

One Cold War Was Enough: Russia Needs Our Help, Not Our Condemnation

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Trying to understand Russia through the prism of the British and American news media these days can be a real headache. On one hand, if you read the business pages of the Wall Street Journal or the New York Times lately, you will learn that Russia is now one of the world's leading emerging markets, and the Russian economy has grown at an average annual rate of 7 percent since 2000. On the other hand, if you turn to the international headlines or the editorial pages, you will read that Russian President Vladimir Putin has been busy crushing democracy and reviving the Soviet Union.

While Americans are constantly having their eyes opened to the possibilities for growth and economic freedom in the People's Republic of China, a far more free and open society in Russia is judged more harshly in the Western news media. Why is this? Is it because the shelves at Wal-Marts across America are not stocked with goods from Russia? Or is it simply because, as some cynical Russians imply, there is one American and European expectation for people who "look like us," and another for others (Asians, Africans, and Arabs) who don't? Or could it be that American perceptions of Russia are still formed by a combination of stereotypes left over from the Cold War and more recent images of Russia in the nineties as the Wild East — an exotic backwater whose main exports were supposedly mail order brides and ruthless mafias?

Russia, we are told by the advocates of a new Cold War, is helping Iran build a nuclear bomb. In reality, Russian technicians have helped Iran to build a nuclear power plant that would use civilian-grade uranium, but the Russians have repeatedly halted their work at the Bushehr site on the Persian Gulf due to Teheran's unpaid debts. The Iranian regime has responded to these setbacks by accusing Moscow of giving in to American pressure for taking these actions.

Earlier this year, President Putin offered President Bush the use of bases in Azerbaijan and southern Russia that could host a joint missile defense system to counter the threat of Iranian missiles targeted at Europe. Yet the Bush Administration continues to insist that placing ground-based interceptors 2,000 miles away from Iran in Poland and the Czech Republic makes sense, even when alternative sites are available much closer to Iran's borders. And while many members of the Bush Administration probably don't trust the crafty ex-KGB agent Putin to follow through on his pledge, perhaps they should remember that it was their hero Ronald Reagan who first proposed sharing missile defense technology with the Russians in the 1980s.

Many of the same conservative commentators and think tanks in Washington that cheered

the collapse of the Soviet Union have essentially remained on autopilot when it comes to Russia since 1989, always looking for signs of a return to the good old Evil Empire days rather than honestly accepting change. For their part, many liberal Democrats seem to view the 1990s, when President Clinton and Boris Yeltsin developed a real friendship, as a golden age of democracy in Russia, rather than the low, dishonest decade of hyperinflation and chaos that most Russians remember.

It hasn't helped that millions of dollars from the jailed Russian oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky have been paid out to PR agencies in Washington and London, creating a small but vocal anti-Russia lobby on both sides of the Atlantic. For his part, Khodorkovsky has been transformed from the Russian version of Ken Lay into a political dissident. The same exiled-oligarch-funded PR machine has also insisted that Alexander Litvinenko, a former Federal Security Service officer who died from radiation poisoning last year in London, must have been murdered by the Kremlin, rather than by the numerous personal enemies he had in Russia and abroad. The same people who warned us about "loose Russian nukes" during the 1990s apparently believe that terrorists or criminals could not possibly obtain a few hundred grams of polonium without state sponsorship.

In addition to arguing that every sensational killing in Russia and abroad is connected to the Kremlin, the New Cold Warriors also like to argue that Russia uses its enormous oil and gas reserves as a political weapon to bully former Soviet republics like Georgia, Belarus, and Lithuania. In reality, all of these countries have been forced to pay higher premiums for energy simply because the Russian natural gas monopoly, Gazprom, can no longer afford to subsidize Russia's neighbors with cheap gas. Countries that have traditionally enjoyed excellent relations with Moscow, like Armenia and Azerbaijan, have actually paid more for Russian gas this year than Ukraine, which has had a more strained relationship with Moscow in the last few years.

None of this is to say that Russia does not have real, severe problems that threaten its immature democracy and recent economic gains. In 2008, the Russian Federation is projected to lose 700,000 people, equivalent to the population of Austin, Texas. This means that while Russia enjoys a very high literacy rate, Russian companies often struggle to find enough talented managers to sustain their growth. And while Russia's major cities are growing, the countryside is losing people, due to high mortality rates and bleak prospects in rural areas. Russia imports some 40 percent of its meat and dairy products, and this has left ordinary Russians vulnerable to the recent run of inflation for basic consumer staples. Russia continues to suffer more abortions than live births every year, and the Russian army draft deprives many small towns and villages of their best young men.

What should America do to help address these real problems? The first step is to stop accepting the folly that a weakened Russia would somehow be in America's best interests. This is particularly important due to the rise of China next to Russia's unpopulated regions and the painful history of Islamic extremism and ethnic separatism in the Caucasus.

The second step is to stop obsessing about the Kremlin and start concentrating on promoting more trade, entrepreneurship, and genuine philanthropy between our two countries at the grassroots and corporate levels. If we can do this with China, a country that does not respect religious freedom and which actively censors the Internet, why can't we do it with Russia, whose government does not do either of these things?

As with so many other ventures, when it comes to Russia, the private sector in America

remains miles ahead of the media and the political class when it comes to introducing real change. If some American politicians and pundits can find reasons for optimism even about war-torn Iraq, surely they can spare some for Russia.

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