

Why Are We Entering the Cold War Again?

Posted by Joan Russow

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By [Roberto Savio](#)

In this column, Roberto Savio, founder and president emeritus of the Inter Press Service (IPS) news agency and publisher of Other News, suggests that media criticism of Russia's actions in Crimea and Ukraine harks back to the Cold War.

ROME, Apr 29 2014 (Columnist Service) - For weeks now, the mainstream media have been unanimously engaged in denouncing Vladimir Putin's action in Crimea first and Ukraine now. The latest cover of The Economist depicts a bear swallowing Ukraine, with the title "Insatiable".

Media unanimity is always troubling, because it means that some knee-jerk reflex is involved. Could it be possible that we are just following the inertia of 40 years of Cold War?

This inertia has not really gone away. Just say or write "communist President Raul Castro," and nobody will blink. But use the same logic and call President Barack Obama a capitalist, and see how it is received.



Roberto Savio. Credit: IPS

Here in Italy, Silvio Berlusconi was able for 20 years to rally his voters against the threat of "communists", as he called members of the left-wing Democratic Party, now in power with a devout Catholic at its head, Matteo Renzi.

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There are at least four points of analysis that are conspicuously missing in the chorus.>

The first is that there is never any allusion to the responsibilities of the West in this affair. Let us recall that Mikhail Gorbachev agreed with George H. W. Bush, Margaret Thatcher, Helmut Kohl and François Mitterrand to let the reunification of Germany go ahead, as long as the West refrained from invading Russia's zone of influence.

Of course, once Gorbachev was out of the way, the game opened up again. Boris Yeltsin's total docility towards the United States is well known.

What is much less well-known is that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) made a 3.5 billion dollar loan to support the ruble. The loan went to the Bank of America, which distributed the money to various Russian accounts.

None of it ever reached the Central Bank of Russia, going instead to the oligarchs so that they could buy up Russia's public companies – and never a word of protest from the IMF. Then along came the unknown Putin, put in power by the departing Yeltsin on the understanding that he would cover up Yeltsin's cronyism.

Here goes a brief summary of how the West gradually encircled Russia:

After Yeltsin, Putin supported Washington's then imminent invasion of Afghanistan in a way that would have been unthinkable during the Cold War. He agreed that U.S. planes could fly through Russian air space, and that the U.S. could use military bases in former Soviet republics in Central Asia, and he ordered his military to share their experience in Afghanistan.

Then in November 2001, Putin visited George W. Bush at his Texas ranch, in a flourish of hype along the lines of "Putin is a new leader who is working for world peace...by working closely with the U.S."

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A few weeks later, Bush announced that the U.S. was withdrawing from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, so that it could build a system in Eastern Europe to protect the members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) from Iran – a move that was seen as directed against Russia in reality, to Putin's dismay.

This was followed by Bush's 2002 invitation to seven nations from the extinct Soviet Union (including Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia) to join NATO (which they did in 2004).

Then in 2003 came the invasion of Iraq, without the consent of the United Nations and over the objections of France, Germany and Russia, turning Putin into an open critic of the U.S.'s claim that it was promoting democracy and upholding international law.

In November of the same year, the Rose Revolution brought Mikheil Saakashvili, a pro-Western president, to power in Georgia. Four months later, street protests in Ukraine turned into the Orange Revolution, carrying another pro-Western president, Viktor Yushchenko, to power.

In 2006, the White House asked for permission to land Bush's plane in Moscow to refuel, but made it clear that Bush had no time to greet Putin. In 2008 came Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence from Serbia, with the support of the U.S., much against Russia's will.

Then Bush asked NATO to grant membership to Ukraine and Georgia, a slap in Moscow's face. So it should have been no surprise when, in 2008, Putin intervened militarily after Georgia tried to regain control of the breakaway pro-Russian region of South Ossetia, taking it under Russian control along with another breakaway region, Abkhazia. Yet we all remember how the media talked about an unreasonable action.

Obama tried to repair the damage done to international relations under Bush. He asked for a "reset" of relations with Russia.

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And at the beginning, everything went well. Russia agreed to the use of its space for getting military supplies to Afghanistan. In April 2010, Russia and the U.S. signed a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), reducing their nuclear arsenals. And Russia supported strong U.N. sanctions against Iran, and cancelled the sale of its S-300 anti-aircraft missiles to Tehran.

But then, in 2011, it became clear that the U.S. was expressing its views about Russia's parliamentary elections. The Western media were against Putin, who accused the U.S. of injecting hundreds of millions of dollars into opposition groups. The then U.S. ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul, called this an exaggeration: he said that only tens of millions of dollars had been provided to civil society organisations.

Putin was elected again in 2012, already obsessed with the Western threat to his power, and in 2013 he gave asylum to National Security Agency (NSA) whistleblower Edward Snowden.

Obama cancelled a planned summit meeting – the first time a U.S. summit with the Kremlin had been cancelled in 50 years.

And while all this was going on, the Arab Spring broke out. Russia authorised military action in Libya, but only to provide humanitarian aid. In fact, this was used to back a change of regime, and Russia felt that it had been duped, and protested to no avail.

Then came Syria, and the West tried to obtain Russian support again for a change of regime, and became upset when Putin refused.

And finally, now, there has been the intervention in Ukraine to get the country into the European Union and away from an economic bloc that Russia was trying to create, with Belarus. So, Ukraine should be seen in a specific context....

The second point is that no political action, short of a war, can really reduce Russia to a local power. It has the largest mass land of any country, it is at the borders of the European Union, and it extends to the Far East. It is both Europe and Asia.

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It is in rivalry with China in Asia, has territorial conflicts with Japan, and faces the U.S. across the Bering Strait. It is a prominent producer of oil and a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, and it has a nuclear arsenal.

Any effort to encircle or weaken it, now that ideological confrontations are gone, can only be seen as part of an old imperial policy. Russia is not a threat as the Soviet Union was.

Russia's GDP is 15 percent that of the European Union's – a bloc of close to 500 million people that accounts for 16 percent of the world's exports. China has 1.3 billion people and nine percent of world trade.

Russia has 145 million people (its population is shrinking by close to one million people every year) and 2.5 percent of world exports. It has few industries, also because Putin is not interested in the modernisation of the country, which would inevitably increase the size of the educated professional class, which is already against him.

The third point, therefore, is that we should take the Ukraine affair with a pinch of salt. It is a very fragile state, where corruption controls politics, and it has structural economic problems. Its western part is more rural, while the eastern part is more industrialised.

The workers there know that entering the European Union would mean the phasing out of many factories. In the western part, during the Second World War, many sided with the Nazi forces, and today there is a strong nationalist movement, close to fascism. Ukraine is a very messy and costly affair.

It is clear that to intervene just to challenge Putin, and offer money (which is basically what the European Union did), seems very shallow thinking. Are we really ready to change the criteria of the European Union, accept a country which is totally out of sync with these criteria, and take on an enormous burden, just to appear to have won against a strongman?

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- [Ukraine Confronts Another Split](#)

- [Discomfort over Crimea Annexation Among Emerging Powers](#)

- [Crimea Vote Splits Families](#)

- [Ukraine Coup Lawful, Crimea Referendum Unlawful](#)

Which brings us to the fourth and final point: Putin is an ex-KGB officer, who feels that Russia was treated unfairly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and that the West is trying to unseat him. All his efforts for reaching an entente with the West have been continuously betrayed, with successive enlargements of NATO, a network of military bases surrounding Russia, clear Western support for all of his opponents, and mediocre trade treatment.

He knows that his feelings about Russian decline are shared by a large majority of his citizens. But he is also an arrogant autocrat, to say the least, who is doing nothing to foster economic modernisation because, by keeping trade and production in his hands, he can maintain control. For him, Ukraine was politically unacceptable.

Another autocrat, Viktor Yanukovich, president of Ukraine from February 2010 to February this year and very much in Putin's style, was deposed by massive street protests sponsored and supported by the West. Any possible contagion should have been stopped in its tracks. So Putin is playing the role of saviour of Russian citizens, which allows him to intervene wherever there are Russian minorities.

The question is: if Putin goes away, will we have a democratic, participatory, clean, non-corrupt Russia? Those who know Russia well do not think so. History is full of examples which show that removing autocrats does not, by itself, bring democracy.

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So, the policy is to continue to surround Putin in the name of democracy. But are we sure that this is not playing his game, by becoming the defender of the Russian people?

They also have the inertia of the Cold War, and they look to the West not exactly as an ally. Today, Putin is the only binding force in Russia. If he goes, most probably there would be a long period of chaos.

This is clearly not in the interest of Russia's citizens...and it is always dangerous to play a game of power without looking to the stability of Europe as such. Of course, this is not the thinking of the strategists in the West who would love to eliminate any other power!

As Naomi Klein writes, the only winners in this affair are the energy companies. They are engaged in a campaign for the world to become independent from Russian oil and gas.

So, let us speed up production of oil in the U.S., regardless of what happens to the environment. And let Europeans stop using Russian gas; we will export it to them. The problem is that there are no structures to do that, and it will take several years to build them.

But just when everybody was debating how to bring climate change under control, and reduce the use of fossil energy, an overall important strategy is pushing this issue into the background. Sri Lankan journalist Tarzie Vittachi once said: "Everything is about something else"...and there are not many examples of oil and democracy going hand-in-hand.