

The Cold War and the Cold Shoulder for Russia

By [Ghia Nodia](#)

October 30, 2014



The Ukraine crisis has shattered key Western assumptions about Russia, and many analysts and policymakers have fallen back on the belief that Russian President Vladimir Putin must be acting irrationally. But it is Western assumptions that need to be questioned. In particular, what has made Russia so keen to undermine the current international order, first in Georgia in 2008 and now in Ukraine?

On the surface, these campaigns seem like post-imperial territorial conflicts. Russia, according to this view, recognizes that it cannot get its old empire back, so it is chipping away at neighboring territories instead, justifying its actions by a nebulous concept of ethnic and historical justice. And, like Serbia's former President Slobodan Milosevic, Putin dresses up foreign aggression as national salvation in order to bolster his domestic popularity and marginalize his opponents.

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Putin's approach closely resembles the vision set out by Russian Nobel laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn in his 1990 essay "Rebuilding Russia." Referring to the former Soviet satellite states, he suggested letting those "ungrateful peoples" go, but keeping Russia's rightful territories, such as eastern and southern Ukraine, northern Kazakhstan and eastern Estonia, with their ethnic Russian populations, and Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which are cultural extensions of Russia's North Caucasus.

But it would be misleading to portray Putin as merely another out-of-control national romantic. He singled out Georgia and Ukraine not to redeem Russians' emotional commitment to South Ossetia or Crimea, but to punish those countries for their dangerous liaisons with the West — in particular, Georgia's ambition to join NATO and Ukraine's desire to sign an association agreement with the European Union. Indeed, Russia's reaction is consistent with its recurrent discourse about being "squeezed out" of its own neighborhood and "encircled" by hostile Western powers.

Western politicians' vain attempts to convince Putin that the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU would benefit Russia by creating a zone of peace and prosperity along its borders were naive and insulting. It is not for Americans or Europeans, however reasonable they may sound, to tell Russia what is or is not in its interests.

From the current Russian regime's perspective, declarations that EU and NATO expansion is about spreading values, accountable institutions and good governance, not military or economic competition, is beyond hypocritical.

The spread of Western values and institutions is precisely what Putin fears most. Supporting democracy on Russia's borders can have a dangerous "demonstration" effect, by encouraging ordinary Russians to demand the same for themselves. Indeed, Putin believes that the past decade's democratic uprisings in Georgia and Ukraine were Western conspiracies against Russia. That may sound paranoid, but his anxiety is rational: European-style democracy on Russia's borders would make it much harder to maintain authoritarian rule at home.

But the insult represented by attempted EU and NATO expansion runs deeper. Russia's Cold War defeat and the loss of its empire transformed the country from a global superpower into a second-rate regional actor within just a couple of years, with a decade of economic upheaval and decline to follow. This geopolitical collapse occurred in part because Russians — not to mention their "captive nations" in Central and Eastern Europe — were seduced into believing that Western-style democracy and free markets worked better. This implied that the West was morally superior, too — a difficult notion for the country of Pushkin and Dostoevsky to swallow.

Given this mindset, Putin and his supporters at home and abroad view democracy and free markets not as the path to peace and prosperity, but as part of a wicked conspiracy to destroy Russia. It does not help that when many Russians recall the country's experiment with democracy in the 1990s, they remember nothing but misery and humiliation.

Western leaders are deceiving themselves if they think that cajoling and reasoning with Putin, or offering token signs of respect, can break that mindset. But turning a blind eye to Russian aggression, as the West did when Russia attacked Georgia in 2008 portraying the conflict as a clash between two hotheaded leaders — is not an option, either.

In short, while it is perfectly rational for the West to want Russia as a partner, Russia considers the U.S. and the EU enemies. The West can offer no conceivable partnership terms that Putin would accept. Either the West jettisons its fundamental values, or Russia must change.

History suggests that Russia changes only when it experiences an unambiguous geopolitical defeat. Its loss in the Crimean War of 1853-1856 led to the abolition of serfdom and other liberal reforms. Its defeat by Japan in 1905 brought about Russia's first parliament and the reforms of Pyotr Stolypin. The Afghanistan debacle of the 1980s created the environment that led to Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika.

Ultimately, the Russian people will decide for themselves what constitutes a defeat. If Putin is able to portray his attack on Ukraine as a success, Russia will continue to bully and posture on the international stage. But if Russians come to believe that Ukraine was a misadventure, a very different country could emerge.

Ghia Nodia is president of the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy, and Development in Tbilisi, Georgia. © Project Syndicate, 2014.

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