



## Misreading Russia

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### Abstract

A key part of the contemporary “Russia challenge” is the West’s tendency to misread that country, both its capacity for reform and the West’s own impact on the choices that have shaped its trajectory. Excess faith in the power of the market and the applicability of social science theories skewed Western policy toward Russia in the 1990s, fuelling the xenophobic and nationalistic narratives that laid the foundations of Putinism. Misreading Russia’s historical insecurities after the collapse of the USSR ensured that US triumphalism would play badly in Moscow, contributing to the toxic environment amidst which Putin ultimately opted to invade Ukraine. None of this justifies the recent excesses of the Putin regime, but it does help to make them intelligible. Appreciating how the West has misread and mismanaged Russia in the past should contribute to more realistic and more effective approaches in the future.

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## Introduction

Scholars of Russia have a lot to grapple with these days. Gabuev (2023) has penned a lament for “the Russia that might have been” (2023), while Alperovitch and Radchenko hold out the hope that “another Russia is possible” (2022). Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty has reported more than a few calls to “rethink Russian studies” (Prince 2023). The disorientation is understandable. Just over three decades ago, presidents Boris Yeltsin and George Bush spoke of “friendship and partnership” (Wines 1992, 1); by 2014, Moscow’s annexation of Crimea and armed intervention in Donetsk and Luhansk had marked a resurgence of the Cold War (Legvold 2016). But Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, surprised even severe Putin critics and plunged East-West relations into much darker, unprecedented territory.

This dispiriting turn of events has been particularly hard on those Russia watchers who experienced a turn of comparable proportions, the Gorbachev revolution of the late 1980s that heralded democratization, new thinking, and an end to forty years of Cold War. How could such high hopes be dashed in just a couple of decades? The answer, this article will suggest, lies in part in the way Western scholars and policymakers have understood Russia. Historical illiteracy, faith in what Yale historian Timothy Snyder (2018) has called “the politics of inevitability,” and the chimera of social science rigour have combined to distort discourse on Russia, resulting in misplaced optimism and an underappreciation of the basic drivers of the country’s development. At the same time, those of us trying to engage and understand Russia from the outside have underappreciated our own role in influencing the perceptions and choices of the leadership in the Kremlin. In particular, the laudable but ultimately flawed conviction that democratic values and institutions are universally applicable has reinforced those aspects of Russia’s political culture and strategic thought that have rendered it fearful of the West. Once the fundamentals of Moscow’s international behaviour are identified and the often-unintended impact of Western (mis)understandings and actions made clear, the seemingly unintelligible and even tragic vicissitudes of Russian foreign policy begin to make sense.

What follows are the reflections of a member of the generation who witnessed the promise of the Gorbachev era and who then went on to work on Canada-Russia relations in what is today known as Global Affairs Canada (GAC). Over a span of nearly forty years, I had the privilege both to study Russia—as a graduate student and as GAC’s Scholar in Residence—and to engage with it diplomatically during two postings at Canada’s Moscow Embassy and as Director for Russia and East Europe at GAC. The analysis presented here is, therefore, unabashedly subjective and intended to be thought-provoking rather than definitive. If readers are led to appreciate that the way the “Russia challenge” has been framed, understood, and managed by the West is an integral part of the challenge itself, this piece will have served its purpose.

My argument is premised on the notion that one can speak meaningfully of a post-Cold War consensus in the West’s policy toward Russia, the “West” broadly understood to encompass those developed democracies formally and informally aligned with its most powerful representative—the United States. This is not to say that there were no distinctions between individual countries’ approaches to Moscow or that the consensus did not have its critics. However, the belief that the collapse of the USSR in 1991 represented an opportunity to advance peace and prosperity was broadly shared and informed thinking both in foreign ministries and in the academy. Understanding how and why this promise went badly wrong helps to explain the challenge that

the collective West faces today with Russia over Ukraine despite the emerging cracks in collaborative efforts.

### First Principles<sup>2</sup>

Half a century ago, the Hungarian émigré historian Tibor Szamuely's posthumously-published classic, *The Russian Tradition*, boldly declared that "[t]he factor that has probably contributed most towards shaping Russia's history has been her geographical position" (Szamuely 1974, 10). My own near half-century in Russian affairs has convinced me that Szamuely was right. All states prioritize security; to do otherwise in a world that lacks a sovereign and where conflict is always possible is to invite depredation (Jervis 1978; Mearsheimer 2001; Waltz 1979). For Russia, meeting this challenge has been uniquely burdensome because of its geographical position. The lands that the princes of Muscovy first gathered and expanded close to a thousand years ago were notoriously flat; the quality of the soils at their disposal was notoriously poor. The absence of natural barriers and attendant vulnerabilities fostered insecurities that today can be said to have been "built into the very structure of Russian history" (Harris 2016, 6). This is because the effort to achieve security in an environment where this proved difficult locked Russia into patterns of behaviour that heightened its sense of insecurity rather than alleviating it. From the earliest times, the insecurity of the physical environment, compounded by a hunger for new lands as thin northern soils rapidly depleted, led Russia's rulers to seek security through an expansionist foreign policy (Pipes 1974). As historian Geoffrey Hosking (1997, 4) wrote: "Like a cumbersome and nervous amoeba...[Muscovy] expanded to fill the space it was able to dominate." For more than half a millennium now, Russia's international behaviour has been characterized by what Stephen Kotkin (2016, 4) has described as "a kind of defensive aggressiveness." The tragedy unfolding in Ukraine is its latest manifestation.

Geography also helps to account for Russia's authoritarian political culture. The challenge of surviving a "hostile and threatening environment" (Keenan 1986, 122), it has been suggested, favoured the "extreme centralization" (131) of authority that has long characterized Russian political life. While the more desirably located denizens of the West could afford to enjoy "individual socialization," their Russian counterparts, for whom deference to authority was crucial in surmounting military and economic insecurities, could not (Keenan 1986, 127). For Richard Pipes (1974), these environmental challenges explained Russia's unique development as a "patrimonial state" where, in marked contrast to the West, a clear distinction between power and property never emerged, and unchecked authoritarianism became the norm.

The most significant consequence of Russia's physical setting is its proximity to a technologically superior and, therefore, menacing West. Overcoming backwardness relative to the dynamic societies that emerged on the Western edge of the Eurasian landmass from about 1500 defined the evolution of the Russian state. As Marshall Poe (2003, 39) observed, "by a cruel turn, the [sixteenth century] Muscovite elite, having just constructed a new and quite typical premodern empire, found themselves face-to-face with what was gradually becoming the most dynamic force in world history." The consequences were profound. Geoffrey Hosking has shown how the all-encompassing, state-led mobilization necessary for 'backward' Russia to compete militarily with an economically superior West "destroyed or emasculated...[t]he political, economic and cultural institutions of what might have become the Russian nation," that is, a polity built on civic

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<sup>2</sup> The discussion in this section draws on Sarty 2022.

institutions and a shared sense of community. For Hosking, “autocracy and backwardness [in Russia] were symptoms and not causes: both were generated by the way in which the building and maintaining of empire obstructed the formation of a nation” (Hosking 1997, xxvii).

This double bind—the need to compete with a more powerful West from a position of relative weakness—accounts for the wellspring of Russian authoritarianism: the preponderance of the state over society. The argument is familiar to historians. Paul Milyukov, the prominent historian and liberal politician of the early twentieth century, put it this way: “Compelling national need resulted in the creation of an omnipotent State on the most meagre material foundation; this very meagreness constrained it to exert all the energies of its population—and in order to have full control over these energies it had to become omnipotent” (quoted in Szamuely 1974, 28). Milyukov’s near-contemporary, the widely-read Russian Imperial historian Vasily Klyuchevsky, was more pithy: “The state grew fat, but the people grew lean” (quoted in Kotkin 2016, 4).

This is the engine of Russian history: a ceaseless quest for security in conditions of relative backwardness that has skewed the country’s development. Approaches to this challenge have varied over the centuries. Peter the Great undertook to match and surpass Russia’s great power rivals through ‘Westernization.’ Spurred by Russia’s humiliating defeat in the Crimean War, Alexander II launched the ‘Great Reforms’ of the mid-nineteenth century; Sergei Witte and Piotr Stolypin spearheaded state-led industrialization to maintain the Empire’s competitiveness in the twentieth. Vladimir Lenin’s Bolsheviks seized power in November 1917 as harbingers of world revolution who rejected all historical precedent, yet by March 1918, Lenin was prioritizing traditional security needs in his acceptance of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Joseph Stalin justified the brutal industrialization campaign of the first Five-Year Plan by warning that “the weak get beaten”— a phrase Vladimir Putin would repeat seven decades later as he began to roll back Russia’s post-Soviet democratic reforms (cited in Kotkin 2017, 73). Russian methods of governance have varied over time. Efforts to surmount the chronic inefficiencies inherent in a state of such preposterous size have created a pendulum of reform and reaction. But the security imperative has always remained paramount.

### **Enter Gorbachev**

Assessments of Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev vary. Broadly hailed in the West as the visionary who brought an end to the Cold War, he is reviled at home as the man who precipitated the collapse of a superpower. Archie Brown, the Oxford scholar who tagged Gorbachev’s rise at the outset and followed him closely thereafter, has described his subject as “a genetic error of the system” (Brown 1997, 88) and “a highly untypical product of the Soviet nomenklatura” (Brown 1997, 316). But I am inclined to agree with Stephen Kotkin (2001, 776) that “[f]ar from an aberration, Gorbachev was a quintessential product of the Soviet system.” His core challenge was the same as that of all of his predecessors: securing state survival in a competitive world. His approach evolved and became radicalized only as the true extent of that challenge became apparent. When Gorbachev first took office in March 1985, he was very much a typical *apparatchik* and Communist true believer, albeit a highly dynamic one. This essential continuity is worth emphasizing. To be sure, the Gorbachev phenomenon cannot be fully understood without reference to the changes in Soviet society from Stalin’s death in 1953 through to the 1980s (Lewin 1989) or to the belief that Gorbachev was “a second Khrushchev” who promised to realize the intelligentsia’s dream of a “humane socialism” (Kotkin 2001, 776). But when Gorbachev and his future Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze agreed late in 1984 that the whole Soviet system was “rotten” (quoted in

Brown, 81), the spur to act was not philosophical. It came from a fear that, as Gorbachev later wrote, the Soviet Union was “clearly losing the competition with its historic capitalist rivals”. The age-old curse of trying to match the West had by the early 1980s become an insurmountable burden for the geriatrics who had been running the country since the toppling of Nikita Khrushchev in 1964. Defence expenditures running upwards of 40 percent of the state budget were a key part of “what ail[ed] the Soviet system,” not to mention that the gap between Soviet and Western living standards had been growing since the mid-1970s (Colton 1986, 32). Five months after Gorbachev became General Secretary, his close ally Alexander Yakovlev, former Soviet Ambassador to Canada and the intellectual architect of *perestroika*, painted a stark picture: “The country is growing weaker,” Yakovlev warned. “By the year 2000 we’re going to be a second-rate power” (quoted in Taubman 2017, 245).

The utter failure of Gorbachev’s attempt at revival speaks to the true magnitude of the challenge that he faced. His selection as General Secretary of the Communist Party placed him at the pinnacle of a sprawling state whose bloat and corruption evoked the brilliant nineteenth-century satire of Nikolai Gogol. As Gorbachev’s biographer puts it, practices such as cooking statistics, covering up mistakes, and lying to one’s superiors “weren’t new; they were as Russian as the vodka that comforted those who engaged in them” (Taubman 2017, 247). However, this reality put Gorbachev in an unenviable position: “even after he became Soviet leader, he didn’t know exactly how bad the situation really was” (Taubman 2017, 238). As the scale of the obstacles to reform became apparent, Gorbachev pursued increasingly radical measures, from elections for new governing bodies to eliminating the Communist Party’s monopoly rule. The isolated perch of a lifetime *apparatchik* meanwhile blinded him to the role that force and fear had played in running a command economy and keeping the country’s disparate nationalities in line. The ‘omnipotent’ yet deeply dysfunctional state forged to counter the more powerful West so distorted the leadership’s grasp of its circumstances that efforts to ameliorate the crisis instead precipitated the Soviet Union’s collapse.

However inevitable Gorbachev’s failure appears in retrospect, it was difficult not to get caught up in the excitement of those times. Kremlin watchers looked on in growing amazement as the relaxation of state censorship, known as *glasnost* (openness), shattered longstanding taboos in the realms of history and literature. Pillars of Soviet military doctrine were called into question, heralding ‘new thinking’ and a transformation of the Cold War standoff with the West. As a Canadian graduate student in Moscow in 1988, I witnessed the thrill as Soviet citizens spoke publicly of the failures of socialism and the prospect that theirs, at last, might become “a normal country.” But even as Moscovites dared to dream of a better future, their skepticism remained undiminished. In a piece I wrote on my return, I assured readers of the *Globe and Mail* that while *perestroika* was “for real,” it was “not a sure bet” (Sarty 1989).

The optimism of the late 1980s endured, however, in the foreign policy establishments of Western capitals. It is difficult to convey today the intoxicating spirit of that period. The Cold War, the defining condition of world politics for close to half a century, was over, and the West had won. The director of a prominent Canadian think tank suggested, provocatively but not entirely without foundation, that the 1990s might promise “peace in our time” (Wood 1990). Francis Fukuyama asserted that the reformist trends then underway in the Communist world marked “the end of history,” (Fukuyama 1989) the triumph of liberal democracy over the last of its twentieth-century challengers. Though Fukuyama made clear that the spread of liberal democracy was by no means assured, nuances were somehow lost in the ‘can-do’ environment of the 1990s (Sarty 2021). The

notion that democracy had proved itself as the inevitable wave of the future had an enormous impact on Western policy toward Gorbachev's Kremlin successor, Boris Yeltsin.

### The Yeltsin Years

Yeltsin spoke directly to the popular longings evidenced during *perestroika*, expressing determination to place Russia squarely on the "civilized path" of the West (quoted in Colton 2008, 218). Unlike his predecessor, however, the brusque *apparatchik* from Sverdlovsk did not shy away from the draconian measures that mainstream economists then deemed essential to shift the moribund post-Soviet economy decisively toward the market. Freeing prices on January 2, 1992, brought products back to the store shelves, but it also sparked inflation that wiped out people's savings, upended livelihoods, and sowed deep resentments. The privatization of state enterprises through the mid-1990s lifted the stultifying burden of central planning but favoured insiders and fuelled an ever-deepening divide between average Russians and a new class of the superrich. Western advisors such as Harvard's Geoffrey Sachs figured prominently in this process, in which the obvious pains of so-called "shock therapy" were regarded as a price worth paying for the gains of market reform.

Russia's relations with the West in the Yeltsin era were thus decisively shaped by "the politics of inevitability," Timothy Snyder's term for the prevalent 1990s belief that with liberal capitalism triumphant and all alternatives vanquished by "the end of history," the market reigned supreme (Snyder 2018, 6-7). This meant that, to the limited extent that the human costs of Russian shock therapy reached Western capitals, they could be safely dismissed as unfortunate bumps on the road to an inevitably brighter, market-based future. As the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs' Desk Officer for Russia in 1994, I can vividly recall noting with satisfaction that some 60 percent of formerly state-owned enterprises were then in private hands. My colleagues and I saw this as encouraging progress away from communism and any attendant costs as worthwhile. In retrospect, it has become clear that, under the uniquely dysfunctional conditions of early post-Soviet Russia, measures intended to advance the market and shared prosperity rewarded corrupt, monopolistic behaviour that created mighty oligarchs and spread staggering social inequality (Goldman 2003; Reddaway and Glinski 2001). The fact that these costs could be associated with Western advisors and the governments who supported them played into the nationalist and xenophobic narratives that would subsequently undergird the Putin regime (Galeotti 2019; Hill and Gaddy 2015).

It is worth reflecting on how the West misread Russia in the 1990s. The late Harvard-based economist Marshall Goldman, who was one of shock therapy's most prolific critics, once lamented that those who insisted that Russian history and culture had not prepared Russians for a market economy "were often dismissed as special pleaders" (Goldman 2003, 25). Yet, as Goldman pointed out, the very particular circumstances of Russia's economic development—the dominance of the state in late-Tsarist capitalism, the deference to authority, and the sapping of initiative over more than 50 years of Soviet central planning—made a smooth transition to the market extremely unlikely. The absence of even a semblance of market institutions and the prevalence of corrupt, monopolistic behaviour was a recipe for the distorted outcomes that Russians are still living with today (Goldman 2003). Though contemporary critics flagged the gap between shock therapy's prescriptions and post-Soviet realities, broad support in Western capitals for Yeltsin and 'reform' remained unshaken (Murrell 1993).

It would appear to be self-evident that national traits unique to Russia could reduce the effectiveness of policy recommendations formulated elsewhere. How could history and political culture not matter? Yet such was Western hubris at the end of the Cold War that this truism could be overlooked. Understanding why this was so takes us back to Fukuyama's "end of history" (Fukuyama 1989) which can be seen as the culmination of intellectual and political currents dating back to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The notion that laws of nature and human behaviour could be revealed and applied and the life of man perfected traces its origins to that time (Robertson 2020). It was hard-baked into the political culture of the revolutionary upstart that had just appeared on the international scene: the United States (Mead 2001). When the US emerged after the Second World War as the most powerful country on earth, its approach to world politics was informed by the same faith in science and progress that had inspired the American founding fathers. As Nils Gilman (2003, 14) has documented in fascinating detail, the dominant paradigm in US academic and government thinking about international affairs in the 1950s and 1960s was a theory of "modernization," holding that "the whole world was destined to converge with the model of modernity limned by the United States." Though modernization theory was largely discredited by the 1970s, the 1989 collapse of the Berlin Wall and victory in the Cold War restored the theory's optimistic, Western-centric ethos to the policymaking mainstream.

This is not to say that the makers of the West's Russia policy were entirely blind to the challenges that the country faced in the 1990s. However, a weakened, less menacing Moscow had less hold on global attention than during the Cold War, and faith in the idea that, however chaotic, Russia was putting communism behind it and moving toward democracy and the market made it easier to overlook the danger signs and hope that all would somehow be well. Even as enduring corruption and chronic socioeconomic inequality continued to raise eyebrows well after Yeltsin had left the scene, two leading scholars argued that these were "common flaws of middle-income capitalist democracies" that were in no way "incompatible with further economic and political progress" (Shleifer and Treisman 2004). The explicit assumption was that Russia's 'flaws' did not render it unique, that it was on track to develop like any other middle-income capitalist democracy, in accordance with the confident postulates of social science theory. The state of Russia and East-West relations in 2023 proved quite conclusively that it was not.

The fate of Boris Yeltsin's attempt to put his country on a "civilized path" places Russia's distinctiveness in stark relief (quoted in Colton 2008, 218). Timothy Colton's (2008) masterful biography traces the first post-Soviet president's rapid evolution from populist reformer to beleaguered modern-day Tsar, whose *apparatchik* mindset, reliance on so-called "red directors" (the existing managerial elites who steered and distorted market reforms to their benefit), and the decision to leave the membership of the security services more or less intact had begun to alienate his erstwhile democratic allies before 1992 was out. In his 1994 memoir, Yeltsin compared his efforts to the reforms of Peter the Great, which, he suggested, "have not been completed to this day...Although we [Russians] have become Europeans, we have remained ourselves" (cited in Colton 2008, 227). All the intoxicating forces of transformation unleashed by the events of the late 1980s and early 1990s were no match for the weight of Russian history.

## **Putinism**

The leitmotif of the late Yeltsin years was weakness. The economic consequences of the USSR's collapse had barely bottomed out by 1998. The disastrous 1994-5 war in Chechnya manifested centrifugal forces that threatened to tear the country apart, while NATO's march toward

enlargement and actions against fellow Slavs in Yugoslavia underlined Moscow's diminished stature abroad. Nothing better symbolized Russia's enfeeblement than the president himself, who seemed never to recover fully from the heart surgery that he underwent in late 1996. The state of Yeltsin's health became a running joke. Moscow cab drivers in those days were never at a loss for ribald humour at the expense of their president, whom they contrasted with the scandal-plagued—yet plainly healthy—US President Bill Clinton.

This is the essential context for understanding the origins and nature of Putinism. In the words of Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy (2015, 739), by the time Putin arrived in Moscow in the mid-1990s, “[p]ractically every political group and party across the Russian political spectrum, from right to left, felt that the post-Soviet dismantling of the state had gone too far and advocated the restoration of Russian ‘state power.’” Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin was the direct beneficiary of this sentiment. His claim to the presidency was built on his commitment to restoring the power and authority of the Russian state, which he framed explicitly in terms of the country's historical destiny. “We must know our history,” Putin intoned in his inaugural speech on May 7, 2000, “know it as it really is, draw lessons from it and always remember those who created the Russian state, championed its dignity and made it a great, powerful and mighty state” (quoted in Dawisha 2014, 267).

Casting the 1990s as an aberration and Putin's presidency as Russia's return to its proper path highlights the divergence between Russian and Western perspectives on the country's post-Soviet trajectory. It explains Karen Dawisha's (2014, 7) important observation that while most Western analysts have depicted the Putin era “as a democracy in the process of failing,” the more accurate lens is “as an authoritarian project in the process of succeeding.” Putin and the elites who support him have seen themselves as correcting the errors of the 1990s and their consequences; by painting that decade in ever more dire terms, they foster their legitimacy as the stewards of a strong Russian state that guarantees order at home and secures Russian interests abroad.

Central to this narrative is the argument, already prominent by the mid-1990s, that “the West had taken advantage of Russia's weakness” during the Gorbachev and Yeltsin years (Hill and Gaddy 2015, 712). The familiar pattern of Russian history has asserted itself. Though their methods differed, both Gorbachev and Yeltsin sought to regain their country's competitive edge in the ongoing encounter with an ever more powerful West. The contention that this had backfired, that Russia's international circumstances were by 1999 more perilous than ever before, was an effective tool in the hands of those who had always taken a jaundiced view of market and democratic reforms. Such views were particularly widespread in the security services, where Putin made his career and from whose ranks he drew his closest and most long-standing allies.

Once this background is understood, the logic of the decision to invade Ukraine becomes apparent. It was not the random act of a paranoid madman. It was the culmination of forces that had been building since the collapse of the USSR, forces which traced their origins to Russia's centuries-old search for security in the face of a globally preponderant West. As Putin biographer Philip Short (2022, 656) put it, “[f]or more than 30 years, Putin had seethed at what he saw as Russia's humiliation following the break-up of the Soviet Union. Now he had decided to do something about it.” To be sure, Putin's state of mind is not irrelevant to the story. His advancing age and pandemic-induced isolation undoubtedly sold him on the distorted ‘intelligence’ that assured him that the ‘rotten’ Ukrainian state would yield in a matter of days. However, failing to appreciate the larger historical and geopolitical canvas that renders February 24, 2022, intelligible is to misread Russia.

## **Misreading Russia**

Why does the West misread Russia? Broadly speaking, there have been two culprits at work, both rooted, I would suggest, in our own ethnocentrism. The first is the conceit that the natural and social sciences are comparable, that the latter, like the former, can be understood by developing generalizations and deducing explanatory laws. While I cannot pretend to do justice to this realm of ontological debate (my graduate days in political science are long behind me), inattention to Russia's distinctiveness contributed to the tumult of the 1990s and tarred well-intentioned efforts to assist Russia with the brush of insensitivity. It seems odd that efforts to understand Russia in terms of its unique history and political culture should be subject to criticism but such has been the case, with those efforts excoriated by "social science theorists who [have] painted area studies scholars as hopelessly particularistic and as obstacles to scientific progress" (Hanson 2014). That area studies should find itself on the defensive speaks to the institutional weight of academic approaches that value the chimera of scientific rigour above all else. To assert that Russia can only really be understood on its own terms is to question whether human behaviour can be generalized and cover laws developed to the degree that merits calling politics a 'science.' More may be at stake than a simple search for truth; it is no wonder that our grasp of what makes that country tick should have suffered as a result.

The second reason that policymakers and scholars alike misread Russia is their failure adequately to appreciate how Washington's universalist pretensions—aided and abetted by its NATO allies—have been perceived in Moscow. One would be hard-pressed to imagine an approach better tailored to aggravate Russia's historical sensitivities than the triumphalism of post-Cold War US foreign policy. To be clear, this is not for a moment to justify Putin's actions; it is to assert that when we reconstruct the world as Putin sees it, those actions become intelligible. For anyone steeped in Russia's long history of insecurities bred by the competition with a technologically superior West, US President George W. Bush's 2003 assertion that "the advance of freedom is the calling of our time" (Bush 2003) had a chilling effect—particularly since it followed a US-led coalition's armed intervention to topple Iraq's Saddam Hussein. A year later, Putin (2004) charged that a savage terrorist attack in the North Caucasian town of Beslan had been abetted by international forces seeking "to tear from us a 'juicy piece of pie.'" In the same speech, he admitted that insufficient attention had been paid to defence and security issues and quoted Stalin's famous 1931 warning that "the weak get beaten" (Putin 2004). In other words, Putin had no time for the lofty-sounding aspirations that followed on the heels of "the end of history," particularly when pitched in terms of 'universal' values that were indistinguishable from Western national interests. To believe that being told by US President Bush that "democracies are good things to have on your border" (quoted in Charap and Colton 2017, 1794) would alleviate Putin's concerns about NATO enlargement is a striking example of misreading Russia.

It bears underlining how much Putin's thinking has been shaped by the postulates of Realism 101: in a world that lacks any higher authority, state survival is paramount and thinking the worst of your adversaries is only prudent. Yet the perilous specifics of Russian history have rendered Putin's take on realpolitik dangerously extreme. While there is much to criticize about the West's approach to Russia following the collapse of the USSR, Putin's assertion, in his February 2022 announcement of the invasion of Ukraine, that "the United States and its Western partners...tried to put the final squeeze on us, finish us off, and utterly destroy us" falls wide of the mark (Putin 2022).

We may have overestimated Russia's compatibility with the reforms that we promoted in the 1990s, but the desire to see a democratic partner play a constructive role in international relations was as sincere as it was rooted in self-interest. No rational Western policymaker has ever actively sought Russia's destruction. Yet this is the conclusion Putin has drawn from the frustration of his efforts to win the security guarantees and privileges that he believes to be Russia's due, conditions the West can never meet because we hold that the countries bordering Russia have the right to choose their own paths. East-West relations have reached a total impasse, and the tragedy unfolding in Ukraine is the result. It is not whitewashing the Putin regime to acknowledge that it took two to arrive at this outcome. There is no excuse for the savagery that Russia is now visiting on Ukraine. No civilized person can escape revulsion at the current excesses of the Putin regime, but there is also no escaping the fact that the West is not blameless and that our misreading of Russia helped us to arrive at the place we are now.

### **Conclusion**

At the beginning of this article, I referenced Alexander Gabuev's (2023) lament for "the Russia that might have been." Once a leading scholar at the Carnegie Foundation's Moscow Center (prior to its closure in 2022), Gabuev is among the thousands of bright young Russians who have left the country since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. His is as informed a perspective as one could wish for, that of a thoughtful and well-connected representative of the generation that has seen its hopes dashed by the excesses of late Putinism. Yet the analysis I have put forward here suggests that even an observer as expert as Gabuev is capable of misreading Russia.

Gabuev (2023) fears that Putin's war in Ukraine may have "permanently foreclose[d] the promise of Russia occupying a peaceful and prosperous place in the twenty-first-century world order." This outcome "was not predestined"; it was the product of "the choices that Putin and the country's elites have made over the past two decades" (Gabuev 2023). Instead of seeing EU and NATO enlargement as bringing regional stability and enhancing Russian security, Putin and his cronies "increasingly focused on revanchism and animosity toward the United States" and replaced discussions about "a new, more open Russian state...with propaganda and imperial nostalgia" (Gabuev 2023).

This characterization of the Putin era is entirely accurate, with one important exception: the assertion that Putin's path represented a 'choice' and that viable, more Western-friendly alternatives existed. My argument is that Russia's fate has been predetermined by geography and history. State survival in the face of a superior and, therefore, threatening West has always overridden all other considerations. It has fostered the growth in Russia of a bloated and deeply corrupt state at the expense of an atomized and largely powerless civil society. Gabuev (2023) himself notes that Putin's imperialist authoritarianism "fell on fertile ground following the trauma of the Soviet collapse." The ground was fertile precisely because of the specific historical conditions that the present article has sought to elucidate. It provides further validation of Karen Dawisha's (2014) characterization of the Putin era as an authoritarian project that succeeded, not as an attempt at democracy that failed.

To believe in "the Russia that might have been" is to overestimate the prospects for fundamental change in a country so steeped in geopolitics and history. But does this mean we have to abandon all hope? Russian authoritarianism is scarcely monolithic; methods of governance have evolved as leaders and circumstances have changed. Reform has given way to reaction, and vice versa, over

the whole course of Russian history. It would be folly to suggest that this pattern has now ground to a halt, to contend that what we saw in 2023 is what we get for all time. Yet my analysis indicates that we should err on the side of caution. A combination of ethnocentrism and self-interest led the West to expect more of Russia in the 1990s than its circumstances made possible. We, in turn, are an inextricable part of those circumstances. The power imbalance dictated by the West's enduring superiority in both hard and soft power puts a firm limit on how far Russia can ever evolve in our direction. Security will always come first.

I understand that this interpretation of the current East-West impasse represents historical determinism. I have argued, in effect, that things are as they are because they *had* to be so. This is also a glaring example of commentary reflecting the time in which it is written. I have framed the entire sweep of Russian history through the lens of 2023, which found both Russia's internal conditions and its relations with the West at their lowest point in living memory. As a lifelong Russophile, nothing would make me happier than to be proven wrong, to be shown that the present is an aberration and that the governance pendulum will swing once again toward the promise of a better life for Russians and a more peaceful world for them and their neighbours. But these are the longings of my heart. Sadly, my head and a lifetime in Russian affairs tell me otherwise.

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