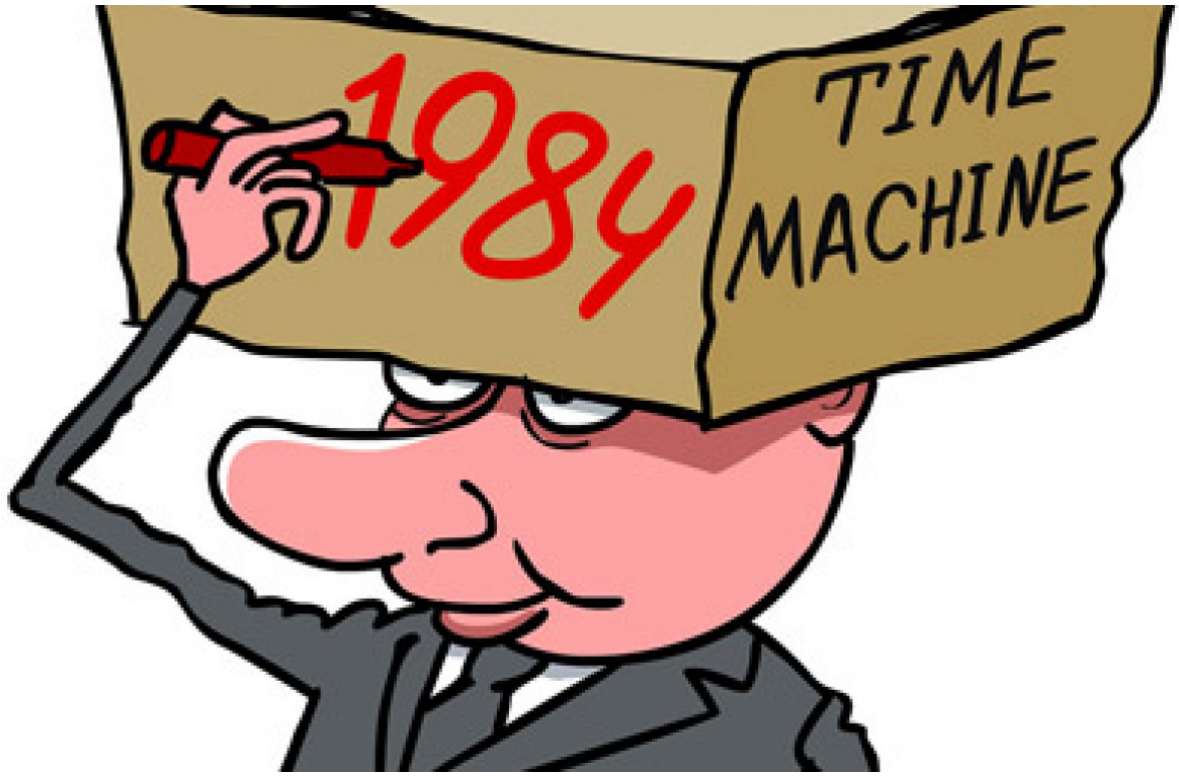
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Putin Is Living in the Past

By Ivan Sukhov

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On Oct. 28, Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulated Ukrainian World War II veterans on the 70th anniversary of the liberation of their country from the Nazis. Putin called on them to remember how they had fought shoulder to shoulder with the Russians against the Nazis.

At about the same time, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko also congratulated his countrymen, but he used the occasion to assure them of victory in the new patriotic war of 2014 in which the aggressor comes not from the west, but from the east.

The media did not report on how those few surviving Ukrainian World War II veterans responded to the words of the two presidents, but it was clear that the leaders used language that precludes mutual understanding.

Just as this year's Valdai Club was held not in Valdai, but in faraway Sochi, so too was Putin's speech far from any connection with the rest of the world. Forum participants politely listened to Putin make a series of scathing remarks about the sinister role the U.S. plays in the modern world and how the Russian bear will not cede a single inch of its taiga.

Forum participants departed in a state of puzzlement while pro-Kremlin Russian commentators resorted to euphemisms in order to retell and interpret the president's caustic comments. The main idea of those proceedings is that, in delivering the most fervently anti-U.S. speech of his 15 years in power, Putin has launched a geopolitical counteroffensive wherein Russia is set to reconsider the results of the Cold War.

It was especially interesting to listen to Putin's Valdai speech in Kiev where elections for the Ukrainian parliament were held on Oct. 26. On the very next day, persistent rumors began circulating that troops had begun regrouping in Donetsk, an area in eastern Ukraine controlled by pro-Russian separatists.

That news came on the back of earlier reports that Poland had decided to concentrate its military forces on its eastern border with Ukraine. The combined effect was to heighten fears in Kiev that, in "reconsidering" the results of the Cold War fully 25 years after it has ended, Russia might renew hostilities in the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine.

Russia can deny involvement in the military confrontation in eastern Ukraine as much as it wants, but Ukraine is undeniably locked in a war: The signs of it are everywhere in Kiev. This is a war for independence, for Ukraine's right to exist as a sovereign state and to make key foreign-policy decisions without interference from Moscow. And it is crystal clear whom Ukraine is fighting: It is at war with Russia — however painful that is for people who never before imagined that Russia and Ukraine could find themselves in an open military conflict.

At the same time, Russian journalists encounter no personal aggression while working in Ukraine. Only the rare local politician refuses to speak to Russian reporters.

And in place of perfectly understandable aggression, Russian journalists encounter only gentle Ukrainian hospitality along with a sizable share of condescending sympathy.

It is as if they want to tell us, "We will stay here, where we have taken the responsibility for our future into our own hands, whereas you will fly home to Russia's stifling political atmosphere, to a country that futilely reconsiders the outcome of the Cold War and the people are caught up in a mass euphoria over the bloodshed in the Donbass."

Honestly, in such a situation I feel the desire to apologize for Russia's politicians who, in true Orwellian dystopian spirit, have managed to convince their citizens that war is peace and that two neighboring "fraternal" peoples with close historical ties are actually enemies.

I would like to emphasize that to understand what a Russian journalist feels working in Kiev today one must imagine what a German journalist would have felt if in, say, 1943, he traveled to an unoccupied part of the Soviet Union and tried to arrange a meeting with a couple of members of the State Defense Committee. The first refuses to meet him out of principle, and the second, shrugging his shoulders, reluctantly agrees to give the poor German an interview.

Of course, that is an absurd scenario because a German correspondent would never have received such an assignment, would never have crossed the front lines and would have been summarily shot had he done so.

And although Poroshenko did draw a parallel between current events and World War II, the times have definitely changed. Wars no longer involve every single citizen as they did 80 years ago, the international community does not resolve political questions by redrawing borders, and Russian journalists embrace their Ukrainian colleagues before returning home with promises to stay in touch through social networks.

Unfortunately, Putin's Valdai speech indicates that, contrary to common sense, he continues to live in the past. What's more, he is at least 20 years late if he plans to reconsider the world order that emerged after the Cold War.

Many commentators have already pointed out that Putin does have some justification for his anger and resentment toward the West, but the problem is that he attempts to explain his motives using an outdated language that nobody but Russians and the citizens of a few other countries can even understand anymore.

Emotions aside, Russia's situation was not so bad in the 20 years since the Cold War. Moscow had the freedom to act as it pleased, and it used that freedom to spoil relations with all of the key former Soviet republics.

Even such politically slow-moving countries as Belarus and Kazakhstan have managed to learn a new political vocabulary in those two decades, whereas Russia continues speaking to them in an obsolete tongue, employing phonetics reminiscent of clanking tank treads and punctuation like the trigger click of a Kalashnikov.

In effect, Putin is proposing that the world join him in speaking a language that has already gone out of use. However, nobody but a few clever Kremlin loyalists has shown any interest in the idea. Worse, Putin's geopolitical counteroffensive has not helped the ruble or oil prices, both of which continue their steady decline.

It seems that global markets ultimately have more power than bombastic public statements about heavy artillery or about trucks with 'humanitarian aid' sent by Russia across the border into eastern Ukraine.

Earlier this week, those markets formulated their assessments of the Russian leader's rhetoric. The result: Oil trader Gunvor — believed to have close ties to Putin's inner circle — announced that it would sell off its Russian assets.

With Russia not actually under attack from anyone, Putin has launched a counteroffensive that is rooted in the past and hopelessly takes aim at the reality of the present.

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