

Russia Needs the EU's Help, Not Its Sanctions

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The West reacted sharply against Russia over the downing of the Malaysian Boeing. That is justified: Even if investigators conclude that separatists in Donetsk are not to blame, Russia helped create a situation in which such a thing is even possible in southern and eastern Ukraine. However, threatening and isolating Russia is unlikely to improve the problem. Like a teenager exhibiting aggressive behavior, Russia needs the help of a very patient and high-minded adult — that is, if any exist.

One of my Ukrainian colleagues who supported the Maidan from the beginning and who was outraged by Russia's actions in the Crimea and the south and east of his country, once sent me a heartfelt note reading: "No one cares what internal issues Russia is going through. They should sort out their problems themselves."

I understand his feelings. I am one of those few Russians who believe that this country's behavior toward Ukraine in recent months has been completely unacceptable, that it has destroyed whatever international authority Russia once held and has irreparably undermined

the credibility of Russian leaders in the eyes of the international community. Indeed, it has led people to stop trying to understand what is happening in this country. Now the world has almost officially concluded that Russians are monsters.

This loss of interest in Russia could be even worse for ordinary Russians than new economic sanctions, or even the tumult that will inevitably result in a society whose imperial ambitions have been thwarted.

But the most frightening possible result of sanctions is that the West could nail shut the "window to Europe" that Russia has been laboring hard to develop ever since Peter the Great first built it at tremendous cost in the early 18th century.

Way back in 2006, a book called "The Day of the Oprichniki" came out, authored by modern Russian writer Vladimir Sorokin. Through some mystical and visionary inspiration, Sorokin created what could serve as a "road map" for today's Russian leaders.

The book describes a Russia walled off from the West, in which almost everyone speaks Chinese and where the populace happily reproduces some tawdry idea of the political, social and cultural life of Russia prior to Peter the Great.

Of course, it is a monarchy re-established and ruled by a certain Tsar Nikolai Platanovich, an allusion to former Federal Security Service director and current Security Council secretary Nikolai Patrushev. While watching a public flogging in a central Moscow square, subjects of the heirs to Platanovich recall with pleasure how they made bonfires to burn banned books and how they themselves burned their travel passports on Red Square as a demonstration of loyalty.

In the year the book was released it seemed like just a bit of outlandish fun, although it had a large print run in part because the pro-Kremlin youth group Nashi staged a public book burning of Sorokin's allegedly "immoral" works. Just the same, nobody imagined that the phantasmagoric situation Sorokin described might become reality only a few years later. Now it seems that Russia is racing at full speed toward the world of Sorokin's oprichniki.

Russia's isolation from the West could make that world a reality. Many Russians have a passion for reviving the past as is seen, for example, by the way in which Russian historical re-enactors are fighting in the south and east of Ukraine. They represent a tiny fraction of the overall population, just a handful of marginal figures who dream of restoring Russia's lost imperial power and who have been waiting for their chance ever since the Soviet Union collapsed.

They and their war are such that, after shooting down a foreign passenger plane while hunting for what they believed was a permissible military target, their first thought was to say that the plane was carrying spies, a deluded attempt to make the tragedy fit into their homemade myth.

And then they hurriedly erased all mention of the episode from social networks. It might very well turn out that they are the killers, and if so, they should be punished. But either way, they will not stop being little boys with the mentality of the late Soviet period, boys who were born to rule the Soviet empire but who arrived on the scene just in time to see it collapse. They are

boys who haven't yet stopped playing their historical re-enactment game.

Of course, theirs is a deviant world view. It is impossible to condone their actions in any way, especially now that their games have turned into a bloody mess. But only people who genuinely lack concern for what is happening inside Russia can label them as the vanguard of the "evil empire," as almost all of the world's newspapers wrote on the morning after the Boeing disaster.

Here in Russia, there is no "evil empire," just a huge and doubly bitter disappointment.

It stems first from the collapse of the Soviet Union, a government which, despite all the crimes of the Bolshevik leadership, enabled several generations of Soviet citizens to feel that they were participating in a grand social and humanitarian project. And second, it results from the fact that, after the Soviet collapse, Europe and the U.S. did not admit Russia into their clubby relationship.

But the majority of Russians do not dream of joining the separatists' ranks. In fact, the several hundred or even thousands of Russians who really are there to fight for their strange ideas are, unfortunately, almost everyone in this vast country that is even capable of taking some form of political action.

That explains why the separatist militias increasingly include individuals who took part in the mass protests on Bolotnaya Ploshchad in 2011, people generally considered to be more liberals than imperialists or nationalists. As for the overwhelming majority of Russia's more than 100 million people, they could not care less and have no plans to go anywhere at all.

Western newspapers probably have some intellectual justification for rhetorically equating the words "Russia" and "killers." And even if the separatists' guilt in the tragedy is never conclusively proven, a certain logical connection becomes evident. After all, the Russian leadership did its fair share to make such an accident possible and the Russian people chose these leaders. The people must ultimately answer for their officials' actions, even if they themselves do not really care about what happens in Ukraine.

Unfortunately, very few people in Russia today are prepared to see or understand that connection. As a result, the blame from the West will only offend them, increase tensions and bring "The Day of the Oprichniki" even closer to realization.

In order to clarify this connection, a high-minded adult is needed, someone who will not pressure this already hysterical youth but instead will make an effort to truly understand what is happening inside him, to find a way to reach him, and finally, to speak to him as an equal, without fear but also without arrogance.

Then it just might become clear that the West also carries some blame for the current crisis in Ukraine because, frankly, it never was interested in what was troubling Russia.

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