

# THE ETERNAL RUSSIAN QUESTION

Jeremy Kinsman

Our former ambassador to Moscow knows that Russia's political story is a layered, complex one that defies attempts to simplify it. The Russian invasion of Georgia, in response to Georgia's attack on Ossetia, is only the latest example. Sophisticated European observers thought there was plenty of blame to be apportioned on both sides. But in the US, notably in the Bush administration, the McCain campaign and even the mainstream media, the interpretation was simplistic and one sided: "the Russians were the bad guys, the Bear was back, and had to be stopped." If only it were that simple. And then there's the Russian strongman, Vladimir Putin. It seems there is always a Russian strongman. Jeremy Kinsman considers the eternal Russian question.

D'une complexité presque inextricable, l'histoire politique de la Russie défie toute tentative de simplification, comme le sait bien l'ancien ambassadeur du Canada à Moscou. Le dernier exemple en date en est l'invasion de la Géorgie, décidée en réaction à l'attaque de celle-ci contre l'Ossétie. Selon les meilleurs observateurs européens, chaque pays porte une lourde part du blâme. Mais aux États-Unis, tant par la voie de l'administration Bush que de la campagne de John McCain et des grands médias, l'interprétation des faits a été partout unidimensionnelle : les Russes sont des brutes et il faut stopper le retour de l'ours soviétique. Si seulement les choses étaient aussi simples... Et il y a Vladimir Poutine, l'homme fort de la Russie. Il semble bien que ce pays a toujours un homme fort dans sa manche. Jeremy Kinsman livre ses réflexions sur l'éternelle « question russe ».

An American friend whose life and international reporting career has been steeped in the Soviet Union and Russia had the Russian "story" come home to the family roost this summer in an agonizing way.

His daughter and her young family had gone to vacation with friends in the hills above Gori, Georgia, when on the evening of August 7 war broke out between Georgia and Russia. For a week, he and his worried wife had no word, as communications were down or congested. They knew, of course, that Russian tanks had rolled into and over the region. It was not until several days later and the visit to Gori of French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner that a calm of sorts settled, the daughter phoned home and my friend's young family left safely for the West, unscathed but shaken.

When I asked my friends whom they blame for putting their loved ones in harm's way — Mikhail Saakashvili, who ignited the war with his rash and brainless attack on South Ossetia when he thought the world was distracted watching the opening ceremonies of the Olympics; the Russians, who reacted to the Georgian army's pre-emptive strike with ready-to-go, disproportionate and vengeful force; or the

chronic ideological gamblers around US vice-president Dick Cheney who allowed Saakashvili the delusion that he would have US and NATO support for the starring role he seems to have concocted for himself — they said, "All of the above, pretty much equally."

It is a balance of blame accorded by most in Europe, including in Poland, according to public opinion polls, even though the Poles are usually happy to take a shot at Russia, which is understandable given Polish history. But Polish professionals point to the nuanced pronouncements of Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski, who said bluntly that Saakashvili had made a mistake. Ex-president Lech Walesa, who had probably done as much as any foreigner to end the Soviet Union, was a good deal tougher on the young Georgian president.

Among European foreign policy experts and officials I have spoken to in several countries, though they signed on to condemnatory statements about Russian retributive excesses, the private disdain for the Georgian was pretty much universal.

The US was different. "Russia Invades Georgia," screamed the headlines. Among most American media,

averse to history or complexity and seduced by Saakashvili's American background and constantly available fluent English-language communications skills (he boasted to the BBC he gave 1100 interviews), and no doubt impressed by the rapturous efforts of John McCain to seize the cartoon image of the Russian bear stomping on the little Georgian to show his mettle as presumptive commander-in-chief-in-waiting and ready for the 3 a.m. call

South Ossetia declared in turn their independence from Georgia owing to just these sorts of resentments. Ossetians are a separate people, with their own language, who are divided territorially between North Ossetia which is still part of Russia, and the southern part, which Georgia's most notorious son, Iosif Dzhugashvili, better known by his nom de guerre Joseph Stalin, awarded to his home republic as part of the divide-and-rule strategy the

insane racism and then the forced retaliatory relocations of 1945 made most such European cities mono-ethnic again. But Tbilisi's cosmopolitanism was spared: Yevgeny Primakov, who was a Soviet fixer-scholar-intelligence capo and later Yel'tin's Russian foreign minister, told me of growing up at his parents' Tbilisi table, a gathering place for fellow intellectuals, which drew in addition to ethnic Georgians a cast of Armenians, Azeris, Russians and Jews. In Georgia,

then, it hadn't seemed to matter. But under Georgia's first leader at independence, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, things took a harsh turn as minorities lost their status and rights.

Georgia's first years of independence confronted the same topsy-turvy inversion of values and almost impossible adaptations to presumptive democracy and open markets as the rest of the ex-totalitarian Soviet empire. The smooth foreign minister under Gorbachev, Eduard Shevardnadze brought his global prestige home as Georgia's second president in 1993 (after Gamsakhurdia, who some consider to have been insane, "died" in opaque circumstances), but his 10 years in power were marked by vast corruption and stagnation of any real democracy project.

But Shevardnadze did coax back from the US a young Georgian who had completed a law degree at Columbia University in New York, Mikhail Saakashvili, who rose to become a wunderkind minister of justice and then quit and began to form a democratic opposition.

So far, so good, and Saakashvili's reformist impulses were attractive and sincere, even if, as British professor of Russian and Georgian Donald Rayfield put it, they were packaged within a "dangerously unstable and sometimes ruthless politician." Saakashvili led the "Rose Revolution" that toppled the grandfatherly Shevardnadze in 2003 and took office on the back of some very ambitious promises, including that Georgia would join NATO and the

## Is it the end of the end of the Cold War? It certainly is not. But there is much to be said and thought about concerning Russia and its role in and with Europe, its region and the world — and in passing, about US leadership in years to come.

on Day One, the issue was clear: the Russians were the bad guys, the Bear was back and had to be stopped, parried, isolated, whatever.

US neo-conservative hype historian Robert Kagan pronounced the Russia-Georgia war as great a turning point in history as the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the Cold War.

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In itself, the story of miscalculations that led the Georgian army to launch an attack with anti-personnel weapons on the breakaway province of South Ossetia would be just another zany episode of the ragged aftermath of the breakup of the Soviet Union.

While important to Georgians, they are also part of eastern and southern Europe's ancestral passions and ethnic quarrels, which go back thousands of years. As history speeds up, age-old enmities re-emerge to slow it down. The issues need more time, patience, and counselling to sort out.

When the USSR broke up in 1992, Georgia declared its independence but the enclaves of Abkhazia and

Soviet dictator used to keep the many parts and peoples of the empire in line.

Their unilateral breakaway in 1992 was nasty: both Georgians and South Ossetians behaved pretty brutally. What was clear was that these parts of Georgia wanted out and would not be reconciled, which is why it became one of the "frozen conflicts" of the area, put on hold, so to speak, until it could be sorted out later. The Russians were granted a form of tutelage over keeping the peace with some oversight from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, though they soon showed they were hardly neutral about the Ossetians' existential choice, extending Russian citizenship to South Ossetians.

Meanwhile Georgia staggered along as an independent country, to the extent that any country is "independent."

Georgia is a very compelling place, almost Mediterranean in mood, whose wines, fruit, poems, and films nourished and brightened the dour USSR, and also radiated a reputation for gangsterism, rather like Sicily.

Historically, Georgia was also multi-ethnic. Tbilisi was one of those European cities like Vienna, Warsaw or Rotterdam where society and its salons mingled peoples and origins. Hitler's

European Union and get back breakaway South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The Bushites loved Saakashvili. What wasn't to love? He spoke and thought like an American, which is really welcome in a country where policy leaders and operators have never been very good at understanding how non-Americans think. His discourse was also anti-Russian at a time when US-Russian relations were sinking like a stone.

He could be chalked up as a success of the George W. Bush "freedom agenda" even if he was a very controlling democrat who responded harshly to criticism on TV and had his police smash student demonstrations. A *New York Times* report on October 7 cites a "growing number of critics inside and outside Georgia [who] argue that it falls well short of western democratic standards."

When Saakashvili sent 2,000 Georgian troops to join the US coalition in Iraq, thereby making Georgia's, improbably, the third-largest force in the dwindling coalition for that increasingly unpopular venture, he made a canny investment that he counted on for subsequent political dividends.

Thus Bush pressed NATO allies to admit both Georgia and Ukraine as new members.

The story of NATO expansion after 1989 is not straightforward. Gorbachev told me several times in Moscow after he had entered private life that there were solid understandings with the US that after the reunification of Germany, NATO would not expand eastward as the Warsaw Pact dissolved. Jim Baker, who was the titanic secretary of state during that period with whom I have shared time in recent years, absolutely denies there was any such deal.

Probably Gorbachev heard enough of what he needed to hear, and Baker and the first President Bush gave him enough generalized comfort, to allow the vast and historic enter-

prise of ending the Cold War to go ahead without stalling over NATO.

In any case, the Czechoslovaks (still), Poles and Hungarians wanted to join NATO. They had been shut off from their home in the West by the Iron Curtain for generations: were they to accept now a Soviet veto over what for them was an issue of existential identity?

Others followed later, including in 2002 for the first time breakaway republics from the USSR itself: the Baltic states of Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia, right on the Russian border.

Russia hated it, but went along, because even it could concede that the forced circumstances of the Balts' absorption into the USSR were unusually harsh.

Still, it was a big chip among the many that sat on Russian shoulders. President Vladimir Putin, who is nothing if not clear, was categoric when meeting the current President Bush that Russia would not accept NATO extending to Georgia or Ukraine.

Saakashvili pushed for it, with US backing and popular support in Georgia (which is not the case in Ukraine). This spring the US couldn't get allies to agree to membership for a

situations. Incidents, skirmishes, harsh words, Russian economic pressure on Georgia were building into a conflagration in the making, and when it was ignited on the evening of August 7, the Russians, who were more than ready, grabbed the *casus belli* like a gift.

In mid-August, the *New York Times* reported a very detailed "timeline" of events and communications in the crucial months leading up to Georgia's armed assault on the capital of South Ossetia, Tskhinvali, on August 7, which killed a disputed number of civilians with anti-personnel weapons: by any count, the total is over a hundred. In that the article repeatedly stressed that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and the US ambassador in Tbilisi had warned Saakashvili not to provoke Russia and, above all, not to invade South Ossetia, my guess is that its writers drew from contacts in the State Department; it clearly showed that Saakashvili felt empowered to ignore their warnings by what he took from his meetings with the more indulging President Bush himself when the Georgian had visited Washington in March.

I don't believe Bush gave him a green or even amber light to invade the enclave. I imagine he just radiated sup-

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country with a border, and moreover, a border dispute with Russia, but Georgia did get a NATO Military Assistance Program, lots of new US equipment and military training because of the Georgian role in Iraq, and the presence of a couple of hundred US military trainers.

Meanwhile, all these years, bad blood had been brewing between Georgia and Russia over the "frozen" South Ossetia and Abkhazia

port for Saakashvili, who spoke elliptically about a need to solve the problem, though the Georgian found encouragement from others who saw some political merit in a Georgian fight with Russia, particularly for Republican fortunes, which could benefit from a nostalgic trip back to a menacing Russia. Randy Scheunemann, chief foreign policy adviser to the Republican nominee, John McCain, had been Georgia's principal lobbyist in Washington, and after the fighting

broke out on August 7, Senator McCain was the first to phone in support for the Georgian president, which he renewed heartily and unquestioningly in the candidates' TV debate.

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**It is almost impossible to overestimate the value of the global contribution made by Gorbachev's glasnost in the 1980s, which led to the end of the Cold War, which he sought and welcomed. He steered the USSR toward political cooperation with the West, a posture that looked even better on Boris Yeltsin, who ended the Soviet Union as well as the predominant role in it of the Communist Party.**

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Obviously, Russia had been ready and willing to go and teach Saakashvili a lesson. French commentator Jean-Dominique Giuliani was typical of Europeans in protesting the "unequal" war waged by Russia, disproportionate in force and reach.

The question of why Saakashvili provoked an already belligerent Russia is almost irrelevant now amid the clouds of words and speculation about Russian longer-term purposes. It's probably safe to say that he made a bad gamble that the US and world opinion would support his rash military move (which the 200 US advisers to the Georgian military must have known about) because he took seriously only one side of the conflicted US policy advice, the dangerous side that has got America into so much trouble already and so deeply. But when Georgia was up against Russia, an overextended and weakened US had nothing in the tank but the vapours of rhetoric.

The invasion and putdown of Georgia was a "demo," to show:

- that Saakashvili's confrontational approach was disastrous

- that Russia was "mad as hell and wasn't going to take it anymore"; and
- that the US was out of it.

Russian language, from Prime Minister Putin and even from his supposedly softer, gentler stand-in as president, Dmitri Medvedev, and from sophisticated tough-guy foreign minis-

ter Sergei Lavrov, was harshly self-confident, defiant and to the point. On the specific point of the "frozen conflict" over the sovereignty quarrel among Georgia and the breakaway provinces, Lavrov said Georgia should just "forget about it," and Russia recognized them as separate countries.

No one else did but that wasn't Russia's point — it was payback time for the West's recognition of Kosovo in February, over Russian objections, which was the first recognition extended to a breakaway ethnic sub-component of any of the newly independent states — in this case, Serbia — that fell out of the breakups of the two multi-national unions, Yugoslavia and the USSR.

But it was payback time for much more than that. It was the moment to show that Russia was not going to be humiliated or ignored any longer. Russia *is* back. That it came back with a sort of bullying force on a small neighbour is very typical of the old Russian style, and caused real worry around the Russian rim.

Is it justified? Where is it all going? To understand, we have to go back to the recent past to grasp how to cope with this part of our futures.

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USSR toward political cooperation with the West, a posture that looked even better on Boris Yeltsin, who ended the Soviet Union as well as the predominant role in it of the Communist Party.

But the economic chaos, social dislocation and overturning of the national narrative were out of control. ("How can you decontrol a controlled society in a controlled way?" Anatoly Chubais, the "privatization czar," once asked me rhetorically.) In October 1993, there was an attempted coup d'état against Yeltsin.

In an emergency meeting he called of key Western ambassadors, Foreign Minister Andrei Kosyrev asked for our governments' support for Yeltsin, saying prophetically, "You will never see again a Russian government as pro-Western as this one."

And we never have. (Indeed, Kosyrev was later bounced because he was so resented in Parliament for not tangling more on behalf of Russian "interests.")

What I don't accept is the charge that the West deliberately humiliated Russia as "losers." To the contrary, there was a vast attempt by the first President Bush and James Baker in particular to avoid any hint of triumphalism. We all went out of our way to bring Russia inside the tent, to valorize Yeltsin, such as the efforts by Jean Chrétien to integrate Russia into the G8 when Canada hosted the Halifax Summit in 1996.

That being said, we were careless, few grasping the enormity of the changes Russia was going through, flippant in our mantras of democratic this and free markets that without having a clue how behavioural practice, which is imperfect in the best of circumstances (e.g., Wall Street bankers, autumn 2008) and needs nourishment over generations, was to be suddenly adapted to a recently totalitarian and traumatized society.



CP Photo

**Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. He personifies the mystery of Russia, as well as its tradition of a strong man at the helm. For the West, writes Jeremy Kinsman, he also represents the eternal Russian question.**

So while Russians looked with envy from their chaos to the predictabilities and transparencies of the West, meaning Europe, they were beginning to feel real resentment and self-doubt.

Moreover, though by far the greatest numbers of the millions of lives ended by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union were Russian, newly independent neighbours, who had been occupied, starved, deported and

repressed, could not forgo some of the politics of revenge against Russians in their midst or on their borders, darkening further the moods of Russians around kitchen tables.

Terrorist attacks brought the Russian house down.

In 1993, Canada had just opened a consulate-general in St. Petersburg. In the spirit of optimism and generosity of the first years of glasnost, some interna-

tionally civic-minded Canadians had launched premises there before their government: specifically, an Ottawa dry cleaner, and a Montreal bagel shop.

In truth, good dry cleaning and bagels were as welcome as anything else, and there was some modest cash flow in these enterprises, not enough to make them the ventures of a lifetime, but enough to attract the local thugs who had emerged from the

“market” like mushrooms after a heavy rain. Getting shaken down for protection money was pretty scary for Canadian start-up philanthropists, and also made the business ventures seem kind of dumb. When this Canadian ambassador complained to democratic mayor Anatoly Sobchak I was told by him to “see my man Putin.”

So, accompanied by our personal professional consul-general, Lilian

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Thomsen, I went to see freshly minted deputy mayor Vladimir Putin.

Breaking what I expected to be ice, I asked him about his new job and what were his biggest challenges. “Actually getting the job after my opponent pointed out to fellow council members I had come from the KGB” had seemed the most impossible task, he said, but to his own surprise he won in a landslide.

How come? First, he was in foreign intelligence, which wasn't against Russians; second, the KGB had a reputation for competence; and third, the KGB was thought to abhor material corruption in its ranks. He was judged to be just the guy to take on the crime mushrooms in the city's midst.

And he did (though the Canadian cleaner and bagel guys came to their senses and went home). I remember saying to Lilian, “This has got to be the smartest and most impressive official I've met in Russia.”

Now fast-forward several years — there he is, having shot upward in the ranks as a top dog in Moscow, a seemingly apolitical doer of really tough jobs.

When Boris Yeltsin's drinking and aberrant behaviour began to seem like the country's own bad dream/reality, and terrorists blew up apartments and rock concerts, Putin was ready to take them on.

He struck back effectively enough to convince Russians he could restore order more generally by playing Russia's favourite card: he was tough.

“It is safer to be feared than loved,” Machiavelli wrote, but in an odd way, Putin worked on being both.

He wasn't exactly loved, but he was admired — and is. He is the polar opposite of the party and ex-party bosses that Russians had for

generations. Sober, in shape, exuding competence, he has Russian communications skills that are outstanding. Interpretation made Gorbachev's wooden bureaucratise sound profound. It can never capture the quickness, sharpness, irony and nuance of Putin's mental calculations as he speaks, sometimes for hours, with the press.

And some important things got better in Russia, a lot better, in some basic ways. The price of oil helped but Russia is a lot more than a “Saudi Arabia with trees,” for a hundred reasons as old as Pushkin and Gagarin. Laboratories are now back, and professions revalorized. For the first time in generations, Russians' private lives were their own business, and not the state's.

But Putin is not a democrat, by instinct or by practice. He thinks he is because he doesn't actually understand democracy, and judges that since 70 percent of people approve of what he's doing then he's doing well democratically, especially since he's well informed about those in the West whose approval ratings are barely a third of that.

But it's a big problem because he is shutting down civil society, which is what is going to improve the Russian

judicial, education and health systems which remain weak.

It's a problem because at the end of the day, he can't stand dissent. He has packaged his patriotic appeal into something called “sovereign democracy” (Lilia Shevtsova of the Carnegie Moscow Center calls it “imitation democracy”), which marginalizes and represses well-meaning Russians like the Moscow Helsinki Group, who simply want to keep and advance the historic Russian gains in freedom from the totalitarian darkness, a noble struggle that Putin just derides.

And that's how he has begun to behave internationally. At first, he was making Russians feel good about themselves again by standing up for Russia, as Reagan did in 1980 for America, but it's become harsh and belligerent, especially in his own neighbourhood.

Why the tough talk? What have we done to him?

Well, apart from pushing NATO right up against Russia (Would we invite Russia in? And what's NATO for, Russians ask?):

- There's the US “missile shield” placed in Poland and the Czech Republic without any genuine consultation with Russia, as called for by NATO-Russia agreements.
- There's a pipeline the US cares about greatly from the landlocked Caspian oil fields through Georgia to the Black Sea, avoiding Russian transit.
- There were the “colour revolutions” themselves, in Georgia and Ukraine, into which the West poured money to support democrats, but which Russians saw as supporting anti-Russians.
- Every time Russian oil and gas interests tried to invest in downstream economic activity in the West, they were stiffed.
- There was Kosovo.
- and there was *not* a lot of taking Russian views and interests seriously.

Taken individually, each of these can be argued (some better than others), but when they're added up, it looks pretty dark if you're Russian. That's how Putin has played to his home audience while all the time putting something of an economic squeeze on Russian neighbours whenever they adopted anti-Russian rhetoric or yearned too openly for NATO's Western brand and Russia's isolation.

**In one direction, the fight with Georgia was Putin's tough-guy wake-up call to neighbours and to Europeans like Germany and France who know that a strategic relationship with Russia is the basis a successful Europe. As ex-US ambassador James Collins said, "We have probably failed to understand that the Russians are really quite serious when they say, 'We have interests and we are going to defend them.'"**

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But there was a wake-up call right back for Putin. His excessive muscle against Georgia was sternly rapped by Germany chancellor Angela Merkel and French president Nicolas Sarkozy. All the talk about "the Bear being back" made investors nervous and tens of billions of dollars left Russia. The big business oligarchs were not happy when Putin's confrontational style shook up their financial partners and markets. Maybe, they concluded, Putin doesn't really get economics very well. Medvedev began to look a little more real. Maybe, people wondered, power had gone to Putin's head. After eight or so years, it generally happens — everywhere.

There were interesting wake-up calls from Americans, too, the most powerful being an op-ed by former

Republican secretaries of state George Shultz and Henry Kissinger.

"The drift toward confrontation needs to be ended...Isolating Russia is not a sustainable long-range policy (nor for Russia)...Russia needs to understand that the use and threat of force evokes memories...Fairness requires some acknowledgement that the West has not always been sensitive to how the world looks from Moscow."

An open letter co-signed by four recent US ambassadors in Moscow and two Russian ambassadors in Washington also called for a pull-down in rhetoric and a return to negotiating and consultation, which have not been on a very serious track since their high point in 2002.

My talks in Europe show that Sarkozy, Merkel and others are clear-headed about getting back on the track with Russia, but Russia has to show convincingly that its smashing of Georgia was a one-time event, not to be repeated. The frozen conflict has to be worked out by adults.

Hotheads around Russia's rim have to look to objectifying their relations with Russia, also working things out, as Sikorski is doing for Poland and the Ukrainians have begun to do. But this only works if Russia stops viewing each relationship as a zero-sum game of domination. They also have to acknowledge that these countries are going to have much more profound relationships with western European societies with which they want to identify, in part because of democratic affinities and aspirations.

Further NATO expansion is nobody's good answer: the squeeze between NATO and Russia is basically unhealthy.

But the EU can have a hugely positive effect, and it is entirely legitimate for Ukrainian and Georgian leaders to aspire to EU membership. EU officials say Saakashvili basically has had time only for his US contacts and ambitions in recent years.

The Obama administration needs to connect to Russia without indulging its guise of victimhood, or rewarding its sallies into bullying neighbours and acting as spoilers internationally. Medvedev's speech the day after the US election which failed to congratulate or reach out to Obama was graceless in a way which makes one question whether Russians have a valid feel and touch for communication at all.

But in that they resent not being heard, Obama can assure them he takes their views seriously while possibly encouraging the EU' to take the lead in the reconstruction of a more satisfactory two-way relationship with Russia. The US and the EU have a lot to do together in international peace and security and, incidentally, need Russia to get it done.

And lastly, Putin or Medvedev and Russians themselves really do need to get back onto the track to democracy, and Medvedev does say many of the right things about he need to fight corruption, heavy bureaucracy, and build the rule of law. As long-time observer Anders Aslund wrote in short-term despair but longer-term hope over the rollback of rights under Putin, "Russians are now too rich, educated, and open not to preserve democracy."

But let none of us consider that it's easy.

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