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# Russians' Own Iron Curtain – in Their Heads

By Georgy Bovt

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The Ukrainian crisis is far from over and might yet get worse. At times, it seems as if this is only a bad dream, but when we wake up, we realize that it is real.

But things will never be the same again. Russia's relationship with the West has been destroyed for a long time. Most likely, normal relations will not be restored until a new generation of leaders comes to power in Russia and the West.

The West prefers to speak to Russia via sanctions and "teach it a hard lesson." But even the harshest sanctions against Russia will not likely cause the economy or the regime to collapse. In fact, sanctions have rarely proven effective against another country. They generally cause more hardship for ordinary citizens than the ruling elite.

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Many hawks in the West sense the same old drumbeat of the Cold War in the current confrontation with Moscow. Similarly, old Cold War-era hawks — as well as younger versions of them — have reappeared everywhere in Russia as well. That Cold War-era generation of Russians is familiar with living in state of confrontation with the West and also in isolation from the rest of the world.

Russians have never been citizens of the world. Efforts by a broader cross-section of Russian society to integrate with European society began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Russian Empire was poised to finally end its provincialism and shake free of its status as the backwoods of Europe. But the thin layer of pro-Western Russians who had been nurtured since the time of Peter the Great were all but eliminated or driven out of the country after the Bolshevik Revolution. After the revolution, the Bolsheviks tried to develop ties with Europe by organizing a global proletariat revolution, but those efforts failed. In its place, the Soviet Union drove itself into isolation from the outside world.

About 80 percent of Russians have never left the Commonwealth of Independent States and have no plans to do so. Of those who have visited the West, many were disappointed to learn that it was not the "heaven on Earth" they had expected. Life there can be difficult and stressful, and the laws are unfamiliar. Many Russians find themselves asking, "Why fill your head with strange rules and regulations and struggle to learn a foreign language?" Only about 5 percent of Russians speak a foreign language at conversational level. The authorities have already prohibited the siloviki from traveling abroad on the far-fetched pretext that 150 different countries might arrest them and extradite them to the U.S. If you add the families members of those siloviki, this means that about 5 million Russians are essentially banned from traveling abroad.

The West will have little luck frightening Russians with the prospect of a new Iron Curtain because Russians themselves already built one long ago — in their minds. And that barrier is higher and more formidable than any physical Berlin Wall. Any information you want is now available on the Internet, but few have the desire and time to search for it, analyze it and compare it to the official propaganda. There is lots of talk that the authorities are planning to build a "cyber firewall" to isolate the Russian Internet as much as possible from "corrupting influences" both within Russia and abroad — including, perhaps, banning Facebook, Twitter and Google from Russia by year's end. But these steps may not be necessary. After all, the widespread anti-Americanism among Russians today arose in an environment in which information offering an alternative to the official propaganda was freely available on the Internet.

Most Russians are comfortable with the limited information they receive from official sources, just as they are comfortable with the growing provincialism of the country as a whole. Everything is simpler that way. What does make them uncomfortable is differing opinions that challenge their provincial world view. And that explains the increasingly hostile attitude toward the West. Never having seen the West, with its more prosperous and democratic societies, those who promote Russia's isolation are attempting to avoid

the temptations and feelings of inferiority. That is an infantile reaction, but it is real, giving state propaganda a free hand to manipulate Russians pretty much as it wants.

It is not even necessary anymore to require exit visas to leave the country, as the Soviet Union did. Most Russians don't want to leave, are scared off by the challenges of starting a new life from scratch in a foreign country, or simply do have no financial means to leave. As for the more innovative, creative and independent-thinking Russians, the authorities have never regretted their emigration from Russia. Recall when prominent economist Sergei Guriev left Russia a year ago. In response, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, "If he wants to leave Russia, let him leave."

But this increasing brain drain only serves to widen Russia's gap with the developed world in the areas of education, technology, information and culture. All of this, coupled with the loss of technological competence, make Russia and individual Russians less competitive and adapted to the modern world.

This new isolation will lead to the same results as the Soviet-era isolation did. Any system that so severely limits communication with the outside world, takes pride in its "unique" form of provincialism and lacks a free exchange of ideas, information, technology and scientific research is doomed to fail. But like the passengers on a boat approaching a waterfall, the overwhelming majority of Russians living in this system will remain blissfully unaware of what is happening and, right up until the very last minute, where they are headed.

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*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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