

Former allies or former prisoners? Russia and its post-Soviet, pro-Western neighbours¹

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For Russia's neighbours, the world is not the same as it was in June 2008, when the complicated, sometimes almost irrational relationship between Russia and its pro-Western neighbours was discussed by this author at the Engelsberg seminar, "On Russia". While the full meaning and consequences of Russia's war with Georgia will continue to be discussed for months to come, it was immediately obvious for Russia's neighbours that the sight of Russian tanks rolling through the Roki tunnel into South-Ossetia and on towards Tbilisi was an event comparable to 9/11—an event that changed all security-related thinking. Moscow had not attacked an independent country since the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979; and Moscow had not tried to change international borders by the use of military force since the Second World War and its immediate aftermath. The war with Georgia could not but affect Russia's neighbours' thinking and outlook in a most profound way.

At the time of writing, in October 2008, the August events are still being interpreted in drastically different ways. A media consumer in Moscow and a media consumer in Tallinn seem to live in different universes. Therefore it is necessary to clarify the position and interpretation of this author early on, as most of the reasoning will inevitably depend on what one considers to be the facts. In this essay, the Georgia-related discussion and references will be based on this author's understanding that the war was designed and provoked by Russia, although technically started by Georgia. People who say that President Saakashvili was foolish to walk into a trap are certainly right—but saying so also implies that a trap was set by someone in the first place.

It is noteworthy that the comparison between 9/11 and 08/08 is valid in more ways than one. Not only did these two dates change the security paradigm for a considerable number of countries, they also did so in a highly unexpected, shocking manner. Both attacks came as surprises to most observers, although the facts that pointed to something being planned and prepared were well known to the competent agencies or even—in the case of Russia and Georgia—visible in broad daylight. This matters because the magnitude of

¹ The focus of this essay is Russia's relationship with those of its former satellites whose policies are, or have some point become, demonstrably pro-Western. One can separate them into three groups: the Central and Eastern European countries of the former Warsaw Pact, the Baltic states that were part of the Soviet Union itself, and finally Georgia and Ukraine, also former parts of the Soviet Union, that started their pro-Western path more than a decade later than the other new democracies. The issues tackled in this essay can apply to various extents to all or some of these groups. For the sake of the smoothness of the narrative, distinctions are not always made in the text, in the expectation that an informed reader will not need them.

misinterpretation in the past can be indicative of the magnitude of reinterpretation in the future. And while the politicians and analysts in the big countries of Western Europe might, for the lack of a new and workable Russia-policy, still continue the old ruminations along the lines that “there is no Cold War because there are no competing ideologies,” for Russia’s neighbours—who have always been affected first and foremost by Russia’s crude force and have always seen the accompanying ideologies mainly as a pretext for conquest, not as concepts worth sharing²—for Russia’s neighbours, the world has changed and there is no way back to the pre-August attitudes towards Moscow.

This statement might leave the uninformed reader with the impression that, before August, attitudes and relationships were somehow exemplary. They certainly were not; quite the contrary. Of all post-Soviet Russia’s international relationships, those with its post-Soviet, pro-Western neighbours have been, if not the most problematic ones, then certainly the ones in which problems—even minor ones—have tended to become almost irrationally emotional and painful.

This essay will argue that the root cause of the permanently simmering and gradually increasing tensions between Moscow and the capitals of its Western-oriented former satellites lies in the different types of political systems, and the different paths of development adopted early on.

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In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the Baltic states and most of the states of Central and Eastern Europe set out to reshape themselves according to the models of liberal democracy, Russia briefly aimed to do the same, but failed. Russia’s political development has been complicated and the system that emerged does not lend itself to easy classification. Still, what happened has been briefly and eloquently summed up by Lilia Shevtsova by way of comparing the two leaders, Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin. According to Shevtsova, Mikhail Gorbachev, “lacking the courage to reject socialist views and leave Communist Party ranks, was the first leader in Russian history to attempt to reform the traditional Russian state, which was symbolised by an omnipotent leader who stood above society. Gorbachev rejected the notion that power was sacrosanct by nature and also abandoned three other major props of

² For a fuller analysis of the relationship between force and ideology in Russia’s relationship with its neighbours and countries further away, see Sulev Kannike: “Geography and Ideology. The Bear in a Bowl and a Peninsular Nation,” *Diplomaatia* No 38, September 2008 (<http://www.diplomaatia.ee/index.php?id=468&L=1>)

the Russian state: militarism, the claim that Russia was doomed to follow a “special path,” and its attempt to have its “zones of influence” in the international arena. Yeltsin completely abandoned the socialist ideal and became an anti-communist. It was he who finally destroyed the old state, which allows us to regard him as a revolutionary. However, he also set about restoring what Gorbachev had tried to undermine: autocracy. He began to concentrate power in his own hands, and it was Yeltsin, not Putin, who began the move back toward the restoration of the old model of governance, albeit without the trappings of Soviet communism.”³

It might be said that Yeltsin committed the same mistake in domestic politics that the West made in its relationship with Yeltsin: the mistake of giving priority to personalities rather than procedures. Such an approach cannot lead to democracy, as democracy is all about rules, procedures and systems of government. The West identified support to Yeltsin with support to Russian democracy and therefore tolerated several of his strikingly undemocratic moves, such as the shelling of the parliament building in 1993, the first war in Chechnya, and the managed elections of 1996. In his turn, Yeltsin focused his attention and political energy on fighting what remained of the Communist Party, neglecting the burning need to create a rule-based environment in which the new Russia might have functioned in new ways.

This is all the more tragic, because Yeltsin may have had the chance to renew Russia in a most profound way. The beginning of his time in office was a moment of historical opportunity to change Russia’s thinking, the rules by which it functioned, how it saw its past, present and future; to relieve Russia of its centuries-old burden of authoritarianism; to change its identity.⁴

But Yeltsin, who was a political fighter of rare talent, a powerful destroyer of the old regime, turned out to be extremely poor at building a new system. As a result, the necessary systemic changes were either carried out very messily and chaotically, for example the economic reforms, or, as in the case of legal reforms, hardly at all. Russia’s constitution, adopted after what could be described as a brief civil war in October 1993, was designed to cement the president’s power, not to strengthen the democratic institutions. While mobilising

³ Lilia Shevtsova, *Russia Lost in Transition*. Washington, Moscow: Carnegie Endowment, 2007, page 5.

⁴ Robert Cooper has convincingly argued that the over-exploited conventional wisdom according to which “states do not have friends, states only have interests” does not actually hold true. States have notions of what they are, and these notions can cause them to behave in ways that go against their coldly and rationally understood interests. In short, states have identities that guide their actions more often than is usually admitted. But identities can also be changed. At certain special moments in history, whole nations can discard their old worldviews and principles of behaviour and adopt new ones. Japan and Germany after the Second World War are cases in point. For a more detailed elaboration, see Robert Cooper, *The Breaking of the Nations: Order and Chaos in the Twenty-First Century*, London: Atlantic Books, 2003.

his energy to fight the Communist Party, Yeltsin forgot about the structures that were actually more instrumental in preserving the backbone of the authoritarian system, the KGB for example.

But most importantly, Yeltsin failed to give his country a new moral foundation. He failed to introduce a new concept of what is acceptable and legitimate behaviour for a state—at home or internationally. He did not address communist crimes in ways that would have had a lasting impact on the way society viewed its history. Not one perpetrator was brought to justice. The work of exposing Soviet atrocities, begun in the perestroika years, was shelved. Instead, to gain votes from the communists, Yeltsin started to adopt certain features from the arsenal of Soviet iconography, such as the lavish and militaristic Victory Day parades he revived in 1995.

In the West, the question of “who lost Russia” has been a recurring feature of foreign policy debates since the mid-1990s. In the view of this author, the underlying assumption that any outsider, even one as powerful as the United States, could have had any decisive impact on shaping Russia’s destiny is naïve and even somewhat arrogant. Russia has always been first and foremost Russia’s to lose. And it was Boris Yeltsin, through his intellect and character, who failed to rise to the historic opportunity presented to him.

He might not have succeeded anyway. After all, Russia is an extremely complicated country, the burden of its history heavy, and the—largely inevitable—chaos and misery of the 1990s was bound to erode the authority of any reformer. Still, it is sad that a proper attempt was not even made.

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Meanwhile, with some ups and downs, some problems here and there, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic states managed to become liberal democracies. Admittedly, the magnitude of the task was incomparable with that facing Russia. Countless factors, such as history, the fabric of their societies and their geopolitical location made their path relatively easy and logical. But it is exactly the contrast between their smoother or rougher, but in any case real, transition and Russia’s ability to, at best, imitate that transition while actually going somewhere else, that has caused sparks and tensions for all of the seventeen post-Soviet years.

Russia tends to accuse its pro-Western former satellites of being Russo-phobic; presumably meaning that they are prejudiced against Russia because of their historical experience and that this obscures their view and prevents them from seeing the new, different

Russia. Up to a point, this may be true. Certainly there are individuals in each country who see the present through the distorting lenses of history and it is not too hard to find politicians willing to use harsh rhetoric about Russia to boost their own popularity.

Still, this author would argue that the actual roots of the plentiful criticism of Russia to be heard in Eastern Europe lie not in prejudice but, on the contrary, in the (possibly subconscious) conviction that Russia was in no worse a condition than Eastern Europe and should have been able to accomplish a similar transition.

The countries of the old West view the transformation of the former Communist bloc from some distance. For them, the task of transformation may occasionally seem easier than it is, but sometimes also harder. “Russia has such a complicated history, it cannot transform overnight,” Westerners would lecture the impatient and critical East Europeans. The Easterners, however, know from their own experience what it takes to reform one’s economy, political system and society. They see how at critical junctures when they adopted one law or another, conducted one reform or another, Moscow failed to take the equivalent step; most often with no compelling social or domestic political reasons. If, in the eyes of the old West, Russia’s burden of territory and history handicap it in the field of reform and justify the application of different standards or the toleration of not just a slower pace, but also complete about-turns, then the East Europeans consider Russia to be as fit as they are, at least overall—the hardships caused by territory or history should in theory be compensated by the abundance of raw materials. If there is anyone out there who considers Russia to be somehow sub-standard by nature then, contrary to the popular view in Russia, it is the Western Europeans with their endless patience, rather than the Easterners with their criticism.

So to East Europeans it is also clear that inaction or movements in the wrong direction are exactly what they are—inaction or movements in the wrong direction, not “the difficult historical legacy” or “the understandably slower pace of reform.” One does not become a democracy by moving towards authoritarianism. It is an all too clear understanding of the nature of the transformation process that prevents East Europeans from joining their Western counterparts in giving Moscow and its leaders the endless benefit of the doubt.

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It is noteworthy that Russia’s relationship with its former satellites—certainly, at least, the Baltic states—started to suffer from chills as early as the first year of Russia independence, in 1992, when Russia’s relationship with the rest of the West was still almost romantic. It

became evident that the new Russian leadership, despite having been allied with the national elites of the Baltic states in the struggles of the perestroika years, had failed to grasp the full meaning of the Baltic independence it had supported. It was mentally prepared for formal independence, but the manifestations of real independence—such as demands that Russian troops should leave Baltic soil, the three countries' exit from the ruble zone, the language laws, Estonia's and Latvia's citizenship policies, the whole concept of pre-war independence being restored—all that was unexpected and hard for even the most ardent democrats in Moscow to swallow. It seems that the (possibly subconscious) expectations among Russian democrats had been that the Baltic states would show more solidarity with the former imperial centre. They were taken aback when Baltic leaders, upon re-independence, suddenly considered their former “fellow prisoners” if not wholly responsible for the existence of the prison, then certainly in charge of the necessary clean-up operation. While Russia's democrats of the early years had fully accepted the fact of the forcible incorporation of the Baltic states into the Soviet Union, they understood the resulting animosity as a consequence of the totalitarian nature of the Soviet regime; they failed to recognise what for the Balts was self-evident: the wish to be properly, not just formally, independent from any Russia, totalitarian or democratic. Therefore the aspirations of the Baltic states to save and reform their own countries first and foremost were accepted with bitterness: “We were all together in this mess and then you just abandoned us,” went the complaint, variations of which can still be heard from Russia's democrats.

This sentiment illustrates well the wide confusion that still reigns in the minds of Moscow about the former status of its satellites. Were they allies or prisoners? No issue highlights this confusion better than the question of Nato enlargement, which has inflamed passions for pretty much all of the post-Soviet years.

The majority of Moscow hardliners—who have now become part of the political mainstream in Russia—never accepted the fact that the Soviet Union had no allies, but only prisoners in Europe. In their view, the entry into Nato of the Central European countries and the Baltic states was a betrayal, the only logical motivation for which was greed: they left their impoverished ally and found a new and richer one.

There is also a widespread tendency among political thinkers in Russia to interpret Nato enlargement as the evil design of the United States, in which the small post-communist countries are merely willing pawns. In general, for traditional Russian political thinking it is hard to accept that small countries might have political agendas of their own. Customary

thinking there sees small countries as essentially vassal states, the only question being whose vassals they are.⁵

It should have been the duty of the democratic leadership of Russia to explain to its population that Russia's former satellites were free to join whichever alliances they wanted; and, as Russia was supposedly a democracy, there was no reason to fear Nato. After all, the Russian leadership could not have hoped to continue living in a double reality: regarding Nato as good in its relations with old Nato countries, but bad in its domestic rhetoric or in its relations with applicant countries. Lots of energy was wasted on managing this schizophrenic situation over Nato enlargement, one that should actually not have been an issue at all.

However, Russia's democrats never even attempted this breakthrough in attitudes. Devoting most of their energy to attempts to reform the economy and meeting lots of resistance from the hardliners, they perhaps simply did not want to open another domestic political quarrel about Nato. Or perhaps what prevented the democrats from making the case for Nato was this same sense of betrayal—by their former allies or by the West.

Many people from both the democratic and hardline camps complain that the West betrayed Russia by breaking the promises it gave to Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989—not to enlarge Nato beyond the borders of the united Germany.⁶ One cannot help noticing that these sentiments are occasionally, but regularly echoed also in the West: “Why do we keep irritating Russia by enlarging Nato towards its borders?” is a question one comes across also in the Western media. If it were not so troubling, it would be almost comic to follow how analysts in Russia and some in the West find common language in agreeing to overlook the single most powerful driver of Nato enlargement: the former applicant and current new member states themselves.

The truth is that in the early years, neither the US nor Western Europe was eager to enlarge Nato. The Partnership for Peace programme, launched by Nato in 1994, was not designed to be the first step towards Nato enlargement—as some former US politicians and diplomats prefer to remember now—but to postpone or possibly even prevent it. It was the East Europeans, who made Nato their most cherished foreign policy goal, towards which they

⁵ For a detailed description of the concept of vassal states in Russia's political and legal thinking see Lauri Mälksoo, “Vassal states,” *Diplomaatia* No 46, June 2007. (<http://www.diplomaatia.ee/index.php?id=311&L=1>)

⁶ As regards the promises given by the West to Russia, they did indeed exist, or half-exist. A former British ambassador has testified that Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had told Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989 that “there was no intention to enlarge Nato.” (A remark by Roderic Braithwaite at the Engelsberg seminar in June 2008.) It is likely that similar statements were also uttered in other Nato capitals. And, indeed, in 1989 there was no intention to enlarge Nato.

worked day and night through diplomacy and domestic reforms, who made it impossible for Nato to keep saying no.

But the bitter complaints from Moscow illustrate another aspect in which Moscow's worldview and understanding of the inner mechanisms of international relations tragically differ from Western notions and practice: Moscow sincerely believes that foreign policy can be executed by deals. Moscow also sought to make a deal with the United States in 1997, before the first round of Nato enlargement, to make sure that the Baltic states would never be invited to join.⁷ Likewise, according to Russian analysts, Vladimir Putin believed that by offering the US his support and military bases in the Central Asian republics in 2001, he was entitled to a geopolitical payback of equal magnitude; and was deeply disappointed when the US—assuming that Russia had offered help because it shared US security interests or even values—just said “thank you.”

It is still beyond Moscow's understanding that deals done at the expense of other countries could hold in the world of Molotov and Ribbentrop, but not in the post-Cold War world of democracy where states are supposed to be free to choose their own alliances. As the case of Nato expansion has clearly demonstrated, in a democratic world there is hardly a way of stopping a country that devotes all its energy to getting into an organisation and qualifies for entry.

The statement above also applies to Russia. Had Russia become a real democracy and wished to join Nato, there would have been no insurmountable obstacles. Russia would certainly have found strong advocates among the Nato countries and, contrary to a popular view in Moscow, not just among the old member states, but also among Russia's former “allies” from the Warsaw Pact. The logic of the concentric expansion of Western organisations—the existing members helping their immediate neighbours to the East and those in turn their neighbours—did not have to stop at Russia's borders. It did so only because at no point in time did Russia show even the remotest prospect of qualifying for Nato entry, either in terms of its military reforms or, most importantly, in terms of its general democratic development.

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⁷ For a description of a meeting between Boris Yeltsin and Bill Clinton, see Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, New York: Random House, 2002.

If asked what Russia actually wants from its neighbours, what are its policy goals, an average Russian politician, diplomat or political analyst would probably answer that Russia wants to have “friendly neighbours.” And they mean it—Russia does want to have friendly neighbours. The only trouble is that, for many of them, “friendly” is simply a synonym for “subordinate,” and they see power politics as a way to achieve that.

There is a curious expression in the vocabulary of Russian “political technologists”—*prinudit k druzhbe*, “to force to friendship,” applied almost exclusively in relation to former satellites. The absurdity of the term should not require much explanation: it is more than obvious that force excludes real friendship. A vicious circle emerges: the more Moscow forces, the more it extinguishes potential voluntary friendships; as a result even more force is required, resulting in even more bitterness. This is how Moscow has by now managed to alienate pretty much all of its former vassals, not just the pro-Western ones: the silence that followed when Russia expected support for its war in Georgia was quite telling.

The tragic irony, however, lies in the fact that Russia could have all the friendship and goodwill it wanted if it did not try to “force to friendship,” but trusted its own natural attractiveness, its “soft power.” The widespread assumption that the only feeling Russia’s former satellites have towards the former imperial centre is hostile hatred, is wrong. In fact, after a brief counter-reaction to the involuntary diet of Russian/Soviet culture, the former satellite countries were soon ready to appreciate the worthy parts of that culture. Coupled with Russia’s economic attractiveness, this could have given Moscow a truly great “soft power”—albeit somewhat diminished by the fact that Russia is not a democracy. Sadly, Moscow has never really trusted the existence of this soft power, nor dared to rely on it.

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The history of Russia’s relationship with its pro-Western former satellites can, by and large, be divided into three different periods of time. The first lasted from 1991 to around 2003 or 2004, the second from 2004 to August 2008 and the third, the clear outlines of which are yet to emerge, has just started.

In hindsight, the period between 1991 and 2004 was still a relatively good one—despite the major debates on Nato enlargement, treatment of Russian minorities and the irritable stereotypes that affected Moscow’s thinking vis-à-vis its small neighbours. The most burning practical questions, such as the withdrawal of Russian troops for example, could be solved with the help of the big Western countries that back then—unlike now—still carried

considerable authority in the eyes of the Kremlin and were willing to act as mediators. Deep in its heart Moscow also felt that it lacked a workable relationship with its neighbours and that it might be desirable to have one. Every now and then, prominent Kremlin-connected Moscow think tanks would summon working groups to devise a new policy towards the Baltics or a new policy towards Poland. Nothing ever came of this, because Moscow's real goals in these countries were unrealistic and impossible to achieve. But one could—at least occasionally—see that Moscow was making attempts, however clumsy, incoherent and short-lived, to improve relations.

In around 2004, everything changed. Moscow adopted a much harsher attitude towards the West in general, the manifestations of which are visible in almost all areas of the relationship. This change was caused and made possible by a whole complex of different developments inside Russia and around the world. The US was badly bogged down in Iraq, leading the Kremlin to conclude that it was a spent power, while the big countries of continental Europe were increasingly tied to Russia by gas pipelines. Inside Russia, Putin's KGB clan had managed to consolidate its power. Growing oil prices brought billions of dollars of unplanned income. Furthermore, much of this oil wealth was already the personal income of those in power: the oil company Yukos was being destroyed, its remains nationalised and later re-privatised to new owners with close connections to the Kremlin. All this could only increase the self-confidence of those in power. The concept of sovereign democracy, detailed by Kremlin aide Vladislav Surkov, was partly a manifestation of that self-confidence.⁸ It enabled Russia to break with its formal, but already entirely hollow, adherence to the standards and concepts of Western-style democracy and claim its own brand of democracy that was not inferior to that of the West, but actually superior by virtue of being more “effective.”

As regards the Baltic states and other former satellites, Moscow suddenly realised that it did not need a workable policy towards them at all. Quite the opposite—it decided that it was beneficial to keep them as a problem that could be raised to the international level at convenient times to fend off criticism of Russia; or simply tarnish the image of the former satellites by portraying them as hopelessly Russo-phobic, and therefore not credible as far as matters of Russia's interest were concerned.

⁸ For views of Surkov, see Vladislav Surkov, *Teksty 97-07*, Moscow: Evropa, 2008. For a lively discussion of the concept of sovereign democracy and what it means to Russia's relations with Europe, see Ivan Krastev, “Russia and the Post-Cold War European Order,” special issue of *Diplomaatia*, March 2008 (<http://www.diplomaatia.ee/index.php?id=470&L=1>)

2004 was also the year when the ghosts of history came marching back to haunt current day relationships. The memory-work, the exposure of the Soviet crimes that had started during the perestroika years, was abandoned under Yeltsin, but it was not reversed. It was Putin who brought the topic of history back to the political agenda, this time using very different, near-Soviet interpretations. By around 2004 Putin's regime had started to use memories of the Second World War and its victory almost as a substitute for ideology, and as a means to legitimate the current Russian regime both at home and internationally. This automatically meant that the contrasting truths and memories of the Baltic states, Poland and Ukraine turned from being simple nuisances into obstacles to an important ideological project.

Observers in Western Europe are sometimes astonished by the ability of Moscow and some East European capital to engage in endless arguments about the details of some seemingly obscure episode back in 1939, 1940 or 1944. "Do you not have a future?" is the question often asked of East European leaders, with the implicit hint that disturbing talk about the past should be stopped.

East Europeans, however, find it hard to leave the past untouched—and they should not. While it is true that there have been cases of history-related issues being used in political campaigns, these cases have actually been rare. For the most part, the discussion is happening not on political playgrounds, but inside the societies themselves. Compared to the perestroika years, the focus of discussion has shifted from "all the bad things that Russia did to us" to the question, "where did we make the mistakes that got us into all of this." In a word, these societies are trying to learn from the mistakes they may have made in the past. This is a good and necessary process—of crucial importance if the societies are to overcome their traumas—and it must not be sacrificed for the sake of good relations with anyone.

It is also curious how an analysis of official Moscow's more private statements on the matter of history reveal yet another fundamental difference between Moscow's and the West's attitudes towards some very basic things: if for the West truth is something to acknowledge and deal with, then for Russia truth is a commodity that can be traded and used for pragmatic purposes. It is illuminating to hear how Russian diplomats have tried to test the ground with Poles: "if we give you Katyn (ie. acknowledge the killing of Polish officers by the Soviet Union), what would you give us in return?"⁹ Or another case, from this author's conversation with an official of the Russian Foreign Ministry: "Estonians, look at what you are doing! If you want to have a good relationship with Russia, how can you go on accusing

⁹ From Anne Applebaum's speech at the Englesberg seminar in June 2008.

heroes of the Soviet Union of crimes against humanity,”¹⁰ referring to the case of Arnold Meri, a hero of the Soviet Union who is being prosecuted in Estonia for his suspected role in the organisation and execution of deportations. Effectively, this statement confronts Estonia with a stark choice—in return for good relations with Russia it should give up its identity as a law-based country where perpetrators are brought to justice and crimes against humanity do not expire.

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Another change brought along by the watershed year of 2004 concerns the ways Moscow uses the Russian minorities in the former Soviet states. The complaints about “mistreatment of Russians” started almost as soon as the fragments of the former Union occupied their seats at the UN. However, equally early it became obvious that Moscow did not actually care about the well-being of its “compatriots”—otherwise how to explain Russia’s relative silence about the Central Asian republics, where Russian-speakers have really been persecuted and often even killed, and instead their focus on the Baltic states, where some Russians may lack citizenship, but the rights they have as residents are real and guaranteed and the way to citizenship is open to those who are willing to make an effort to learn the languages of the countries they live in?

Moscow’s actual problem has never been the treatment of minorities; the real problem was the Baltic states’ legal concept of restored statehood with everything this brings along: citizenship laws as well as (by now long abandoned) calls to return to pre-war borders; concepts of history that are increasingly at odds with those of Russia and calls for compensation for occupation. Russia’s aim is to treat all post-Soviet countries as new countries that became independent in 1991. That way, it has become almost obligatory for Russia to bring up the status of Russians in Estonia and Latvia—as it does not agree with the causes and implications of that status. But the topic also provided a handy means by which to try to discredit Estonia and Latvia in the international arena.

For Russia’s neighbours, all this was quite inconvenient. But things became outright dangerous from 2004 onwards when Moscow started testing its abilities to meddle in its neighbours’ domestic life by using local Russians. The Russian demonstrations protesting against school reforms in Latvia in 2004 and the riots caused by removal of a Soviet statue in

¹⁰ From this author’s conversation with a Russian diplomat, in May 2008.

Tallinn in 2007 were cases in point. But claims made by Russia in August 2008—that it invaded Georgia to protect its citizens in Abkhazia and South Ossetia—were the worst of all. This meant that all Russian citizens in any former Soviet republic came to be regarded as a potential source of tension and danger—which is certainly not a thing a country that cares for its “compatriots” would want to do. And it certainly does not have a good influence on a fragile, but very necessary debate that had started in Estonia—that maybe it was not enough to treat the local Russians simply with legal correctness, maybe one should do more to win hearts and minds. The case for the latter will be harder to argue after Moscow’s actions in August.

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Paradoxically, apart from being a manifestation of arrogant self-confidence, Russia’s post-2004 aggressiveness is also an expression of panic and insecurity. The Rose revolution in Georgia in late 2003, and especially the Orange revolution in Ukraine a year later, were interpreted as US- or Nato-conducted regime changes, the goal of which was to expand Western influence in the region. The Kremlin panicked, although there were no signs whatsoever of anything even remotely similar being possible in Russia.

Among the Kremlin’s countermeasures was the dramatic increase in anti-Western propaganda on Russian television and its increasingly hysterical nature. Since the second half of 2006, Russia has rotated its enemies in almost the same way that the European Union rotates its presidencies—a new one every 6 months. In autumn 2006, Georgia was the chief culprit on the screens of the Russian TV-channels; in spring 2007 it was Estonia’s turn; in the second half of the year the UK took over; and in the first half of 2008 it was Georgia again. These information campaigns were designed to cast a bad image on the countries that had supposedly either engaged in the conduct of, or—even worse in Moscow’s eyes—succumbed to, pro-democratic regime changes. A second goal was to mobilise the domestic audience against “external enemies” and thereby help to manage and manipulate the election season of late 2007-early 2008.¹¹

For quite some time these information campaigns seemed to be virtual wars, designed mainly to influence the domestic audience, while also causing some displeasure to the victim.

¹¹ The Kremlin’s chief “political technologist” Gleb Pavlovski was quite open about his working methods: “If I have a campaign to win, I use whatever means I have,” he acknowledged, and went on to complain that Anglophobia did not sell well, but one always can blame NATO and the US. (This author’s interview with Pavlovski, May 2008.)

In August 2008, however, the virtual war was converted into a real military action. While Moscow's intentions and calculations when it started the war with Georgia can only be speculated upon for now, one lesson has become starkly clear: one should never dismiss hostile rhetoric or hateful propaganda as "designed for the domestic audience" and therefore supposedly innocent. As life has shown on more than one occasion, "propaganda for the domestic audience" has ways of converting itself into external actions; perhaps sometimes even against the will of those who thought that they were in control of that propaganda.

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The conclusion cannot be optimistic. It appears that the relationship between Moscow and its former satellites was decided the moment they chose their respective paths of development. From that point onwards, the difference in their political and value systems and the related thinking patterns guaranteed that lots of issues were seen drastically differently. A common past guaranteed that these differences did not remain a matter of academic debate, but manifested themselves in the most practical issues of everyday life. Furthermore, those issues tend not to be trivial, but have roots in very fundamental things: such as attitudes towards law, truth, justice, etc.

As a result, the advice often given to East Europeans by Western politicians and organisations to improve the relations with Russia has been well-intentioned, but naïve: the Easterners would love to do it, but the price Russia asks for good relations turns out, when closely examined, to be their soul and identity.

Meanwhile, for the old Western countries, the undemocratic features of Russia have of course been visible, but never so plainly exposed in practical life; and dealing with Russia has never borne such a heavy price-tag. That has allowed them, for lack of anything better, to confine their Russia-policy to pretending that the realities in Russia are not as bad as they are, in the hope that this would somehow make those same realities get better.

The only good thing the war in Georgia might have brought along—though it is too early to say—is the end to that pretence. If the disagreements among the Europeans of East and West have so far been on the level of analyses, focusing on how to understand Russia, then from now on a common analytical understanding might be easier to achieve and the discussion should be able to move on towards devising workable policies towards Russia.

The basic mistake the West has made in its relationship with Russia has been not to treat Russia as any other country to which a standard set of expectations and demands is

applied and rewards and punishments measured out according to performance. The West could never have micromanaged Russia and made it a democracy, but the West could have set the standards by its own actions and reactions. By being tolerant of Russia's undemocratic development or by pretending that it did not exist, the West has shown that it does not take democracy very seriously at all. It has compromised itself and its values in the eyes of both the Kremlin and ordinary Russians. The latter can be forgiven for thinking that democracy is something that is used for propaganda purposes, but has little impact on real life.

The only sensible way forward would be to try to reverse that course. Practice what you preach, goes the advice. It will be very hard: suddenly to apply standards-based criteria in a relationship where none have existed is bound to result in an outburst of anger from Russia. Things are further complicated by the need to apply the same standards across the board: Russia's behaviour in Georgia should be scrutinised no differently from Russia's behaviour in Estonia, Finland, Sweden, Germany or the UK. For those Western minds that are still susceptible to the concept of spheres of influence, this will seem unnecessarily troublesome, and even dangerous. And dangerous indeed it is—but dealing with Russia has become dangerous one way or other, and we should better face it. Sticking to our principles late is still better than never: otherwise we will have lost not just Russia, but also the West. Which, unlike Russia, is indeed ours to lose.