



საგარეო საკითხებისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების ქართული ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

42

[MIS]UNDERSTANDING RUSSIA

GIORGI BADRIDZE



EXPERT OPINION

2015



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

EXPERT OPINION

GIORGI BADRIDZE

[MIS]UNDERSTANDING RUSSIA

42

2015



The publication is made possible with the support of the US Embassy in Georgia.

Editor: Jeffrey Morski
Technical Editor: Artem Melik-Nubarov

All rights reserved and belong to Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form, including electronic and mechanical, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Copyright © 2015 Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies

ISSN 1512-4835
ISBN 978-9941-0-7961-0

After years of resistance on the part of many Western analysts and decision-makers, it is gradually dawning on them that Russia has been engaged in a Cold War-style behavior against the US, Europe and their collective security structures. With his adventures in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, Putin has made it a bit more awkward for his Western supporters to advocate for appeasement and the “Russia first” policy.

So why did it take so long for Western leaders to recognize what was evident from the outset for so many of us in the Russian neighborhood? And why do we still regularly hear the voices of the appeasers calling for capitulation in the face of Putin’s bullying?

This paper seeks to demonstrate the failure by the Western community to identify the initial signs of Russia’s true intentions and to hear clear warnings. But before I bring specific examples of how the West sleepwalked into a new Cold War, let us have a look at the long history of the misunderstanding of Russia as well as Russia’s love affair with authoritarian rule. It worth mentioning that according to the recent Levada poll nearly half of Russians are not embarrassed to state to the pollsters that they would rather have stable salaries and pensions than freedom.

Historians studying Russia do know that there are very few reliable sources of Russian history. Most of the Russian textbooks have been written under the watchful eye of the Tsarist or Communist censors and have without exception served only one purpose – government propaganda. These practices are alive and well in Putin’s Russia. Not only history is being written in a way to please the Kremlin but in the best Orwellian tradition it is later regularly rewritten to accommodate the changes in government policies.

But let us go back to the origins of the Western confusion. For the past few centuries Russia has seldom been what it appears to be at first glance. The duality and mystification started during Peter the Great who shaved the beards of Russia’s largely Asiatic elite, put them into European clothes and renamed and restructured the government apparatus according to the European style – in other words, he made Russia look like Europe.

But Peter did not change the most important thing – a political system based on the tyrannical rule of the Tsar and his tiny elite. Most importantly, this system allowed keeping the absolute majority of Russians as serfs – virtual slaves as they were during the Golden Horde or the time of Ivan the Terrible. As serfs, most Russians remained the actual property of their feudal masters and could be bought, sold, exchanged for hounds or even killed without much consequences until the reforms of Alexander II (in 1861). One would imagine that this would make Alexander one of the

most popular leaders in Russian history but the reality is that not only was he assassinated by the revolutionaries from Narodnaya Volya (“People’s Will” terrorist organization), his only statue, ironically, stands in Helsinki, Finland – an ex-Russian dominion and not in Russia proper. Russian writers and film-makers have been traditionally glorifying Ivan the Terrible, Peter and Stalin but not Russia’s greatest reformer, Alexander II.

But even this limited freedom offered to Russians by Alexander did not last for too long. Stalin’s collectivization policy physically exterminated the new class of Russian farmers and returned Russian peasants to the position of virtual serfs once again. The rest of the population did not enjoy much freedom either – especially those millions of men and women sent as forced laborers to the Gulag.

The reason why so much brutality was accepted by the people of Russia has deep roots, too. Russian historians may be seeking the origins of their statehood and culture in Kievan Rus but to an objective observer it should be inescapable that for centuries Russian rulers have been following the political tradition of the Mongol conquerors. They have been presiding over an oppressive regime that treated Russia’s own population – ethnic Russians (let alone the minorities and natives of the conquered lands) as captive people.

This political system has long defined Russia’s expansionist foreign policy but until 1917 Russia managed to alternate its alliances between major European powers.

With the Bolshevik Revolution, things changed. Communism really did scare the entire civilized world with its clearly defined and far-reaching goals. The international system faced its hardest test when the world’s two most evil powers – Bolshevik Russia and Nazi Germany – joined forces to divide Central and Eastern Europe, starting the Second World War. It is frightening to imagine a world in which the Soviet-Nazi alliance would have lasted longer. But thanks to Hitler’s madness, it ended in two years when after failing to defeat Great Britain, Germany attacked the Soviet Union. It was Hitler who forced the West and Stalin to build a temporary coalition. The victory in the war only strengthened Communist Russia and propelled it to the position of one of the world’s two superpowers, bringing the confrontation with the West to a global scale.

The defeat of Communism in the late 1980s generated new hopes and illusions. The West hailed the arrival of what was supposed to be the “end of history” and the dawn of a new era of democracy and cooperation. But as soon as Gorbachev’s perestroika softened the Kremlin’s iron grip on

power and total control, the Soviet system simply imploded. What followed was a new and “reformed” Russia that claimed to strive not only for modernization but democracy. Today, most historians describe Yeltsin’s presidency as the high point in Russia’s democratic development. This view could only be justified considering this nation’s appalling overall democratic record.

It would be unfair to blame Western leaders for wanting normal relations with its huge eastern neighbor but the reality is that they failed to predict, let alone avert, the ensuing fiasco of Yeltsin’s quasi-democracy. They must have been alarmed with the Russian bullying and direct aggression against those former Soviet republics which Russian leaders thought could escape from their sphere of influence. Many experts still have little understanding of what they call “ethnic conflicts” and the Russian role in them in the Caucasus and Moldova but Russian hostility toward international transport and energy projects in this region must have been a clue about Russia’s true intentions.

Whether or not his attempts to introduce democratic reforms were genuine, Yeltsin should be judged by his real record: the total corruption of his government and the reign of organized crime and poverty that discredited democracy in the eyes of ordinary Russians for generations. And perhaps his most important legacy is Mr. Putin himself whom Yeltsin personally installed as a successor. Yeltsin must have known that a man with Putin’s background would be no friend of democracy but, apparently, he was persuaded by the guarantees offered by Putin and his KGB clan not to prosecute his suddenly enriched family members.

Nowadays, we often hear experts talk about Putin’s “transition from a partner of the West into an opponent.” But how the West mistook Putin for a partner remains a mystery. Unlike Yeltsin, Putin did not even pretend that he was devoted to democracy. From the outset, he made it quite clear that he would act resolutely to dismantle whatever fragile democracy had emerged under Yeltsin. Putin justified his authoritarian style by the need to introduce what he called “a sovereign democracy” and instead of consolidating democratic institutions he started building a “power vertical.” On paper, Putin’s Russia is a democratic federal republic but in reality, the political and economic power is exclusively concentrated in the Kremlin like in the “good old times.” The difference with the Soviet past is that nowadays at the top of the “power vertical” is Putin’s corrupt KGB clan instead of the Politburo.

His foreign policy was quite clear too – he was openly nostalgic for the Soviet Union whose collapse he described as “the greatest geopolitical

tragedy of the 20th century.” Putin’s policy in the “near abroad” should not have left any questions regarding his determination to root out any Western presence there and to reinstate Russia’s military, economic and political control in the region.

Some people in the West decided to blame Russia’s turn to authoritarianism and increasing assertiveness in foreign policy on themselves – “We made Russia panic with the NATO expansion, we’ve been humiliating them and left them no choice but to actively stand up for themselves.” In Germany, such people are known as Die Russland-Versteher (“those who understand Russia”). The irony is in the fact that these are the people who have distinguished themselves with utter incompetence about Russia or, alternatively, consciously push the Russian interests in the West at the expense of the interests (and contrary to the values) of their own countries. In the early years of Bolshevism, Lenin had branded such people as “useful idiots.”

True to Lenin’s other famous dictum – “The Capitalists would sell us a rope with which we will hang them” – Putin has been happily using the help from his Western partners in gaining an edge against the West itself. How can anyone explain the fact that Russian gas exports to Europe had for years generated a perception among leading EU countries that they had become dependent on the Russian supplies? Gas cooperation between Russia and EU countries should have at best created a state of interdependence between partners, not a dependence on the part of Europe. It was not that complicated – as much as Europe needed Russian gas, exactly in the same way, if not more, Russia needed cash. Moreover, while technically Europe can replace Russian gas (even if with a more expensive source), what would be the consequences for Russia if it stopped supplying Europe? With the Russian economy largely unreformed, Russian budget revenues still depend (by as much as 50%) on energy sales. If redirecting oil to a new market is relatively easy, finding a new customer for natural gas is virtually impossible. As recent developments have demonstrated, China cannot and will not become Russia’s alternative market – China would not invest in the multi-billion dollar infrastructure that is necessary to deliver Russian gas to its borders and, more importantly, China has enough other options not to pay for Russian gas as much as it would become commercially viable for Gazprom.

Another factor that raises questions about Europe’s gas policy is that EU countries had allowed Russia to create a near-monopoly position in supplying gas where it should not have been – a large part of Russian-supplied gas did not even come from Russia but from the Central Asian countries

where Gazprom would buy it at its own price and then resell it in the West for a different rate and with many political strings attached.

In other words, some European countries have even paid for the rope to tie themselves by the neck into Russian dependency. Not only have they been supplying cash to Putin's regime for all these years, emboldening him at home and abroad, but they have virtually acted on his behalf on the international stage. Well done, Mr. Putin!

I am convinced that Western law enforcement agencies need to have a proper look into the mechanisms of how this strange arrangement has come about – it is gradually emerging that Putin's Russia may have been a greater exporter of corruption than energy. In the recent months, Western media has been regularly reporting on how many European countries had been providing money laundering services for dirty Russian money. Putin has also been successfully buying friends and influence among Western political elite, businesses, think-tanks and media. What is new in Putin's tactics is that for the past few years he has started funding what until recently were considered as marginal political forces in Europe – both the extreme left and the extreme right. However, with the help of Putin's cash they are becoming stronger by the day against the background of the ongoing European political and economic crisis.

The fact that Putin has made anti-Western, anti-liberal, homophobic and xenophobic principles the official ideology of the new Russia makes his European success even more paradoxical.

Anti-Western sentiments are not new in Russia but not even during Soviet times was the state propaganda cultivating these ideas so effectively. State-controlled Russian TV channels and other media have created a parallel reality in the minds of most Russians. Like during Stalin's time, they believe that Russia is a besieged fortress – but this time, a bastion of conservative Orthodox Christian morals and the principle defender against the onslaught by the decadent West. Manufacturing stories to generate hatred has become a normal practice for Russian media. So today in Russia's upside-down political system, not only the Kremlin sets its own political agenda but using this omnipotent propaganda machine skillfully crafts the political desires of ordinary Russians. As a result – what Putin does is what his people end up wanting.

A few years ago, the Russian propaganda operation took a truly global scale when the Kremlin launched a multi-billion dollar international broadcasting platform called Russia Today (later renamed RT) which has become one of the most viewed international TV channels in the world. It must be

emphasized that unlike Soviet propaganda, RT and other Russian government media outlets are truly sophisticated and effective both at home and abroad. Of course, one of the reasons for its success is that until now, the West had never even tried to engage in the propaganda war that Russia has been waging.

Moreover, the West has been reluctant to admit that there was a fundamental problem in the relations with Russia. There are many reasons why the West got Russia wrong for so long. One reason is perhaps simple ignorance on the part of some experts, coupled with arrogance. The fact that the Russian aggression, first in Georgia and then in Ukraine, came as a surprise to many illustrates the point. There were many warning signs and direct predictions – as a diplomat, I personally participated in my government’s attempts to warn the US and EU partners about Putin’s plans to attack Georgia as early as in 2006. We argued that Putin would respond to the recognition of the independence of Kosovo by Western powers by attacking Georgia. At one such meeting, a fairly senior Western diplomat told me: “Crying wolf would only undermine your cause” (this is a direct quote).

When Russia invaded Georgia in August 2008, I was in London and made a prediction in a TV interview which sadly came true: “Russia is on a collision course with the West and the longer it takes for Europeans to respond, the deeper inside European territory this collision will occur and the more painful it will be.”

And there were many much more authoritative voices than mine directly warning the West that if Russia had not paid the price for its aggression against Georgia, its next target would be Ukraine.

Edward Lucas, Senior Editor of *The Economist* was one such voice. When in 2007 he published his “New Cold War,” some of the Western pundits branded him as a warmonger. I had to agree with him when he said that the problem is that “we are ignoring the views of the people who’ve been comprehensively and systematically vindicated in their analysis and listening to the views of people who’ve been comprehensively and systematically wrong.”

The best evidence for this point is what an analyst from a respected French think-tank said about the chances of the Polish Foreign Minister, Radek Sikorski, in replacing Catharine Ashton as the Chief of the EU Foreign Policy in 2014. He cast doubt about the eligibility of Sikorski who has been vindicated many times about Russia based on the fact that “... the Polish people are still marked by their tragic history [of Soviet oppression.]” In

other words, instead of Sikorski he would rather have someone with no historical knowledge of what it means to be Russia's neighbor and, thus, one easily duped by Moscow.

Now, even those who designed the US "Reset" policy with Russia admit that it was an utter failure but when it was launched by the US administration shortly after the Russian war in Georgia, it signaled that the US was ready to ignore Russian aggression toward its neighbors.

I think we can all agree that it is time to listen to those who have a deeper knowledge and experience of Russia and of Europe's eastern neighbors. And here is what, in my humble opinion, we should have learned in the course of the recent months.

If there were any real question about what Russia wants after 2008, the developments in Ukraine answered it comprehensively. Until 2013, Ukraine had everything to be Russia's perfect partner. The two nations have close historic and cultural ties. Ukraine had a pro-Russian leader, Viktor Yanukovich, who terminated cooperation with NATO. He was also deeply corrupt and easily manageable by Moscow... his only "crime" against Russia was that he tried to make a trade deal with the EU and sign a largely symbolic Association Agreement (which does not imply potential candidacy status, let alone membership in the EU). In a nutshell, this deal would facilitate Ukraine's trade with the EU and improve the investment climate.

What happened next exposed Putin's own neighborhood policy: in contrast with the EU, whose Eastern Partnership aims at creating a stable, democratic and prosperous neighborhood for Europe, Russia wants to be surrounded by poor, corrupt, authoritarian and virtually failed states to make sure that the West loses all interest in cooperating with them. While the EU integration process requires aspirant countries to meet a multitude of criteria (and the EU will respect your choice if you decide to head the other way), Russia is prepared to use force against those who try to "escape" from its sphere of influence.

One of the reasons why I think Putin will fail in his quest to build a new Russian empire and even end up ruining what he already has is that he has picked the worst possible role model from Russian history. Of all the Russian leaders, he copies Tsar Nicholas I who was best known for his conservative political views and whose reign was marked by geographical expansion as well as repression of dissent. Like Putin, Nicholas was also responsible for economic stagnation, deep financial crisis, poor administrative policies and a thoroughly corrupt bureaucracy. Even though, unlike Nicholas, Putin

has so far succeeded in Crimea, I would make a prediction that the overall consequence of his war in Ukraine is still going to cost him dearly. I would not be surprised if a few years later Putin's rule would be described the way in which one of the closest associates of Nicholas I had described the Tsar's legacy: "The main failing of the reign of Nikolay Pavlovich was that it was all a mistake."

Winston Churchill once said that the Americans will always do the right thing... after they've exhausted all the alternatives. I think that both Americans and Europeans have exhausted all the alternatives and now have to do the right thing – engage Russia in a pragmatic but principled way. Putin will stop only when he sees that his aggression does not bring dividends but a heavy price. Until then, not only Russia's ex-Soviet neighbors but the rest of Europe will not be safe.