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THE SOURCES OF RUSSIAN MISCONDUCT

GIORGI BADRIDZE

163

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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One of the fundamental problems of international relations is that people from the countries whose political system is based on the rule of law and human rights often do not understand the logic of conduct of authoritarian regimes. Incidentally, this is equally the case with the relatively conservative and completely liberal observers. Such misunderstanding has, on many occasions, produced catastrophic outcomes. The most vivid illustration of this is the 1930's policy of appeasement. Despite the facts that Nevil Chamberlain was motivated by the noble goal of averting the war, the wrongful assessment of the Hitler regime brought about the bloodiest war in history.

In this paper, I will attempt to evaluate some aspects of Russian foreign policy which, in my humble opinion, are misunderstood in the West and have resulted in serious complications for Russia's neighbors and the West itself and which continues to represent a clear and present danger. Naturally, I do not intend to diminish the achievements of generations of brilliant diplomats, analysts and political leaders whose wisdom, vision and courage contributed to many triumphs of Western civilization in its struggle with tyrannies. Today, the world needs precisely the type of leaders who would be ready to see the reality that the ideals of human dignity, freedom and democracy are again under threat and that they must be defended.

To address the problem, we need to refer to history as misperceptions and the sometimes actual mystification of Russia and its rulers originates centuries back.

No one should doubt that Russia is the source of one of the world's greatest cultures and, quite possibly, of a distinct civilization: it gave humanity a superior literature, music and scientific achievements. Hence, I would like to emphasize that my criticism of Russia's traditionally authoritarian (and often tyrannical) political system does not diminish my admiration for the greatness of Russian culture.¹ I think it would be odd to like Tsar Nicolas I because of the genius of Pushkin or to be sympathetic toward Stalin because of Bulgakov, Akhmatova and Pasternak. And yet, strangely, both the past and the present know some Western intellectuals and lovers of Russian culture who supported the politics of successive Russian governments – the repressive machine which often destroyed those who created this culture.

As I mentioned above, in the eyes of outside observers, Russia has often been veiled in mystification. For instance, even among Georgian intellectuals who should supposedly know Russia better than others, for a long time there existed the myth of “two Russias” – of a good one and an evil one. The confusion originates in the times of Peter the Great who, undoubtedly, was a great reformer. He transformed Russia’s government that was rooted in the Golden Horde and contained some Byzantine elements into the one based on European models. He shaved beards off the faces of the Russian elite, which was still stuck in the Dark Ages, put them into European clothes and introduced some European architecture. In other words, he made a small part of his country look like Europe. However, his reforms did not touch the most important element of Russia’s political system: like in the times of the Mongol domination, the absolute majority of Russians remained as serfs, in reality – as slaves without rights, the property of their masters well until the 1861 reform of Tsar Alexander II. **From this originates the first misunderstanding – the failure to see that the first victims of Russian tyranny were Russia’s own people who, for generations, were treated like the conqueror treats the conquered.**

Perhaps this is the reason why Peter’s reforms improved the effectiveness of his autocratic rule and the power of the Russian state but changed very little within Russian society. Despite copying European expertise (he brought numerous military and civilian advisors, copied European architecture, etc.), Peter and his successors made sure that Russia remained tightly locked to European ideas and values. For instance, Russia was bypassed by the enlightenment which became a cornerstone of European civilizations. It is noteworthy that Peter’s reign, which is considered as a breakthrough in Russia’s development, did not produce any significant cultural products (except for those directly imported from the West). The reason was simple: slavery is not a good condition for culture to flourish. It took more than a century for the Europeanized Russian elite to start generating the great Russian culture.

So, what was produced was a peculiar mix of eastern tyranny hiding behind a European façade which keeps confusing outside observers to this day. Traditionally, Russians were happy to add to the puzzlement and tried to present the controversial nature of their country as its charm. In

1866, Russian diplomat and poet, Fyodor Tyutchev, described Russia's exceptionalism in the following words:

Russia can't be grasped with the mind,
Or gauged by a common yardstick,
She is of a special kind -
One can only believe in Russia. *

Even Winston Churchill could not resist the temptation of the mystification when he described Russia as "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." Yet, despite embracing an opportunity of an alliance with Stalin's regime against the Nazi Germany in 1941, Churchill realized the dangers of the Soviet advance into the heart of Europe earlier than most. Like George Kennan's "Long Telegram," Winston Churchill's historic Fulton speech made him a prophet of the Cold War.

As I mentioned above, misconceptions and confusion about Russia are sources of various problems. Believing that the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the Western democracies was caused by the incompatibility of their respective ideologies, the West hoped that the new Russia would become a democratic partner after the demise of Communism. Even those who doubted Russia's ability to build a genuine democracy never contemplated the possibility of Russia returning to confrontation with the West. While it is natural that the West did not want a new conflict, it was a mistake to think that conflict could be averted by unilaterally refusing to participate in it and by making gestures of good will, periodical resets and cordial dialogue.

There still is a school of thought in the West which blames the deterioration of relations with Russia after the end of the Cold War on their own actions. They often cite the expansion of NATO and the "encirclement of Russia" as the cause of the Kremlin's "suspicion and justified reaction." Such an argument would have been explicable (even though it was clearly erroneous) if no historical experience of the not-so-distant past was abundantly available (which will be discussed in greater detail below)

* Translated by G. Badridze. Original: Умом Россию не понять
Аршином общим не измерить
У ней особенная стать
В Россию можно только верить.

and the existence of a political system which has been created (or rather restored) by President Putin whose stability depends directly on the concentration of absolute power in the Kremlin. Putin has been justifying his monopoly on power by the needs of restoring Russia's greatness and defending Russia from foreign enemies. After years of the misuse of power, enriching himself and his cronies, it is the illusion of greatness and the fight against imaginary enemies that sustain his regime.

Let us examine how Russia was perceived in both the more distant and the recent past and what lessons could be drawn from this experience by modern political leaders. I have mentioned the difficulties that Western observers regularly face when trying to understand what moves the Kremlin's behavior but at every stage of history, there have been people who were capable of discerning the true elements of the Russian political system from superficial effects.

In this regard, the events of 1762 are quite telling. This is when Peter III was overthrown and later killed by conspirators for withdrawing Russia from the Seven-Year-War. In the words of his wife and eventual usurper, Catherine II, peace with Prussia represented the danger to the state and "[the] threat to Our Greek Orthodox dogma. ...Russian glory, brought to its height by the victory of arms and by much bloodshed, has now fallen into complete enslavement to the enemy by the conclusion of peace."² What added a slight irony to Catherine's statement is that unlike Peter, who had some Russian blood (he was the grandson of Peter the Great but born to a German father and raised in Germany), she was one hundred percent German. Despite his short reign, Peter is a significant figure in Russian history whose fate reveals a recurring theme in Russian politics: apart from making peace with Prussia, his extreme unpopularity and his eventual demise was caused by his attempts to pursue some liberal reforms. Peter tried to modernize the Church, the armed forces and the system of serfdom. Such a fate was more or less shared by all future Russian reformers from Alexander II to Gorbachev and Yeltsin. All three were not without controversy, particularly Yeltsin, whose most important legacy is not a reform but Putin as his handpicked successor. The fact remains that to this day, the majority of Russians have greater respect for Stalin and other tyrants than for any of the reformers.

The year 1762 was also interesting because long before George Kennan's "Long Telegram," it was the year when Russia's political and socio-economic systems were analyzed and directly connected to its expansionist policies. In a few months after the deposing of Peter III, Laurent Berenger, the French Charge d'Affairs in St. Petersburg, described Russia for his superiors in Paris and made prophetic conclusions:

"If Russian ambition is not checked, its effects may be fatal to the neighboring powers. I know that the degree of Russian power should not be measured by its expanse and that its domination of eastern territories is more an imposing phantom than a source of real strength. But I also suspect that a nation which is capable of braving the intemperance of the seasons better than any other because of the rigor of its native climate, which is accustomed to servile obedience, which needs little to live and is, therefore, able to wage war at little cost ... such a nation, I suspect, is likely to conquer."³

This prediction was vindicated soon enough, something that Georgians experienced firsthand: against the main stipulations of the Georgievsk Treaty of 1783 which established an alliance between the Russian Empire and the Kingdom of Kartli and Kakheti (eastern Georgian kingdom), Russia first let Agha-Mohamed-Khan, the Shah of Persia, to raid Georgia and destroy its capital city of Tbilisi in 1795 and from 1801, embarked on the systematic destruction of all forms of Georgian statehood, self-governance, the independence of its ancient church and the royal dynasty whose members were forcibly exiled to different parts of the empire. The treatment of the widow of Giorgi XII, Queen Mariam, by the Russians could be a plot for a good drama novel.⁴ In the end, even the word "Georgia" was wiped off of the map. Typically, Russian historiography, which has always been in the service of the state propaganda, offers its own version of the events: it claims the treaty had not been violated but if it were, it was King Irakli II to blame and that the Georgians themselves asked for the annexation, etc.

Laurent Berger's prophecy proved ominous for Russia's other neighbors, too. In 1772, Poland was divided among Russia, Prussia, and Austria for the first time. In 1939, it was portioned for the last time by Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany.

Throughout the XIX century, Russia occasionally entered into an alliance with some of the European states, usually against the other ones. For instance, Alexander I switched his relationships with Napoleon Bonaparte between an alliance, neutrality and the participation in anti-French coalitions four times. After the defeat of Napoleon, Austria and Prussia welcomed Russia into the role of a European gendarme and co-founded the Holy Alliance. Its main purpose was to preserve the status quo and prevent liberal revolutionary processes on the continent. In World War I, Russia found itself in the opposite camp – in the Entente with France and Great Britain against its former allies.

The West experienced a real shock when, at the peak of its might, the Russian empire imploded. This happened during WWI when Russia had been embarked on the fulfilment of its boldest historic ambition: taking control of Istanbul (Constantinople – the Second Rome) along with the straits leading to the Mediterranean. Despite the consent from its new allies – France and Britain (which had been trying to prevent Russia's access to the Mediterranean for most of the XIX century), the empire crumbled from within and lost a large part of its European possessions (some temporarily and some for good). The cause was almost identical to what happened later to the Soviet empire: **Russia's backward socio-economic system did not withstand the weight of its ideologically motivated geopolitical ambitions.**

After a short-lived resistance, the West reconciled itself with the existence of the Bolshevik dictatorship in Russia. Soon, despite adopting a new ideology which was radically distinct from the mysticism of the "Third Rome" concept, the new Russia resumed the expansionist policies of the Tsarist regime. Despite their internationalist slogans, the Bolsheviks made the restoration of the control of the lost territories their first priority. They failed to reconquer Poland in 1920 (until 1939) but successfully invaded and annexed the Democratic Republic of Georgia and the rest of the Caucasus by 1922.

Later events proved that the Soviet foreign policy remained consistent with the goals and methods of the Russian empire which provokes a question as to why the West was so convinced that Russia's conduct would radically

change after the defeat of the Communist ideology. Perhaps because of such futile expectations of the 1990s and the early 2000s, the pre-war and early Cold War attitudes toward Russia deserve a fresh look as many avoidable mistakes of that era are being repeated time and time again with a peculiar stubbornness. I must emphasize that even the greatest political leaders who have changed the course of history for the better have occasionally made grave mistakes in their perceptions of Russia. One of the greatest American Presidents, Franklin D. Roosevelt, is one such leader. It is hard to see how and why did Roosevelt and members of his administration developed an inexplicable affinity toward Stalin while having many misgivings about their closest ally, Winston Churchill.

Roosevelt was convinced that the US could continue strategic cooperation with the Soviet Union after the war and considered the system of the “Four Policemen”⁵ as the basis of the new world order in which, paradoxically, he trusted the USSR more than other partners.

Such an attitude did not only reflect just Roosevelt’s personal whim. His administration included some radical supporters of the Soviet Union, among whom the US Ambassador to Moscow, Joseph E. Davies, deserves special mention. Davies, who served in the USSR right during the peak of Stalin’s mass repressions in 1936-1938, was later charged with the task of liaising with the allies as Roosevelt’s special representative during the war.

Despite the fact that one of the largest exterminations of its own people by a state took place right before his eyes, Davies became Stalin’s passionate fan. In 1941, he published his autobiographical book, *Mission to Moscow*, in which he claimed that Stalin was misunderstood by the West and wrongfully portrayed as a villain. Moreover, in his book, he justified not just Stalin’s political goals but also his bloody terror, openly claiming that millions of victims of the 1937 repressions had deserved their fate. Curiously, the book gained an astonishing success, turned into a bestseller and was made into a movie in 1943 by Warner Brothers.⁶ Although ambassadors are often known for their enchantment of a foreign country, the case of Joseph Davies is still extraordinary. From US ambassador, he actually turned into Stalin’s ambassador as he actively cultivated false perceptions about the Soviet regime.

This may not be directly connected to the topic of this paper but it's worth mentioning that Joseph E. Davies's name has resurfaced in recent years for a quite peculiar reason. In 2017, the *New York Times* accused then President Donald Trump of plagiarizing Joseph Davies's personal coat of arms which the latter commissioned in 1939. The only difference between the two is that Mr. Trump replaced Davies's motto "Integras" with "Trump."⁷

The habit of some Western politicians and analysts to explain or even justify Russian aggression by their own action is also not new. When Putin's turning of Russia toward hardcore authoritarianism and increasingly aggressive foreign policy became hard to ignore, quite a few voices in the US and Europe started to claim that it was the West which alarmed and humiliated Russia by the enlargement of NATO and forced it to take active measures in order to protect its security and economic interests. For instance, such people in Germany are referred to as "Die Russland-Versteher" – "those who understand Russia." The irony is that these are usually the people who have either very little understanding of Russia or who concisely promote the Kremlin's interests in contravention of the interests and values of their own countries.

Such attitudes have their history and they, too, originate in the Roosevelt administration. The recognition of the fact that the Soviet Union not only was not inclined to continue the war-time alliance but considered the US as a strategic foe proved painful for many US leaders. Why the Soviet actions surprised the US is surprising in itself as the Soviet authorities were always categorical about hostility toward the Western democracies which was based on irreconcilable ideological considerations and geopolitical interests. This should have been clear back in 1939: when it came to choosing, Stalin made a deal with the Nazis instead of the Western democracies and was forced into the alliance with the West only after Hitler violated the Non-aggression Pact.

Despite this, Die Russland-Versteher of the time tried to justify the post-war Soviet hostility not by the nature of the Bolshevik regime or the age-old Russian expansionism, but by the alleged wrongdoings by the US and the West. Many of them sincerely could not understand why the Soviet Union would not want to become a co-founder of the new harmonious world order in equal partnership with the United States, the world's strongest

nation. Roosevelt's Vice President and later one-time Agriculture Secretary in Truman's administration, Henry Wallace, was the loudest among such voices. Wallace and his followers claimed that Stalin's mistrust and hostility toward the United States was provoked by the US itself when it failed to explain its peaceful intentions.⁸

Another motive born in the early days of the Cold War, whose echoes can be heard today, sounded like this: "Alright, Russia wants its sphere of influence (it really meant the subjugation of the liberated peoples of Europe) but we are not any better." The same Henry Wallace claimed that America had no moral right of implementing the policy of containment of the USSR because he believed in the moral equivalence between the West and the Soviet Union. He thought that the Soviet sphere of influence in Central Europe was justified and that American resistance (the protection of the freedom of the European peoples) only aggravated bilateral relations.⁹

Wallace's proposed solutions can also be recognized in the proposals of some modern-day politicians and analysts: he thought that the Cold War could be ended by America's unilateral withdrawal from it. Whereas Wallace and his supporters could plead their inexperience in their defense; namely, that they could not foresee what would be a part of the Soviet sphere bring to the peoples left on the other side of the Iron Curtain, his contemporary followers must know that there is no moral equivalence between the US and Russian actions. They can see a clear difference between what was produced by their respective spheres of influence: in the Russian sphere, one could find North Korea and, at best, the DDR, while in the American sphere - South Korea and West Germany.

Luckily, soon after the end of the war, two crucial factors concurred: the American Charge d'Affairs in Moscow, George Kennan, offered his superiors a deep and comprehensive analysis of the Soviet political system and how it determines the country's foreign policy which since then is known as the "Long Telegram." The other factor was that despite the existence of people like Henry Wallace in the administration, the new president had enough wisdom and courage to put aside the self-destructive illusions and offer the free world American support and leadership. In his book on George Kennan, John Gaddis says that his analysis made things much clearer: "It

was the geopolitical equivalent of a medical X-ray, penetrating beneath alarming symptoms to yield at first clarity, then comprehension, and finally by implication a course of treatment.”¹⁰

Amid the Western euphoria of the early 1990s, when the world was still adjusting to the post-Cold War realities, there were some sober voices that warned against blind faith in Russia’s claims of democratization and Western tendencies of ignoring (or even condoning) Russian mischief against its neighbors. Curiously, the clearest of such warnings came not from idealist opinion leaders but from one of the staunchest realists, Henry Kissinger, who understood that policy that betrays democratic principles based on miscalculation is a bad *Realpolitik*: “Integrating Russia into the international system is a key task of the emerging international order,” he wrote in his *Diplomacy* in 1994. “...Generous economic assistance and technical advice is necessary to ease the pains of transition... . **But Russian reform will be impeded, not helped, by turning a blind eye to the reappearance of historic Russian imperial pretensions. The independence of the new republics, recognized after all by the United Nations, must not be tacitly downgraded by acquiescence in Russian military moves on their soil.**”¹¹ Sadly, his warning has proven prophetic.

Today, the United States and Europe have a multitude of brilliant analysts who have deep knowledge about the political system centered around the Kremlin. It is a system which always excluded the participation of its citizens. In this upside-down system, the Kremlin determines the political agenda and through its powerful propaganda machine manufactures the “will of the people”. Therefore, it is often hard to understand the logic of the Russian leaders’ conduct, particularly when it is detrimental to the long-term national interests of Russia. Precisely, this is the Russian paradox: whenever their leaders face the choice between the interest of the country and their own interest, they regularly choose the latter and get away with it. The effects of such a political system can be seen by anyone who travels in Russia beyond the Moscow or St. Petersburg city limits.

Here, I would like to share a few observations and recommendations:

- Russia is different and understanding the logic of its conduct is possible only when one considers its political system as the main determinant.

In this system, the monopolization and preservation of power is the Kremlin's top priority.

- Putin and his regime, which have not distinguished themselves with good governance and economic management skills, cannot gain and preserve power through democratic process, therefore, they have substituted the improvement of the quality of life of their citizens with the imperial project (of making Russia great again) and have shifted their attention to the external enemies (from poverty and rampant corruption).
- Hence, the bullying of neighbors and confrontation with the West (or at least the creation of the perception of it among its populace) is now Russia's standard mode of action. Such a strategy has so far proven effective as the majority of Russians approve of Putin's hybrid war and despite falling popularity, his grip on power is solid.
- Therefore, any attempts of "withdrawing from the confrontation by a unilateral decision," resets, any other unilateral gestures of good will are futile: the Kremlin will take them as signs of weakness and accept the accommodation of its whims as a given and find new pretexts for confrontation.
- The West must recognize that Russia's main soft power is the corruption which it has been actively exporting. Western politicians known for lobbying the Kremlin's interests in contravention of the interests of their own countries and European/Western solidarity regularly end up on the Russian government payroll (boards of Gazprom, Rosneft, etc.).
- The declaration of the prevention of its neighbors' membership in NATO as a matter of national security exposes Putin's true intentions: he knows well that NATO would not (and could not) ever attack Russia, Russia has deep economic ties with many NATO members, Russia's most stable relations are with the neighbors which have already joined NATO and its worst relations are with those which are not protected by the alliance. The conclusion is clear: NATO does not represent a threat to Russian security, it is rather viewed as a detrimental factor as NATO would prevent Russia from using force against its neighbors in the pursuit of its imperial project.

- Through unity, the West has achieved unprecedented success in human history. Today, the breakup of the West and the retreat from its principles represents the greatest threat not just to its prosperity but to its security.
- I understand why the US is concerned with the growing power of China; however, the appeasement of Russia in order to prevent a strategic Sino-Russian alliance is doomed to failure. Putin's first instinct would be the demand to recognize a Russian sphere of influence (which would sound a death knell for young democracies like Georgia) and produce a much worse outcome than an unlikely alliance between Russia and China.¹²
- Resisting Russia's attempts to destroy the rules-based international order does not mean the inevitability of full-scale confrontation. On the contrary, it is the display of weakness which is more likely to provoke Russia's aggressive behavior.
- It is time for the Western strategy to be founded on its vast experience and realism and, most importantly, on the loyalty to its core principles and values which have never been under such threat since the end of the Cold War.

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4. When Russian general Lazarev tried to physically drag the Queen out of her bedroom (to send her to exile in Russia), she stabbed and killed him. Lithograph by the French artist Charles-Michel Geoffroy: <https://grafika.ru/iblock/11c/11c9b9fa12534e9b4ed0196743a9cc4c.jpg>
5. According to Roosevelt’s plan, the new world order was to be based on the cooperation among the USA, the UK, France, the USSR and China.
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8. Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, Simon & Shuster, NY, 1994, p. 447.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 464.
10. John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life*, Penguin Books, 2012.
11. Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, Simon & Shuster, NY, 1994, p. 818.
12. China is the world’s most populous country with the fastest growing economy. It borders vast expanses of Russia’s sparsely populated and resource-rich Far East and Siberia. If Russia must fear someone, it is not the democratic West.