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The Trouble with Russia

By [Herbert E. Meyer](#)

Each year a group of KGB Commissars would get together for a weekend of bear hunting. A helicopter would fly them to a clearing deep in the forest, leave them with their guns and camping gear, then pick them up two days later.

Now the hunting weekend has ended, and the Commissars are waiting in the clearing with their equipment and with the carcasses of three bears. The helicopter swoops in and lands, the pilot steps out and takes one look at the waiting cargo.

"Comrade Commissars," the pilot says. "I'm sorry, but I cannot take all three bears on board. The helicopter can carry only two. Please decide which one you wish to leave behind."

Two Commissars grab the pilot's arms, while a third slaps the pilot hard across his face and says, "Captain, this is precisely what you told us last year. As you no doubt will remember, that led to an unpleasant afternoon of beatings and threats against your family if you didn't take all three bears on board. In the end, you did as we ordered. Surely it won't be necessary to repeat all that again?"

The pilot nods glumly, then gets busy loading everything on board and they take off.

Ten minutes later the helicopter crashes. One of the Commissars is killed, and another has two broken legs. A third Commissar crawls out from the wreckage and drags himself over to the dazed pilot, who is lying on the ground nearby. The Commissar slaps the pilot across his face, sits him up and asks, "Captain, where are we?"

The pilot looks around and says, "Same place we crashed last year."

In the Cold War years we learned a great deal about KGB Commissars, and it turns out they all share the same two qualities: They are thugs -- and they are incapable of learning from experience.

Vladimir Putin has the heart and soul of a KGB Commissar -- which, of course, he once was. He's a thug, and he's learned nothing from his country's history. So he's driving Russia into the same ditch the communists drove it into back in the twentieth century. He's creating a one-party dictatorship in which the country's wealth will be owned or controlled by the State. Like all dictators, he's trying to gin up a foreign enemy -- that would be us -- to justify his domestic policies. And he's embarking on a course to achieve his communist predecessors' dream of imposing a sort of *Pax Sovietica* on the world.

The rigged election of Dmitri Medvedev as Russia's president on March 2 was, of course, merely window-dressing to show that Putin is obeying his country's constitution by limiting himself to two consecutive four-year terms. Putin himself will take the lesser post of prime minister, but there's no doubt he's the man in charge. The general assumption is that Putin will return to the presidency when Medvedev's term expires, or sooner should the presidency become vacant before then. (A friendly word of advice for President Medvedev: Get yourself a food-taster, and send a flunky out each morning to start the car.)

Russia's Three Objectives

All this means trouble for us -- at least in the short term. That's because Russia now has three global objectives, and in the coming years it will move fast to achieve them all:

First, Russia wants to position itself not merely as a leading supplier of energy, but as leader of the world's energy-suppliers. Given its own vast reserves of oil, natural gas and coal, Russia today is growing rich as a major energy provider in Europe. But now Russia is reaching out for raw materials beyond its own borders; for example Gazprom, the Kremlin-controlled energy giant, is actively bidding for the rights to develop Nigeria's vast and untapped natural gas reserves. And diplomatically, Moscow is maneuvering in the Mideast and with Venezuela's Hugo Chavez to effectively transfer the leadership of OPEC to the Kremlin.

Second, Russia wants to get back control of what it calls the "near-abroad" - those countries that once were part of the Soviet Union and now are independent. This includes Ukraine and Georgia, whose current instabilities are due, in large part, to Moscow's meddling. It includes the Baltic countries and also Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. And down the road it may well include countries like Romania and even Poland. Putin and his Kremlin team probably won't launch a direct military attack. Why should they, if they can gain control of the "near-abroad" nations by working covertly to ensure that Moscow's friends win elections or, when that fails, by covertly undermining freely elected governments. Their objective is a *de facto* restoration of the old Soviet Union, under the Kremlin's leadership.

Third, Russia wants a global veto. In other words, Russia wants a world in which nothing of consequence will happen -- such as treaties, trade agreements, regional military alliances, or wars -- unless Russia approves. Russia's quest for a global veto reflects the single most striking difference between it and the United States. While we struggle to lead, Russia wishes merely to obstruct. Alas, today there are a lot of countries -- including ones that we Americans like to think of as allies -- whose primary foreign-policy objective is to weaken the US. They are as frightened by our economic productivity and our technological prowess as by our military strength and, whether or not it makes sense, they want to see the US brought low. Russia will maneuver to unify and lead this effort.

With episodes such as Medvedev's rigged election, last year's natural-gas cut-offs to Ukraine and Georgia, the ongoing diplomatic rows with Great Britain over extradition and the work of the British cultural missions, its sale of advanced surface-to-air missiles to Iran, its deliberately provocative flyovers by long-range bombers of Western territories and US naval formations -- and the untimely, violent deaths of so many Kremlin critics -- a clear picture of what Russia will be like to deal with in the coming years has already developed: it will be brutal, surly, petulant, and generally a pain in the civilized world's rear-end.

How to Deal with Russia

The question is: What should we do about Russia? And the answer is: We should treat Russia as though it were a condition to be endured, rather than a problem to be solved. Dealing with Russia in the coming years will be like dealing with a chronic bad back. Mostly you ignore it and go about your business despite the occasional flare-up; sometimes the pain becomes so intense you've got to gulp down a couple of pills, or a shot of whiskey, and then lie down until the pain subsides; and over time you learn that there are some activities which -- no matter how tempting -- you really must avoid.

Simply put, we should do whatever we think is in our country's best interests and pay as little attention to Russia as possible. Of course, Russia will always be there -- rather like a bad back. This means that everything we try to accomplish -- stabilizing the Mideast, deploying a missile-defense shield, assuring the flow of energy to consumers worldwide and all the rest -- will be harder, take longer, and cost more. Too bad for us, and for the civilized world, but that's just the way it's going to be in the years that lie ahead.

It sounds odd to say this, but a sense of humor will help enormously. That's because Putin's Russia, unlike the old Soviet Union, is thin-skinned and simply cannot stand to be ridiculed. For instance, a few months ago the Russians sent a submarine below the North Pole, dropped a Russian flag to the ocean floor -- and then declared that by doing so they had established sovereignty over the Arctic Ocean and its vast mineral wealth. Then some genius pointed out that if planting a flag conveys sovereignty -- the US owns the moon. We haven't heard a word since from the Kremlin about its claims to the Arctic.

Unfortunately, it won't always be possible to determine in advance just which US policies and initiatives are

going to cause minor flare-ups, and which are going to cause excruciating pain. This will be a trial-and-error sort of process in which experience, common sense and good judgment will be not merely helpful, but necessary. (For instance, let us not be too surprised if our support for an independent Kosovo, over Russia's strenuous objections, turns out to ignite a more serious conflagration than we're expecting; it was Russia's total and inflexible support for Serbia in 1914 that started World War I.)

Our efforts to keep Iran's *mullahs* from getting their hands on nuclear weapons will likely bring us into serious conflict with Russia, and it will take all the fortitude and skill our next President can muster to keep this conflict diplomatic rather than military. But in the years to come the real focus of our trouble with Russia will be -- as usual -- western Europe. And -- as usual -- the Europeans won't be helpful to us. Today they are as frightened by a cut-off of Russian energy supplies as they used to be by a Soviet missile attack. As the continent's economic power wanes, and as its demographic problems mount, Europe wishes merely to be affluently comfortable as it continues its descent into history. Our so-called allies will always take the path of least resistance, and we can safely assume that their fear of Russia, and their lust for money, will exceed their courage to face down Russia or to side with us to keep Western civilization moving forward.

Indeed, this is already happening. As the dollar slides down against the Euro, American tourism is dropping fast and so are American purchases of European products. Today the European hospitality and luxury-goods industries are actively re-orienting their marketing campaigns from American tourists and consumers to Russia's emerging, energy-enriched middle class. (You can see the impact of this re-orientation as you pass through the airports in London, Paris and Rome. You are fairly engulfed by Russian tourists and shoppers -- in their designer clothes, with their Gucci luggage and their gold Rolex watches, and loaded with purchases from Europe's swishiest shops -- as they curse at you and muscle their way past you to the front of the security line. And the Russian men are even nastier.)

The Cold War Won't Return

Although our relations with Russia won't be pleasant -- to say the least -- there isn't going to be a second Cold War. Despite booming energy revenues that are now spreading wealth throughout much of Russian society, the country is dying. Literally. Today the average life span of a Russian male is under 58 years of age; that puts Russia in the Haiti-Bangladesh category, and nowhere near the modern-industrial-world level. Moreover, because the birth rate in Russia is just 1.3 (the replacement level is 2.1) today the number of deaths in Russia vastly exceeds the number of births. Indeed, today in Russia the number of abortions exceeds the number of births. The country's population is dropping fast, from about 143 million now to about 110 million in 2050.

Russia covers nearly one-sixth of the earth's land surface. There simply won't be enough working-age Russians to keep things going and to support the country's huge aging population. Even now -- and with very little publicity -- just like the countries in western Europe Russia is relying heavily on imported workers to keep the place going. For example, several million Kazakhs and Uzbeks are now doing the menial but vital jobs in Russia that other Moslems are doing today in, say, France, Italy and Germany. More importantly, in the coming decades there won't be a sufficient number of young Russian males to sustain the kind of army Russia will require to defend its far-flung borders.

Finally, Russia seems once again to have an chosen economic model that just isn't compatible with achieving and sustaining global power. In effect, Russia wants to become a sort of snowy Saudi Arabia in the sense that it will rely for its wealth on energy exports, rather than on the entrepreneurial talents and technical prowess of its people. And Russia's approach to industrial modernization cannot possibly deliver the kind of long-term productivity gains that drive economic success in today's fast-moving, technology-driven world. For example, the giant Russian automaker GAZ just purchased an entire factory from Daimler-Chrysler that is already 15 years' obsolete. Russian productivity inevitably will fall further and further behind US productivity, which means that despite its energy revenues Russia won't be able to sustain the kind of decades-long, high-tech military competition that a second Cold War would require. And if the US and its allies ever get serious about developing alternate energy sources Russia -- like Saudi Arabia -- will be finished.

While the Putin regime means short-term trouble for us, it also means that another long-term tragedy is looming for the Russian people. Once again, they are living in a police state. Even now, the Kremlin is busily re-building the dreaded Gulag and packing it with Russians whose only crime has been to oppose Putin or to speak out publicly against the dictatorship he and his cronies are tightening every day. And If you're wondering why

Russia has squandered the historic opportunity it had to join the civilized world when the Soviet Union collapsed back in 1991, the answer is depressingly simple: Countries are like people; some learn from their mistakes and move on, while others keep making the same mistake over and over again.

Genius in the Genome

The only good thing to emerge from Russia's bleak future will come from the humor, courage, and astounding genius that lie deep within the Russian genome, and that only adversity brings to the surface. Russia's next generation of dissidents will give the world yet another collection of poems and novels that will become among the twenty-first century's greatest works of literature. With a bit of luck, we may even get another bunch of those marvelous Russian jokes in which the individual is always defeated by the boundless, pitiless stupidity of the State.

The patriotic young lieutenant joined the KGB to protect the Motherland from its enemies. But he's having his doubts. Could all these people he's been arresting, torturing, sending to the Gulag and shooting really be foreign spies?

Unknown to the lieutenant, he's being carefully watched by the KGB Commissar in charge of his unit. The wise and experienced Commissar understands that his lieutenant is young and idealistic -- just as he once was. Indeed, the Commissar himself sometimes thinks the regime goes too far. But he has long since learned not to question his Kremlin masters, and instead to devote his energies to rooting out the State's enemies wherever they may be hiding. One afternoon the Commissar invites the young lieutenant for a drink after work.

Now the two officers are sitting in a bar, with their tunics unbuttoned, their ties loosened, drinks in one hand and cigarettes in the other. After a few pleasant moments talking about sports and women, the Commissar leans across the table and speaks very quietly.

"Lieutenant," he says, not unkindly. "I know you're having doubts about our system. At your age, so did I. Sometimes even now I think we go too far. But our enemies are everywhere among us, and to protect our beloved Motherland we must be vigilant and ruthless."

"Thank you for confiding in me, Comrade Commissar," the lieutenant says gratefully. "I want to assure you that my views are precisely the same as yours."

"In that case," the Commissar replies, with a sigh, "I arrest you on a charge of anti-Party deviationism."

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