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# Diverging Visions of Partnership

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| NATO | PUTIN | U.S. FOREIGN POLICY | UKRAINE |

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Western observers mostly attribute the chill in Russian relations with the West to President Vladimir Putin's personality, authoritarian tendencies, and excessive ambitions for Russia. All of these factors have had their share in the gradual and steady estrangement of Russia from the West. However, to lay all the current problems at Putin's doorstep would be a mistake because it would overlook some more fundamental causes of Russian-Western discord, which Putin's departure from power would not completely eliminate.

Two of the most important of these causes are: (1) a narrative held by many Russians of the process of the USSR's collapse and the Yeltsin era that is different from those popular in the West; and (2) different visions held by Russia and the West regarding their partnership.

The West has always seen the USSR's collapse as a blessing and Yeltsin as a hero who precipitated this collapse. They have seen the Yeltsin era as a promising period for the growth of democracy and free market economy in Russia. This view is not shared by many Russians. For them, Yeltsin was responsible for torpedoing Gorbachev's plans for the reform of the USSR,

which would have retained it as a loose grouping similar to the British Commonwealth. Had it worked, this concept would have salvaged Russian pride and helped it to retain a measure of influence over the internal Soviet space. Moreover, according to this Russian view, such a solution could have spared Russia such agonizing conflicts as that in Chechnya.

**In short, the West’s idea of partnership was Russia’s absolute acquiescence with all Western policies anywhere in the world, irrespective of the consequences for Russia, along with the total reshaping of Russian society according to a Western model, without any consideration for Russia’s peculiarities, history, and culture.**

Many Russians see Yeltsin’s call for the independence of Russia from the USSR and his call on Russia’s ethnic minorities, such as the Tatars and Chechens, to “get as much sovereignty as you can” as factors responsible for both the USSR’s collapse and the conflicts and turmoil that followed. For these Russians, Yeltsin’s call for Russia’s independence from the USSR was mystifying, since Russia dominated the USSR. Even Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev at the time asked rhetorically, “From whom does Russia seek independence?” By contrast, the West lionized Yeltsin.

Similarly, the West saw policies like economic shock therapy as presaging reform, but many Russians saw it as the wholesale dismantling of Russia’s industrial base, literally handing it over to private individuals, while ordinary Russians experienced a fall in their living standards. Furthermore, while the Russians saw the Chechen war as directed against separatists and terrorists, the West tended to view it as a war of national liberation. The Russians, particularly President Putin, bitterly resented the lack of Western sympathy for Russia in the face of what they saw as terrorist acts committed by extremist Chechen Muslims against Russia.

The cumulative impact of these diverging visions was that many Russians came to believe that the West was not just against the USSR and its policies of confrontation but against Russia as a great power and a key international player. Even such a pro-Western Russian as Andrei Kozyrev, in a 1993 article *Foreign Affairs*, complained that some people in the West cannot accept the idea of Russia as a great power.

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The Russian and Western visions of what a Russo-Western partnership meant were also very different. Again, as explicated by Kozyrev, Russia saw itself as an equal partner with the West in the management of the post-Soviet world, in a sort of condominium or latter-day Conference of Vienna style. In particular, Russia believed that it should continue to play a key role in places such as Central Asia and the Caucasus as the West's partner. But in much of the West, any Russian effort to reorganize its relations with these regions was seen as an attempt to recreate the Soviet Empire.

To make matters worse from this Russian perspective, the West often supported anti-Russian leaders in some of these countries and, in questions related to energy transport, favored Turkey over Russia, and encouraged a greater Turkish role in the ex-Soviet space. In short, the West's idea of partnership was Russia's absolute acquiescence with all Western policies anywhere in the world, irrespective of the consequences for Russia, along with the total reshaping of Russian society according to a Western model, without any consideration for Russia's peculiarities, history, and culture.

Given these diverging narratives and visions, it was no surprise that as early as 1993 a gradual process of moving away from Yeltsin's early positions began in

Russia. The first manifestation was the hardening of the Russian government's position vis à vis autonomist tendencies within the Russian Federation, which in the case of Chechnya led to a long and bloody conflict. Lest one forget, the Chechen War began under Yeltsin.

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In foreign policy, change was to come later, but by 1997, Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov was complaining of U.S. efforts to establish its global hegemony and was asking for the development of a multipolar international system. Later events, such as the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq and the bombing of Libya by forces of NATO nations exacerbated Russian concerns over the West's tendency towards unilateralism. Syria was the last straw, and led Russia to support Bashar Assad at the risk of antagonizing the West.

In short, as soon as the dust over the USSR's collapse settled, the requirements of retaining the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation and preventing further decay of the state system asserted themselves. Similarly, the realities of Russia's geography and history set in and, with them, differences of interests and views on many issues with the West. In other words, by the end of the 1990s, many Russians came to believe that the country needed a strong hand to rebuild the state. This hand happened to be Putin's, but it could have been that of another Russian. Surely, at times Russia has overplayed its hand, both domestically and internationally, to its own detriment, but so have other states. As to the future, a cardinal principle in managing Russian-Western relations should be recognition that Russia has its own security concerns as well as a desire for influence and prestige, goals which may not always coincide with those of the West. The challenge is how to reconcile these conflicting ambitions, so as not to endanger the mutual gains of the last two decades. One

way is not to overly personalize the source of Russian-Western discord. A second way, which incidentally is valid in the case of other countries, is to apply principles of international conduct across the board and not selectively. If international rules are broken by the powerful, others will do the same when they can.

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**Jack Matlock** · Duke University

Dr. Hunter's description of the opposing "narratives" is absolutely correct. One thing she does not mention is that, in 1991, the United States supported Gorbachev's vision, not Yeltsin's. President Bush addressed the Ukrainian parliament on August 1, 1991, recommending that they support Gorbachev's union treaty and reject "suicidal nationalism."

It is ironic, and very damaging to peace and stability, that widespread narratives in both east and west in fact distort what actually happened to bring the Cold War to an end and to eliminate the division of Europe. It was a negotiated solution that had no losers, and it was based on the assumption, and the general assurance, that the U.S. and its Western allies would not "take advantage" of a Soviet withdrawal from Eastern Europe.

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