

# Primakov in Context: Myths and Realities of Russia's New Prime Minister

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A casual reader of Western media in Europe and the US, in particular, might be excused for believing that the potential for a new US-Russian Cold War had increased significantly as of mid-September. The catalyst for this change was not geo-political or politico-economic but individual and idiosyncratic: the appointment of Yevgeniy Primakov as Russia's new prime minister. This memo argues that such a portrayal of the situation is seriously flawed: Primakov's views and decision-making style, as well as the institutional and international contexts within which he operates, render any sharp turn to the past in Russian policy unlikely. While Mr. Primakov is not a Western liberalizer in the manner of former Foreign Minister Kozyrev, his outlook and views should not be surprising to US policymakers, accustomed as they are to the tough-minded and pragmatic Realpolitik practiced by Kissinger, Brzezinski and Albright, among others.

## **Primakov the Man: Myths versus Realities**

The profiles of Primakov offered by many analysts distort reality and lack nuance. Here, I highlight three of the more egregious myths currently being propagated.

*Primakov is the epitome of the old-style Soviet apparatchik.*

Russia's new prime minister is a product of his (Soviet) times, but he is far from being a standard-bearer of the old nomenklatura--those individuals with narrow, often corrupt, bureaucratic mindsets who spent careers slowly advancing through the Party apparatus. Rather, Primakov is better seen as representative of another prominent Soviet-era group: foreign policy intellectuals. These were men such as Yevgeniy Varga, Nikolay Inozemtsev, Aleksandr Yakovlev and Georgiy Arbatov who combined academic expertise on international affairs with close connections to, and sometimes positions within, Party structures. Like nearly all these men, Primakov was not a foreign policy visionary. Instead, throughout the Soviet period he played a crucial linking role--acting as a conduit for bringing new ideas and concepts, developed outside Party/state units, to the attention of central decision-makers. Primakov was particularly adept at facilitating such linkages during the late Soviet period, when he played a central role in promoting the conceptual revolution in Soviet foreign policy (so-called "new political thinking") that helped bring the Cold War to an unexpected and peaceful end.

*Primakov advocates an aggressive and hard-line foreign policy vis-à-vis the West.*

The last point challenges a second popular myth: Primakov as the hard-line Russian nationalist. In fact, scholars who have analyzed his writing, which stretches back to the early 1960s, typically portray it as progressive in nature. Primakov participated in, and helped advance, a number of key Soviet debates, including those over the prospects for socialism in the developing world, the economic vitality and foreign policy behavior of Western capitalism, and the role of arms control in national security policy. From the vantage point of 1998, these topics seem trite, and Primakov's argumentation conservative. However, when placed in the proper (Soviet) frame of reference, his contributions look far more relevant and progressive.

The skeptic might appropriately counter that actions speak louder than words. In particular, while Primakov may have been good at "talking the talk" (a liberal stance as an academic), was he not the architect of a hard-line, anti-Western policy during his tenure as foreign minister (1996-1998)? However, crucial to any evaluation of this policy is the baseline against which it is compared. The assumption implicit in many Western analyses is that the proper one is the late Soviet (Shevardnadze) or early post-Soviet (Kozyrev) periods. Certainly, when compared to the policies of a Shevardnadze (empire in retreat) or early Kozyrev (empire collapsed), Primakov's stewardship of Russian policy looks aggressive and, from a Western perspective, worrisome. Yet, when viewed in a longer-term (Soviet/Russian) or comparative perspective (other 20th century great powers), his diplomacy begins to look strikingly familiar: a hard-headed advocacy of national interests, an unwillingness to accept that state policy is simply what other powers or international institutions dictate, and a desire to promote a country's diplomatic influence in areas of traditional concern.

My purpose here is not to defend Primakov's foreign policy or to claim that it was overwhelmingly pro-Western, which it was not. Instead, the intent is to place these policies in context. It is useful to consider whether Russian policy over the past two years would have been any different if Andrei Kozyrev had remained in office--I think not.

*Primakov's decision-making style is authoritarian--as befits a former "spymaster."*

It is difficult to understand the source of this particular misperception--especially as it flies in the face of a 20-year track record that Primakov has built up in various institutional contexts. As an organizational leader, it is true that he is a taskmaster, one who relies upon and thus demands a lot of key subordinates. Yet, this is a leader with a very open ear: Primakov prides himself on a pluralistic decision-making style where he typically seeks advice from a wide array of individuals before making a decision. Moreover, in contrast with most other foreign policy intellectuals who went on to play political roles in the Soviet/Russian transition, Primakov devotes equal attention to policy formulation and policy implementation. Indeed, he was widely praised in Russian circles for making the Foreign Ministry a more effective and influential player in the policy process during his time there.

### **Primakov the Prime Minister: Continuity in Policy and Style**

Primakov is 69 years old and unlikely, at this point in his life, to change the conceptual apparatus, approach to decision-making, or leadership skills that he has developed over the course of four decades. Indeed, since his assumption of the prime minister's post in mid-September, there are several indicators of continuity. Conceptually, this has meant tactical adaptation in both economic and foreign affairs--and not a wholesale rejection of the Kiriyenko/Chernomyrdin policy legacy. As for decision-making, it is interesting to note the process by which Primakov has sought to develop an anti-crisis program: it involved the commissioning of several different groups to come up with ideas. This is indicative of an approach that the new Prime Minister has honed over many years; it also increases the likelihood of establishing a political consensus for reform, the absence of which has crippled the efforts of previous governments. At the bureaucratic level, while it is too early to tell whether Primakov's leadership abilities are adequate to the new tasks at hand, there are grounds for skepticism. It was one thing for him to take over and revitalize academic institutions (the foreign policy think tank IMEMO in 1985-88) or a particular government ministry (Foreign Affairs in 1996-98); it will be quite another for Primakov to resurrect the federal authorities' seriously eroded powers of policy implementation (the collection of tax revenues, say).

Beyond this, there are certain enduring features of Primakov's style and personality that may serve him, and Russia, well in present circumstances. Not a grand thinker or ideologue, Primakov is pragmatic and has a problem-solving focus. These may be genuine assets at a time when the central challenge facing the government will be to implement whatever anti-crisis program is eventually agreed.

Tactically, this pragmatism reflects--and is probably a consequence of--political instincts refined throughout a 40-year career in the Party/state as well as academic institutions. For better or worse, Primakov is an intensely political animal, which explains why he is virtually the only major Gorbachev-era policy advisor to survive and prosper in the politicized environment of post-Soviet Russia. Far more than Chernomyrdin (or especially Kiriyenko) Primakov appreciates that public policy and the ideas informing it, no matter how appealing in the abstract, are worthless unless grounded in political realities and backed by powers of implementation. Indeed, his formation of the first true coalition government in the post-Soviet era suggests that his political antennae are sharp as ever. Of course, whether such coalition-building skills are compatible with the promulgation of a minimally coherent economic program is a central and still unanswered question.

### **Conclusion**

Individuals always make policy in the context of some larger set of constraints, and in Primakov's case these are severe. At the national level, the days are long gone when particular leaders--a CPSU general secretary, a President Gorbachev or a prime minister, say--could play a dominating role in Russian policymaking. Indeed, the state's vastly

weakened powers make politics a defining feature of effective governance in the country today. Furthermore, at the international level, Russia's ongoing integration with global markets sharply restricts the scope of possible policy change.

Given these realities, Mr. Primakov, in the end, was probably one of the better choices for the prime minister's post. Having spent over 30 years studying and making policy regarding Russia's international environment and having extensive experience at integrating the abstract world of policy concepts with the practical world of politics, he has the necessary outlook and skills for understanding and dealing with such constraints. At a minimum, this may allow him to stabilize the current situation, which, in itself, would be no small accomplishment.

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