended the Cold War, rather than admitting that the Soviet regime was peacefully defeated from outside and crumbled from within. Russia is vulnerable and faltering, and its real individual income and industrial output have flatlined for seven years. The Russian economy did not collapse, but it won't recover, and it has been severely damaged by the Saudis' cutting oil prices. The question is how to induce Russia to accept the change in the correlation of forces without failing

to treat Russia respectfully as a continuing Great Power. A new, and much more easily imposed, containment policy toward Russia will succeed only if it seeks to reflect current facts and not the real humiliation of Russia and denial of its status as a great nation.

This all comes to a head in Ukraine. The real choice is to accept that Ukraine will not be in the EU, much less NATO, and will be Finlandized-autonomous (but broadly influenced by the Russians) and a *cordon sanitaire* between Russia and the West; or to accept the partitioning of Ukraine, with those ethnically Russian Ukrainians who want to be Russian adhering to Russia, and the two-thirds of Ukrainians who are not Russian forming a more homogeneous Ukraine and coming into the West. Henry Kissinger and others emphasize Russia's origins in the "Kievan Rus" and believe that if pushed too hard, Russia would cease to be a potentially useful or even coherent entity in opposition to extreme Islam and to China. I think that if a partitioning of Ukraine were handled intelligently, the accretion of Russia through absorption of those Russian Ukrainians who wished it (or in practice whether they wished it or not) would adequately feed Russian pride, while the success of Ukraine following its entry into the EU would assist the Western emulators in finally gaining the upper hand in Russia over the nativists.

The Ukrainian imbroglio remains very unstable, as Putin and his comrades rattle their sabres; his deputy premier, Dmitry Rogozin, recently announced that "tanks don't need visas." (However, they don't deal well with American anti-tank weapons either.) There is finally some response from the West to Putin's irritating mischief: NATO is tripling its response force to 40,000, and the U.S. has started to pre-position sophisticated weapons in countries that border Russia, and is finally considering the sale of defensive weapons to Ukraine. But the ambivalent Merkel government has not taken the step that would be the most effective: reduction of natural-gas

imports from Russia.

Ukraine itself is not flourishing. Corruption is apparently as rampant as in Russia. And the notorious private armies, which profess to be patriotic organizations supplementing legitimate national defense, are frequently out of control. But Ukraine knows that if it is going to stay out of the Russian orbit, it will have to earn support from the IMF, and will have to meet basic governance standards required by the EU. This should be a powerful incentive for Ukraine ethically to cleanse its politics and economy.

Russia can't win a contest with the West. It can't attempt a general invasion of Ukraine, or sanctions will come down that will do unacceptable damage to Putin's popularity, no matter how hysterically he lays the blame on foreign enemies. In the next two years, new presidents in the U.S. and France and a stronger coalition partner for Angela Merkel – the Free Democrats in place of the Social Democrats – will enable the West to deal with Russia with the combination of finesse and firmness that should guide that country to acceptance that it is important and respected but not a superpower. And there is no reason to despair of democracy in Russia; all polls show that the majority of Russians want some accountability of government to the people, value a high standard of living more than they value intimidating neighboring countries, and want a rapprochement with the West. Competent Western statesmen can manage these problems successfully, if we can elect them. But that is our problem, not Russia's.

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