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Answering the Kremlin's Challenge

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On December 20, 1991, NATO foreign ministers gathered at the alliance's headquarters in Brussels for talks with diplomats from the former Warsaw Pact countries were caught by surprise as the (still) Soviet ambassador, Nikolai Afanasievsky, began reading out a letter from Russian President Boris Yeltsin to NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner. "We consider these relations [with NATO] to be very serious and wish to develop this dialogue in each and every direction, both on the political and military levels," wrote the Russian leader who, five days later, would take control of Moscow's nuclear arsenal and its permanent seat on the UN Security Council as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics formally went out of existence. Yeltsin's letter continued: "Today we are raising the question of Russia's membership in NATO." Unlike the sham Soviet application to join the alliance in 1954, this one was clearly made in good faith, coming a few months after Russian citizens defiantly—and definitively—rejected the old regime, going out in the hundreds of thousands to the streets of Moscow to stand in the way of an attempted hardline coup d'état.

A quarter-century later, this reads almost like fiction. Russia's official national security strategy, signed by President Vladimir Putin, describes the "bankruptcy of the regional system of security…built on the basis of NATO and the European Union" and designates NATO actions, including its "military activization, its continued expansion, the approach of its military infrastructure to Russian borders" as "a threat to [Russian] national security." Russia's

dramatically stepped-up military exercise schedule has included simulated nuclear attacks on NATO member states and allies such as Sweden. In its updated military doctrine, the Kremlin has lowered the threshold for using nuclear weapons, while Mr. Putin has openly and off-handedly discussed his readiness to push the "nuclear button," which his Soviet predecessors had never threatened in public even in the tensest moments of the Cold War.

In 2014, Vladimir Putin undertook the first state-to-state territorial annexation in Europe since the Second World War, seizing Crimea from Ukraine, and launched an unannounced but very real war against his neighbor, sending weapons, money, and even regular Russian troops to back the ostensibly "separatist" uprising in Ukraine's two easternmost regions. Mr. Putin's more overtly hostile acts toward NATO countries have included withdrawing from the US–Russia agreement on the disposal of surplus weapons-grade plutonium, and positioning nuclear-capable Iskander-M missiles in Russia's Kaliningrad enclave, putting them in range of Lithuania and Poland, and, potentially, parts of Germany, including Berlin. In Syria, he has so brazenly opposed Washington in the civil war that will decide the fate of his ally, Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, that experts discuss what to do in the event of a "hot war" incident between US and Russian forces.

Meanwhile, at home, Mr. Putin has portrayed his regime as the antithesis of the "declining" West and a bulwark of "traditional values," while dramatizing its military and foreign policy adventurism as evidence of a Russia "rising from its knees" after the "humiliation" of the 1990s. The state propaganda machine has, for years now, been tuned to attacking Russia's supposed enemies in the West, with Dmitri Kiselev, the most recognizable face on the Kremlin television networks and Mr. Putin's propaganda spin master, infamously boasting on-air about Russia's ability to "turn the United States into radioactive ash."

How and why could such a geopolitical volte-face by a major world power—from seeking membership in NATO to confronting it—have occurred? To answer this question is important not only for finding ways to respond to Mr. Putin's challenges to the Euro-Atlantic community, but also for identifying the lessons that both future Russian leaders and the West should keep in mind when Russia makes its eventual post-Putin transition.

In fact, this coming volte-face had been foreseen—and dramatically highlighted—very early on. On December 14, 1992, at a meeting of foreign ministers from the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in Stockholm, Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, the face of Moscow's pro-European foreign policy under President Yeltsin, took the floor to denounce NATO and EU efforts to "strengthen their military presence in the Baltic States and other regions of the former USSR." Mr. Kozyrev called former Soviet republics "a post-imperial space where Russia has to defend its interests by all available means, including military and economic ones," and where "CSCE norms cannot be fully implemented." As Western diplomats in the audience looked on in disbelief, and US Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger rushed to request an urgent meeting with Mr. Kozyrev, the Russian foreign minister approached the podium once again—this time, to explain that his speech had been a stunt intended to focus attention on what could happen if President Yeltsin's political opponents among the nationalists and Communists centered around the Congress of People's Deputies were to prevail in the domestic power struggle.

As it turned out, Boris Yeltsin won, but then, just a few short years later, handed the keys to his Kremlin office, along with the Russian nuclear codes, to an officer of the very same

organization—the KGB—he had so dramatically defeated in August 1991. Mr. Yeltsin's preferred successor in the Kremlin—as the Russian president himself made clear on several occasions—was the young reformist governor of the Nizhny Novgorod region by the name of Boris Nemtsov, whom he brought to Moscow in the late 1990s as first deputy prime minister. History chose otherwise. And as so often happened in Russian history, a turn toward authoritarianism at home was followed by a matching shift in relations with the outside world, especially with the democracies of the West.

The domestic political changes in the early years of Mr. Putin's presidency were remarkable. Having inherited a flawed and problem-ridden but fundamentally democratic political system—with a pluralistic parliament, competitive elections, and a multitude of media voices, including on national television—the onetime KGB operative quickly reshaped it in accordance with his professional and political upbringing, meeting little resistance at home and even less internationally. Starting with symbolic acts that should have warned those who were willing to notice—such as reinstating the Soviet-era national anthem first introduced by Stalin, and a memorial plaque to his mentor Yuri Andropov (Soviet KGB chairman best known for establishing a special directorate tasked with suppressing dissent and authorizing the practice of committing dissidents to psychiatric asylums) Mr. Putin proceeded with practical steps aimed at cementing his authority. One by one, he took over or shut down independent television networks; curtailed the rights of the regions and abolished direct elections for regional governors; turned the judiciary and law enforcement into tools for punishing his opponents—the best-known case being that of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Russia's richest man who had the tenacity to support opposition parties and paid for it with a ten-year prison sentence—and fixed elections to cleanse the Russian parliament of all genuine opposition, turning it into a rubberstamp—"not a place for discussion," in the unforgettable words of its own former speaker. Russians who dared to oppose Mr. Putin's regime and its policies were denounced as "national traitors" who spend time "scavenging at foreign embassies," as Mr. Putin himself put it. Russian nongovernmental organizations that did not toe the official line—including the Levada Center, the country's leading independent pollster, and Memorial, a human rights group founded by Andrei Sakharov—were labeled "foreign agents" (which in Russian is synonymous with "foreign spies") under one of the multitude of new repressive laws introduced by the Kremlin.

Such a political climate—and the accompanying vision of Russia as a "besieged fortress" surrounded by enemies—inevitably meant a reassessment of the country's place in the world and a reinterpretation of its own recent history. Defying not only geography, but also centuries of history, culture, and religious identity, the Russian government declared, in an official strategy adopted by the culture ministry, that "Russia is not Europe." The peaceful dissolution of the USSR in 1991 was no longer considered an act of liberation for Russia and other former Soviet republics, but, in Mr. Putin's own words, as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century" (presumably greater than the Holocaust, Communist terror, and two of the most destructive wars in the history of mankind.)

The 1990s were no longer seen as a difficult but necessary period of democratic transition, but as the decade when Russia was brought to its knees by the West and its political pawns inside the country. Western countries themselves—the United States chief among them—were no longer considered Russia's natural allies, but adversaries determined to contain, weaken, and dismember Russia; those who "think that Russia… is still a threat, and this threat has to be eliminated" and use terrorism as "an instrument to achieve these goals," as Vladimir Putin astonishingly claimed after the 2004 terrorist attack in Beslan.

Under this "zero-sum" mindset, measures that serve to weaken or destabilize the assumed adversaries are not only acceptable, but necessary—even if they involve direct political interference, from the quite open multimillion-euro loan given to France's far-right *Front national* party—one of Mr. Putin's closest political allies in Western Europe—through the Moscow-based First Czech Russian Bank in 2014 to the hacking of Democratic National Committee emails during the 2016 US election campaign. Political behavior by neighboring governments that was considered hostile has been met with outright force—such as the military incursion into Georgia in 2008, or the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the *de facto* war against Ukraine in the Donbass. Given the historical, linguistic, religious, and cultural proximity between Russia and Ukraine, a corrupt Ukrainian strongman forced out of power by mass protests on the streets of the capital was a scenario too close for comfort for Vladimir Putin—especially after the scare of Russia's own "winter of protest" in 2011 and 2012. The success of the Maidan in Kiev had to be stopped to prevent a Maidan in Moscow—by whatever means necessary. The shock about the Kremlin's assault on Ukraine felt in many Western capitals was naïve: why would a government that violates its own laws and tramples on the rights of its own citizens be expected to respect other countries or follow international norms?

It would be inaccurate to blame the West for Russia's political turnaround in the last quarter-century. The lion's share of responsibility lies within Russia itself, above all with its post-Soviet political elite that failed to match the genuine popular enthusiasm for democracy in the early 1990s with a political strategy that would have allowed Russia to fully come to terms with, and turn the page on, its totalitarian past. Unlike other countries in eastern Europe, Russia never underwent anything resembling a lustration process that would have made it impossible for an operative of the Soviet security services to ever achieve a position of power. Some of the old regime's archives were opened—but not fully, and not for long. The Communist party was declared by Russia's highest court to have been responsible for "the policies of repression directed at millions"—but no consequences followed. The Soviet system remained only half-condemned, while the hardships that accompanied the often half-hearted and inconsistent market reforms, and the unhealthy influence that financial "oligarchs" exercised over elected officials helped discredit the very notion of democracy among the general population. Mr. Putin's revanchistpropaganda fell on fertile ground. Those who will shape Russia's next democratic transition would be wise to learn the lessons.

But so would the leaders of Western democracies. Because they, too, share some of the responsibility for Russia's failed transition in the 1990s—and its renewed authoritarianism at the start of the new century. For most countries that underwent a successful post-Communist transformation it was, as Václav Havel put it, "a return to Europe"—the prospect of becoming full members in the Euro-Atlantic community—that served as the leading incentive for reform, allowing them to brave adversities and make difficult choices. Such a prospect was never seriously offered to Russia. "The question of Russia's membership in NATO" raised by President Yeltsin in December 1991 was met with silence. And, although Russia was admitted into the Council of Europe (which today gives Russian citizens their only recourse to real justice, through the European Court of Human Rights,) membership in the European Union—theoretically open to any European country that fulfills the "Copenhagen criteria" on rule of law, democracy, and a functioning market economy—was never offered to Mr. Yeltsin's Russia even as a distant possibility. Such an approach not only denied Russia's political elites a crucial motivation to implement reforms, but also lent credence to Mr. Putin's subsequent claim that the West was unwilling to accept Russia as a partner, even when its political system was in line with Western values.

The West was, however, more than willing to accept Vladimir Putin. To the bewilderment of many in Russia who had noticed the early warning signs, leaders of the Group of Eight embraced Mr. Putin, it seemed, more eagerly than they ever did his democratic predecessor. As if trying to correct their initial mistake of not opening the door to Russia's democracy in the 1990s, they made a second one—this time, by appearing to give a nod of approval to its newly emerging authoritarianism. Mr. Putin's first steps in that direction were cautious and mindful of potential reaction, particularly from fellow member states in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which includes Russia, the US, and all European Union countries, and whose statues clearly state that "issues relating to human rights, fundamental freedoms, democracy and the rule of law… are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating states and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the state concerned."

No such "legitimate concern" was forthcoming from the West, however. On the contrary: just weeks after an early-dawn raid on the studios of NTV, the country's largest private broadcaster, transferred it to state control—and months after the reinstatement of Stalin's national anthem and the curtailing of the independence of the upper house of Parliament— US President George W. Bush, standing beside Mr. Putin, famously declared that he had "looked the man in the eye... [and] was able to get a sense of his soul." That same year, in 2001, Mr. Bush praised Mr. Putin as "a new style of leader, a reformer, a man who loves his country as much as I love mine… a man who is going to make a huge difference in making the world more peaceful by working closely with the United States." The self-delusion was not confined to the White House. In June 2003, days after the Kremlin pulled the plug on Russia's last independent national television channel, the British government treated Mr. Putin to a lavish royal reception at the London Guildhall—not too far from the spot where, three years later, agents likely acting on Kremlin orders would poison FSB defector Alexander Litvinenko with radioactive polonium.

Mr. Putin can be forgiven for getting the wrong message. And, while one would be hard-pressed to find many areas of agreement between the administration of George W. Bush and that of his successor Barack Obama, their attitude toward Mr. Putin demonstrated remarkable bipartisan continuity. Mr. Obama began his presidency with a "reset" in relations with the Kremlin, once again prioritizing tactical deals over principles. Perhaps the most grotesque illustration of that policy came in March 2012. As tens of thousands of people gathered in downtown Moscow to protest Mr. Putin's declared victory in an election characterized by what OSCE observers called a lack of "real competition" and "abuse of government resources," the State Department announced that "the United States congratulates the Russian people on the completion of the presidential elections, and looks forward to working with the president-elect."

Recognizing the short-sightedness of its past willingness to sacrifice values for the sake of *realpolitik* would be a good starting point for the Euro-Atlantic community to reassess its attitude toward Vladimir Putin. To some extent, this began in 2014. A forcible change of borders in Europe achieved what repressions against the opposition, the muzzling of the media, and the successive rigging of elections could not. Mr. Putin has been disinvited from Group of Eight meetings; extensive sanctions, both individual and sectoral, have been imposed by US and EU governments; and Western leaders have stopped pretending that the Kremlin strongman is a fellow democrat—although, from time to time, we still hear influential voices calling for a return to "business as usual." There is a growing appreciation in capitals around the globe that the Kremlin's domestic behavior and its international conduct are inextricably linked—and that nothing will change until Mr. Putin's regime is replaced by a democratic government.

That task, of course, must be undertaken by Russian citizens alone. Yet, while outsiders should not attempt to shape political events inside Russia, neither should they enable Mr. Putin and his kleptocrats by providing safe harbor for their illicit gains. For the many striking parallels between the Soviet system and the current regime in Russia—from political prisoners to media censorship—there is also a crucial difference: while they were persecuting dissenters and engaging in anti-Western propaganda, members of the Soviet Politburo did not store their money in Western banks, send their children to Western schools, or invest in luxurious real estate in Western countries. Those who rule Russia today treat their citizens in ways expected of third-world dictatorships, but choose the freedoms and protections of the West when it comes to their own families and their ill-gotten money. This hypocrisy must stop. Those who trample on the free world's most basic norms should not be allowed to enjoy its economic and political privileges. Western democracies should not serve as havens for Mr. Putin's crooks and human rights abusers. Telling such people that they and their money are not welcome would be a strong message of solidarity to those in Russia who continue, at great personal risk, to work for a democratic future in our country.

In 2012, the US Congress sent such a message by passing a groundbreaking law that, for the first time, introduced personal accountability for human rights violations. The Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act—named after a Russian lawyer who was arrested and tortured to death in prison after uncovering a tax fraud scheme involving government officials—banned Russian human rights abusers from receiving US visas and owning US assets. Boris Nemtsov, the late leader of the Russian opposition, described the Magnitsky Act as "the most pro-Russian law ever passed by a foreign parliament" because it was directed against those who abuse the rights of Russian citizens and plunder money from Russian taxpayers. For years, however, the potential consequences of the Act were limited by timid implementation, with only low-level abusers targeted by its provisions. The unspoken "glass ceiling" was broken in January 2017 by the outgoing Obama administration when it decided to blacklist General Alexander Bastrykin, one of Mr. Putin's closest confidants who, as head of Russia's Investigative Committee, was in charge of a slate of politically motivated criminal prosecutions, including those against the Bolotnaya Square protesters, and who once personally threatened to murder a leading independent journalist.

It also took years for Europe to follow. In December 2016, Estonia, a tiny former Soviet republic on Russia's northwestern border, had the tenacity to become the first European Union member state to introduce its own Magnitsky law. Two months later, the United Kingdom—long a favored destination for Kremlin kleptocrats and thus the most important country in this regard—took a decisive step as its House of Commons approved a bill allowing courts to freeze the assets of people who have profited from corruption and human rights abuse. "This measure would send a clear statement that the UK will not… allow those who have committed gross abuse or violations around the world to launder their money here," Ben Wallace, Britain's security minister, affirmed before the vote. It is essential that other European countries move in the same direction if the West is to become serious about defending the principles it claims to espouse.

To this end—it truly is better late than never—the international community should hold the Kremlin accountable not only for its unlawful actions abroad, but also for its continuing violations of the rule of law and human rights at home, which constitute clear breaches of Russia's commitments under its membership of the OSCE and the Council of Europe in such areas as freedom of the media, election standards, or due process. The latter has been clearly problematic in the official investigation into the assassination of Mr. Nemtsov, who was gunned

down in February 2015 two-hundred yards from the Kremlin wall. Although the alleged perpetrators have been arrested and put on trial, the Russian Investigative Committee is unable or unwilling to pursue those who had ordered and organized the killing—for example, not even once questioning Ramzan Kadyrov, the Kremlin-appointed head of Chechnya with evident links to the accused gunmen. The Russian authorities must not be allowed to sweep this investigation under the carpet. The necessary questions must be asked, including publicly, through all available bilateral and multilateral mechanisms.

The Kremlin's aggressive "propaganda war" must be countered, among other ways by the development of quality independent media in the Russian language that would provide objective information to Russians both inside and outside the country. In 2015, while holding the rotating EU presidency, the government of Latvia put forward a proposal to establish a Europe-wide Russian-language television channel, but the idea did not win backing from other EU states. Meanwhile, the Kremlin continues to pump substantial resources into RT, its English-language broadcasting outlet that is widely available (if not widely watched) in Europe and North America.

Standards should be maintained when it comes to parliamentary diplomacy. Members of the current Russian legislature, who owe their seats to an election in 2016 that—like all national elections in Russia since 2003—fell far short of acceptable democratic standards, should not be welcomed as bona fide members in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Not because they represent Russia—but because they *do not* represent it.

This distinction is crucial for the success or failure of Russia's future transition—and Western leaders should make it explicitly and clearly. Too often, they rhetorically equate Mr. Putin with Russia, condemning "actions by Russia" or "the position of Russia" when they mean actions and positions of an unelected authoritarian regime in the Kremlin. This may seem like a trivial point—but when the US president or the German chancellor refer to restrictions imposed on individuals or entities connected with the aggression against Ukraine as "sanctions on Russia," they unwittingly do the bidding of Mr. Putin's propaganda. The Euro-Atlantic community should be careful to avoid the appearance of blaming the people of Russia for the actions of a regime they can neither unseat in a democratic election nor hold accountable through independent media or a legitimate legislature. On the contrary: while standing firm on principles in dealing with Vladimir Putin, Western governments should make it clear that a future democratic Russia will be welcomed as an equal partner both in the world and in Europe, and will reclaim its rightful seat at the table by returning to the Group of Eight and—should its people and its elected leaders choose—by joining the Euro-Atlantic institutions. In short, Russia should be treated for what it is—a European county, fundamentally no different from its neighbors that, until recently, also lived under non-democratic regimes but were able to "return to Europe."

In the spring of 1989, shortly before a succession of "velvet revolutions" would sweep through the countries of central and eastern Europe, liberating them from Soviet-style regimes and culminating in Russia's own democratic revolution in August 1991, US President George H. W. Bush took the podium at the Rheingoldhalle in Mainz, West Germany, to lay out his vision for a coming era. "For forty years, the world has waited for the cold war to end. And decade after decade, time after time, the flowering human spirit withered from the chill of conflict and oppression; and again, the world waited," Mr. Bush declared. "But the passion for freedom cannot be denied forever. The world has waited long enough. The time is right. Let Europe be whole and free."

In the ensuing quarter-century, the progress toward this goal must surely have surpassed the boldest dreams of the cold-war generation of Western leaders. Despite the many remaining difficulties, democracy and cooperation have succeeded where there were once dictatorships fenced off by an "iron curtain." But the job is not yet done. A Europe "whole and free" will only become a reality once Europe's two largest nations—Russia and Ukraine—take their places within it. That day will come. Such is the logic of history. But those who are entrusted with political responsibility in the current generation should do all they can to bring that day a little closer.

The author is vice chairman of Open Russia, a Russian pro-democracy movement.

This essay will appear in an upcoming World Affairs book collection on transatlantic challenges.