

Twenty Five Years after Soviet Union's Collapse the West Lacks Strategic Vision Towards Russia

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Moscow still aims to undermine the very values that hold the West together, but the United States and its allies have not mustered the moral and strategic clarity needed to stave off this threat.

Twenty five years ago I watched the Soviet Union crumble. I was a child, living in Moscow.

The fall was coming and everyone knew it for years. People began to openly criticize the system. No matter the lies and the murders, the Kremlin could no longer hide its failure to deliver the life it promised. Most people around me no longer believed in the Soviet ideology. My own family for its part never did, but what matters is that those who did lost that belief. During the August 1991 putsch a song repeatedly played on the radio with a refrain about a word "that turns a mob into a people -- svoboda." (the Russian word for "liberty" or "freedom").

In the West, by contrast, many continued to believe the Soviet Union remained resilient until the very end. "[H]ardly anyone in the summer of 1991 predicted that the USSR itself would fall apart by the end of the year," [recalled \(http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/21/opinion/sunday/the-soviet-coup-that-failed.html\)](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/21/opinion/sunday/the-soviet-coup-that-failed.html) Hungarian-born British journalist and author Victor Sebestyen in August 2011, "Indeed, some still believe its collapse was not inevitable."

But after collapse, the West again misunderstood -- this time, what it would take for Russia to democratize. The West believed Moscow was no longer a major threat, and eventually turned to other priorities, while problems in Russia festered: hyperinflation, chaos, massive poverty, the rise of powerful oligarchs, and return to personalized power politics in the absence of rule of law. Above all the public yearned for stability, and an obscure former KGB spy Vladimir Putin promised to bring just that -- as long as the people stayed out of politics. It is ironic that, while the Kremlin typically accuses the West of trying to weaken Russia and names NATO among top major threats to the country, the West instead is most guilty of ignoring Russia for years.

Today's Russia exports corruption to the West, and thereby makes the West complicit in perpetuating the system Putin created. The Soviet Union had an ideology, but Putin's is a message of universal cynicism. The Kremlin says that the West is no different from Russia, and that there is no real democracy anywhere. He says there is no truth, and if there is one it doesn't matter anyway. And when the West refuses to take the threat Russian propaganda poses to democracy seriously it endorses this view.

Today's Russia aims to undermine the very values that hold the West together. Soviet and czarist Russia always became more aggressive internationally to compensate for weakness at home. This is precisely what is happening in Russia right now -- from aggression in Ukraine, to enabling an ethnic cleansing in Syria and destabilizing Europe, to Russia's growing alliance with Iran and other dictatorships. Nothing about Putin is fundamentally new -- he is both a product and enabler of problems that have very deep roots.

Russia is slowly deteriorating economically and socially, but it will not collapse anytime soon. And even if it did, the mentality would remain, and the West's problems with Russia would not be over. Putin remains committed to undermining the West, as he was from the very beginning when he came to power. The West lacks moral and strategic clarity towards Russia, and once again fails to underestimate the damage such lack of vision might cause.

Anna Borshchetskaya is the Ira Weiner Fellow at The Washington Institute.



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