



Russian President Vladimir Putin's brazen annexation of Crimea, and his sabre rattling in eastern Ukraine, recall memories of the Cold War, and fault lines between East and West. Wikipedia photo

Loose Ends from the Cold War: Ukraine, Russia and the West

Jeremy Kinsman

In 1991, G7 leaders meeting in London were presiding over what seemed a new and orderly world. Mikhail Gorbachev was an honoured guest, democracy was spreading in the former Soviet Union and a celebratory mood of East-West harmony prevailed. Today, Vladimir Putin's annexation of Crimea and murky interference in eastern Ukraine indicate the degree to which the West underestimated both the costs of Russia's Cold War legacy and the complications of its enduring regional influence. Is this a new Cold War? No. But the regrets are many.

The crisis in Ukraine and Russia's swift military move to annex Crimea shocked a world which believed that annexing a smaller neighbour's territory by force, so reminiscent of Europe's dangerous and divided past, was obsolete.

Simply put, Vladimir Putin says he did it to protect ethnic Russians in Ukraine after a coup that he claims was engineered by Western governments left them at the mercy of Ukrainian nationalists.

In truth, the revolution was not about

geo-politics or ethnic tension but was to protest a corrupt and abusive government, whose culture mirrored Putin's own.

But the exceptional episode also flowed as unfinished business from the way the Soviet Union broke up into 15 states. The abrupt separation of Russia and Ukraine as separate states left fateful loose ends that became more tangled over the clumsy and unpracticed attempts to replace communist regimes with market economies and democracy.

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It is a sharp contrast to the celebratory mood over East-West harmony twenty-five years ago.

In June 1991, when leaders of the still-supreme G7 met in London at their annual summit, they felt at the top of a new and orderly world.

An improbable coalition of Western and Middle Eastern powers, supported by unusual cooperation from Moscow, had thrown Saddam Hussein, the last authoritarian to annex a neighbor, out of Kuwait. The fall of the Berlin Wall was radically changing a Europe President George H.W. Bush declared to be "whole and free."

On a glorious early summer day that matched the G7's upbeat mood, striped tents on the lawn of Lancaster House by Buckingham Palace shaded a lunch for the hundred or so officials. The leaders themselves dined inside with special guest Mikhail Gorbachev, whom Brian Mulroney had urged host John Major invite as a signal of the suddenly vastly altered and improved world outlook.

When Gorbachev came out on the veranda to admire the view, the officials in the garden rose in spontaneous applause.

Apart from spells of *ostpolitik* and détente, the Cold War had dominated the entire working lives of these officials. Their lives were now abruptly transformed by Gorbachev's historic campaign of top-to-bottom reform in the Soviet Union, and his declaration of an end to East-West animosity. A vast Red Army was pulling back, 800,000 from East Germany,

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1.3 million counting clerks and families, and nuclear weapons were being de-targeted.

What was wrong with the picture in the garden was what we didn't know.

Anatoly Sobchak, the "mayor" of Leningrad, had been warning that in the USSR, "democracy and dictatorship lived side-by-side." Gorbachev was hated by the Communist Party *nomenklatura* for wiping out its power and privilege.

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By 1991, he had lost standing with the people as well. The euphoric casting off of the old communist regime had launched a chaotic unraveling of everything, causing what David Remnick called the "wreckage of everyday life." The public blamed Gorbachev for having no coherent alternative economic plan.

G7 officials had neither the knowledge nor the humility to grasp that no one had a clue how to enable a successful transition from the command and control Soviet economy and non-democracy to its opposite. No country had done anything as vastly complex. Westerners would mentor Soviet partners on new norms (ours, of course) for laws and institutions. We didn't realize that the attainment of inclusive liberal democracy was an essentially cultural exercise that would have to be learned over time. Elections were just one step on the way, though the West celebrated their introduction as if they were the desirable outcome itself. These not-yet apparent truths about the Russian experience would be doubly dark for Ukraine.

Gorbachev's sinking approval rat-

ings (they plunged from 60 per cent to the teens in the course of the year) encouraged resentful throwback hard-liners to seize power during his Black Sea vacation in August 1991.

The coup failed. The public was fed up with economic chaos but was unwilling to revert for leadership to stereotypically wooden authoritarians from the rejected and resented Communist past.

Citizens chose to renew their wobbly hopes for "democracy" by rallying behind Boris Yeltsin, whose election as president of the Russian Republic was the first real popular ballot in over 70 years. Their hopes bypassed Gorbachev, weakened by the coup and now vulnerable to the ascendant and hostile Yeltsin, keen to settle scores with the beleaguered Soviet leader who had repeatedly humiliated him.

In the other constituent republics, the demonstration that newly won reforms could be snatched back by Moscow hard-liners was a shock. Ukraine's Communist Parliament immediately adopted in August an "Act of Independence" calling for a referendum in December (supported by 92 per cent of Ukrainians, including 56 per cent in Crimea).

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But as Bill Clinton's Russia hand, Strobe Talbott, has put it, Ukraine was seen from Moscow as the "heart of Russia." Alexander Solzhenitsyn, for example, had been calling from exile for the break-up of the USSR for years, but like most Russians, never anticipated a separate Ukraine.

On the other hand, Moscow was viewed from Ukraine with historic distrust, forged especially by Stalin's forced collectivization of agriculture in 1932, a "social holocaust" (Orlando Figes) that starved to death millions of Ukrainians. However, most Ukrainians differentiated between the heavy hand of "Moscow" and "Russians" themselves, accepting the mass atrocity was more an exercise in totalitarian social engineering under a Communist monster than an ethnically-targeted slaughter. The common reality in Ukraine was of Ukrainian and Russian communities woven together except at Western and Eastern extremities.

Ukrainian nationalists struck a deal with party boss Leonid Kravchuk. He agreed to lead Ukraine into independence, on the understanding he and his apparatchik clan would then rule the new state.

A more ominous start to Ukraine's independence could scarcely be imagined. It produced rotten governance and economic stagnation, renewed by subsequent corrupt leaders for over 20 years, creating acute mass disappointment that would propel the Orange Revolution in 2004 and ultimately the crisis of 2013-14.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union's break-up in December 1991 was surprisingly peaceful. Twenty million ethnic Russians lived outside Russia in the newly autonomous 14 Republics but no wave of migrants fled "home" to escape local ethnic assertiveness. There has been tension over rights of Russian retired military in the new Baltic Republics, and "frozen conflicts" around the status of Russian enclaves in Moldova and Georgia, but all in all, extraordinarily little violence.

Was it an illusion? Loose ends were everywhere, nowhere more evident than between Ukraine and Russia, which had major arguments to settle, over currency, energy imports, infrastructure.

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Yeltsin had always had his doubts about "losing" Crimea (tossed from Russia to Ukraine by Nikita Khrushchev in 1954 when internal borders in the USSR hardly mattered), though the long-term lease for the Russian Black Sea fleet at Sebastopol bridged the most obvious Russian concern.

Another bridge was needed to persuade more ardent Ukrainian nationalists to agree to give up their part of the Soviet nuclear arsenal. In the 1994 "Budapest memorandum," Russia and Western partners agreed to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity while Ukraine agreed to dismantle its nukes.

But in most ways, for a decade the two countries pursued parallel paths and endured comparable pain, aggravated in Russia's case by Chechen wars and terrorism. Russia's economic and social degradation (GDP decline every year from 1990 to 1998) was mirrored in Ukraine, as was the Yeltsin regime's culture of cronies and corruption.

But the Russian situation changed decisively in 1999 when the Yeltsin family positioned the rapidly elevated Vladimir Putin to succeed the faltering Boris Nicolayevich. The choice was fateful.

On one hand, Putin succeeded admirably in stabilizing Russia, aided by a spike in the price of oil. Incomes and pensions began to climb again, dramatically. But on the other hand, he began to subtract from recently awarded democratic space, and before long veered to antagonism to the West.

I had met him in 1995 as a newly appointed deputy mayor of St. Petersburg, having been referred to him in 1995 as just the person to settle some problems Canadians were having with local extortion. He did, and indeed came across as one of the most impressive and effective Russian officials I had met.

When asked once what he had learned in the KGB, he confided, "to mingle." He aimed to project to a

contact what he estimated the contact wanted to see in him.

It worked. When he made a solid commitment to democracy in his New Year's Day, 2000, acceptance speech to the nation, and when he invited the secretary-general of NATO to be his first foreign visitor, Western leaders accepted at face value his projection as a reformist leader who envisaged Russia working with the West as Yeltsin had done.

Russians rewarded Putin with approval ratings in the 70s as personal incomes rose dramatically (by 140 per cent from 1998 to 2008) and he wrestled an end to the Chechen wars, after yet more terrorist spasms. But the trade-off was that Russians relieved to celebrate security and a more orderly and growing economy would accept a "time of calming down" in political life, a cessation of protest and political competition.

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In reality, Putin has no feeling for democracy because he abhors competition, at least with him. His KGB training made suspicion of other peoples' motives his default position. He doesn't credit the sincerity of democratic aspirations because he has never known them. As Fiona Hill of the Brookings Institution has pointed out, when the euphoric years of casting off the communist regime and tasting new freedoms occurred in his home town of St. Petersburg, from 1985 to 1990, Putin was in a closed KGB bubble in Leipzig. By the time he quit (more or less) and returned

home, all he saw was the residual crime and disorder.

Meanwhile, independence in Ukraine brought disorder and dismay under Kravchuk, until 1994, and then under Leonid Kuchma. The economic recovery in Russia after 1998 was not matched, though Ukraine was more than a match in corruption, sliding below even Russia near the bottom of Transparency International's rankings, (where it has stayed ever since). Moreover, as Putin began to narrow democratic space in Russia, Kuchma did the same.

However, the 2004 presidential election offered hope of a reform candidate Ukrainians wanted to believe in, Viktor Yushchenko.

Putin—and outgoing President Kuchma—actively and ardently supported his opponent, ex-Soviet machine apparatchik, Viktor Yanukovich. When an obviously rigged election declared Yanukovich the winner, the Orange Revolution began.

Over 17 days, outraged Ukrainians in a highly disciplined campaign of nonviolent mass protest shut the country down and occupied Kiev's great central square, the Maidan. Decisively, security authorities did not use deadly force. The vote was run again, with Yushchenko being the winner second time around.

There were three results.

- 1) Putin took the Orange Revolution personally. He never saw it as protest over a rigged election. For him it was a "regime change" operation orchestrated by Western interests via Ukrainian NGOs. From that time on, his hostility in Russia to democracy activists and civil society, and their rightfully entitled connections to international civil society, became acute, expressed through criminalization of such contacts, and strident patriotism.
- 2) In Ukraine, the Yushchenko regime turned out to be as corrupt and ineffective as its predecessors, a harsh disappointment for reform-minded Ukrainians.
- 3) Putin turned anti-West and anti-NATO.

Over time, Western leaders had with rare exceptions tried to convey the message

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there had been no "winners" or "losers" of the Cold War.

But the expansion eastward of NATO made Russians feel like losers. They ultimately learned to live with NATO entry for the Czech and Slovak Republics, Hungary, and even Poland as societies that could be considered "Western," an argument that could be made less convincingly for Romania and Bulgaria, but made nonetheless.

But Ukraine? There was no way Russia would accept NATO incorporating a country as intimately connected to Russia, on Russia's borders, and including the leased iconic Russian naval base of Sebastopol.

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The issue of Ukraine's entry into NATO was vexed. Most European NATO members judged NATO membership of Ukraine to be going too far in several respects, especially as Ukrainian public opinion was ambivalent at best. Still, the Bush administration (with avid Harper government support) managed to keep the door open at the April, 2008 Bucharest Summit. In August, a provocative miscalculation by another ex-Soviet candidate for membership, Georgia, provided the pretext for a punitive Russian invasion that in December persuaded NATO ministers to take Ukrainian membership off the agenda. However, the episode rankled Vladimir Putin as much as anything the West had in his view done to humiliate his country, and there was a long list of such things.

Ukraine was hit especially hard by the 2009 economic crisis, leaving the economy 30 per cent smaller than

in 1991. Yushchenko's six-year tenure had been quarrelsome and unproductive (though a free press thrived), and corruption still flourished, including to the benefit of his family. His approval rating fell to 7 per cent, and that of ally Iulia Tymoshenko to 22 per cent. Despondent Ukrainians turned to a more inclusive-sounding Yanukovich, who convinced enough voters that he would govern for all Ukrainians to win the 2010 election.

Meanwhile, the European Union had been developing with Ukraine an association partnership that Ukrainian reformers and civil society counted on to oblige fairer and more transparent standards of governance.

In Russia, Putin was back as president. The casual announcement he had agreed to switch jobs with Dmitry Medvedev was greeted by mass protests in major Russian cities. The time for calming down was clearly over. Urban professionals, students and the middle class expressed their impatience and frustration over being treated "like political infants." A childish doctored parliamentary election in December, 2011 widened protests, though Putin was elected again in April.

Once elected, he cracked down on dissenters whom he likened to "foreign agents." He also launched a campaign to re-create the Russian sense of identity to fill the void he believed had been left by the evacuation of the all-embracing forced identity of communism. Putin framed a new patriotism in Russian exceptionalism, distinct from Western liberalism, rooted in imagined pre-Revolutionary traditional and ethnic values of 19th Century Orthodox morality, featuring among other things, anti-gay assertiveness.

He devised the notion of a Eurasian Union that would be the vessel for his sphere of influence, as a sort of counterpart in the East to the EU. However, he desperately needed Ukraine in it for heft and credibility, and he had a jaundiced view of Ukraine's flirtation with the EU itself.

Yanukovych's tenure had been no better than his predecessors and indeed personal and family entitlements were hitting new levels of corrupt practice. His dentist son was in on 50 per cent of state contracts.

Putin saw leverage in Ukraine's dependence on Russia for 70 per cent of its fuel. Under Yushenko, who rubbed Russia the wrong way, Gazprom had used gas as a lever of Russian state aggression, raising prices starkly. The Ukrainian state budget continued to pay the difference. By 2013, Ukraine was virtually bankrupt. Putin offered Yanukovych the \$15 billion he needed, in return for agreeing to join the Eurasian Union.

This meant abandoning the EU association project. There were small-scale protests in Kiev. When Yanukovych used force against the protestors, the crowds multiplied.

The crowds came out not because of geo-politics, the choice of "EU against Russia." They were there because they were fed up with corruption and dishonesty and had counted on the open governance undertakings in the EU association accord to oblige Ukraine to reform.

When Yanukovych jammed through Parliament a law for Ukraine that mirrored the restrictive and criminalizing anti-NGO laws of Putin, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians poured into the street and square. When he used deadly force to kill 80 protesters in the Maidan, a dozen of whom were Russian speakers from the east, the crisis broke. His credibility gone, he was forced to flee Ukraine for Russia, even though an orderly end to his reign had been brokered by EU ministers. The Ukrainian Parliament mandated an interim government to take power.

As we know, Putin's resentment at the turn of events was again profound. Crimea, where the population is 60 per cent Russian, seceded within days in a referendum orchestrated by the Russians after their lightning military occupation.

Putin's "Little War" sparked widespread patriotic support in Russia, accompanied by xenophobia and anti-Western diatribes fuelled by state-owned TV news monopolies. It usefully deflects attention from other

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issues, the weakening Russian economy, and likely revelations of the extent of corruption in the \$51 billion bill for the Sochi Winter Olympic project, most of the rewards having gone to Putin's cronies.

It provides pretext and cover for Putin to clamp down on protest and dissent he now explicitly identifies with "traitors." There will be less likelihood of contagion to Russia's protest movement from Kiev's.

The implications are deep and wide. At the time of writing, Russia is agitating to destabilize Ukraine's Russia-leaning East by tacitly supporting separatist assertiveness against the authority of Ukraine's government, including armed occupation of key buildings. Ukraine authorities are wary of using force but are leaking control over their own territory.

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His accusations that Russia was in conflict with the West over Ukraine have become a self-fulfilling prophecy. He is playing what could be a costly game. Further moves against Ukraine will mean pressure to spread sanctions on Russia beyond asset freezes and visa barriers for selected Russian personnel to include financing and broader economic issues. Russia's multinationally active state firms like Lukoil, Gazprom, or Sibneft will find it more difficult to raise capital in world financial markets.

Putin counts on the EU countries be-

ing disunited on the issue, believing they feel too economically vulnerable to risk counter-sanctions cutting them off from Russian gas that counts for 25 or 30 per cent of supply in some cases.

But Putin is ignoring Russia's weak economic structures and overstating its potential leverage: Russia counts for only 1 per cent of EU economic activity while the EU counts for 15 per cent of Russia's. Russia's stock market has already taken a 13 per cent hit this year.

Investors are no doubt asking how Russia, where oil and gas account for over 60 per cent of exports and 30 per cent of the GDP, can cut off its principal markets and survive? China is cited as the magic alternative market, but the Chinese have been resoundingly unsupportive on Putin's moves over Ukraine.

Europe will begin to reduce exposure to Russian supply. Long-term, Russia's advantages will diminish as European LNG connectors multiply, and the US develops LNG export capability and increases its capacity in conventional and unconventional sources of energy.

A quarter-century of joint effort to integrate Russia into the world economy will be interrupted.

Meanwhile, the Chinese are looking to make the 21st century theirs while Russia struggles still to succeed in the 19th century.

Is it a new Cold War? No. But there are a lot of regrets, and fresh efforts may have to wait for new Russian leadership. The June day in London when Gorbachev appeared on a veranda to cheers seems like much more than a quarter-century ago. **P**

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