

How the West Encouraged Putin's Aggression

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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I ended my previous column in this newspaper with these words: "I am afraid that when we wake up tomorrow, we will find ourselves in different country. I even know the name of that country: the Soviet Union." But despite my pessimism, I never dreamed it would happen this quickly. The current pro-Kremlin rallies with their chants of "We believe Putin" are even more alarming than the Soviet-era slogan of "We support and approve of the Communist Party's policies."

The weakness that the U.S. and other developed democracies have shown in standing up to Putin over the years has led in no small part to the rise of his aggressive policies.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claims that Crimea is no less important for Russia than the Falklands are for Britain. However, he conveniently overlooks the fact that the Falkland Islands belonged to Britain before the Falkland war started, while Crimea had already been a part of Ukraine for 20 years before Russia made its first moves over the past three weeks to incorporate the peninsula into Russia. Putin's actions in Crimea signify the resurrection of Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev's "limited sovereignty" doctrine.

When Russian leaders begin speaking of "protecting the rights of our countrymen" in other lands, it calls to mind not the Soviet government, but the most frightening totalitarian state of the 20th century. In the span of a few short weeks, Russia has managed to restore an "Iron Curtain" and launch a military confrontation reminiscent of the worst years of the Cold War.

More than half a century ago, U.S. politicians and political scientists vehemently debated the question, "Who lost China?" I am certain that the U.S. and European countries will soon be asking themselves, "Who lost Russia?" How did Russia, after almost a quarter of a century as a member of the world's democratic community, revert into a totalitarian state intent on biting off sizable chunks of a neighboring state in the name of what its leader refers to as historical justice?

Of course, the main responsibility lies with the citizens of Russia. Russians were not prepared to take advantage of the freedom we unexpectedly gained in 1991. The liberals who took the reins of government after the fall of the Soviet Union were unable to resist the lure of getting rich quickly by corrupt methods. This created a certain antipathy for "democracy" among most Russians and prompted them to abandon it in favor of Vladimir Putin and his Orthodox chekists.

Putin's regime was smart enough to share a fraction of the country's enormous oil wealth with the population under its control, thereby procuring the unshakeable loyalty of a significant portion of the population.

But the weakness that the U.S. and other developed democracies have shown in standing up to Putin over the years has led in no small part to the rise of his aggressive policies.

Strategists and ideologues have been debating for 15 years whether or not the West could overlook Putin's exotic views — namely, that Russia is engaged in a permanent struggle with the West and that the West is responsible for all of Russia's problems.

This debate prevented Washington from reacting to Putin's declaration that the terrorists behind the 2004 Beslan school siege were backed by "certain forces" that do not like the fact that Russia has a nuclear arsenal. What exactly did Putin mean by "certain forces"? Difficult to say for sure, but many observers interpreted it as meaning Western powers.

Meanwhile, Western strategists focused on a policy of constructive engagement with Russia. They turned a blind eye to the fact that Russia is led by people with 19th-century worldviews, instead hoping to engage Moscow in projects of mutual importance in which some common interest was served — for example, a transit corridor from Afghanistan and the facilitation of multilateral talks with Iran and North Korea.

In pursuing this policy of engagement the West hoped that, as that cooperation progressed,

the Russian leadership would gradually become more "civilized." This policy was obviously a failure. Despite its involvement in these projects, the Kremlin did not become more civilized, but retained its 19th-century mindset.

The ideologues — who were previously outnumbered by the strategists, but will likely grow from here — argued all along that long-term cooperation would not work without paying attention to the serious values gap between Moscow and the West.

They contend that if one side believes in free and fair elections, the rule of law and political and personal freedoms for its citizens, but the other side believes that all of these are just tools for manipulating the population, then no long-term partnership is possible in any form.

If one side views the relationship as a constant struggle for superiority, it will use any ostensible cooperation as an opportunity to weaken the enemy's military might and undermine the resolve of its population.

Instead of trying to engage Russia, the West should have focused on explaining to the Kremlin that civilized states should not violate international law. Unfortunately, the same Western states that so loudly tout their supposed observance of the rule of law at times prefer circumventing those rules for the sake of political expediency.

Recall how Washington struggled to make its case for the invasion of Iraq, or how the West granted independence to Kosovo in violation of international law. As Moscow annexes Crimea, it happily reminds the West of those precedents.

It is this behavior that reinforces Putin's conviction that the world is ruled by force, not by law.

Admittedly, this analysis lacks practical value when Putin has already crossed every imaginable "red line." At this point, there is nothing left to do but focus on the future, be it in the short or long-term. The only way the West can hope to reestablish normal relations with Russia is by itself adhering to the lofty principles it proclaims.

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