

What President Bush Should Say to President Putin in Bratislava

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As the world was gripped by political events in Ukraine late in 2004, I watched in amazement as President Vladimir Putin of Russia painted himself and his country into a smaller and more uncomfortable corner.

The same leader, who skillfully built relationships with Europe's leaders and who wisely was the first to call President George Bush after 9/11 and declare his country ready to help in the common defense against transnational terrorism, committed the diplomatic faux pas of publicly declaring for a candidate in the elections of a neighboring sovereign country. Even worse, he staked his country's interests and credibility on that candidate's win.

Compounding this original miscalculation, Putin congratulated his favored candidate based upon fraudulent results, which were then declared invalid by Ukraine's Supreme Court. Putin then held a hastily arranged meeting with outgoing Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma at a Moscow airport to announce -- not that Russia would respect any Ukrainian decision -- but that the only acceptable option was the one most likely to preserve his favored leadership.

This was behavior more akin to Soviet actions during the Polish and Hungarian crises of 1956 -- when Kremlin leaders summoned local communists to plot intervention against popular resistance to illegitimate regimes installed by Moscow -- than to the skilled diplomacy of a Russian leader who represents his country at G8 summits, claiming Russia's right to stand among the world's most powerful democracies.

Where just months ago many officials in Europe and the US were willing to excuse Putin's efforts to eliminate economic and political opposition within Russia, Putin's Ukraine's policy caused a fundamental, if still quiet, re-thinking of assumptions about how genuine is his stated goal of Russian integration into the global system. Does he seek to increase Russia's wealth in order to improve the lives of Russian citizens, or to increase Russian power to wield it over an anachronistic "sphere of influence"? Whereas many in Washington, Paris, and Berlin were willing to believe the former, now they increasingly are disconcerted by evidence of the latter.

Why has Putin been caught up in such a self-defeating, counterproductive strategy? Perhaps he was being duplicitous all along, masking a determined neo-imperialism behind charm and a facility with foreign languages.

Though tempting in its simplicity, such an explanation is too simplistic. I think the evidence is that Putin's goal of economic growth and global integration has become increasingly hobbled by a worldview preoccupied with what it sees as Western machinations to weaken and even break apart the Russian Federation.

During the Ukraine crisis, the Russian press was filled with wild assertions that Western governments had funded and even orchestrated the opposition campaign and demonstrations. That none of these assertions have any basis in fact was irrelevant in Russian politics and policy, because Russia lacks an independent media or political opposition that can challenge Kremlin perceptions. In pursuit of a political system in which he cannot be challenged, Putin has isolated himself from the kind of independent information and ideas he needs to make good policy.

Putin is caught in a trap of his own making: He is dependent on a small set of suspicious advisors who hold a dark world view in which Russia is the target of a western campaign to weaken and dismantle the country. Other advisors who advocate Russia's economic development and integration can influence Putin and his policies in the run up to summits and G8 meetings, and therefore at those events Putin says the things the West has become accustomed to hearing from a pragmatic, post-Soviet leader. But during crises the Kremlin goes into a siege mentality, and feeds its own fears and misperceptions on the reasons for Russia's insecurity and problems. We saw this after the massacre at a school in Beslan, and we saw it in the diplomatic crisis over Ukraine.

How should the US cope with Putin's Russia under these circumstances? While the sinister world view is genuine, American leaders need to understand that the problem is the closed decision-making structure and absence of challenging information to shake the Kremlin mindset.

Although the US can do nothing to change that structure, President Bush can do quite a lot to address the problem of information failure. There are few moments in history when personalities and personal relationships among leaders really matter. This is a moment when the personalities and personal relationship of President Putin and President Bush could matter a great deal. President Bush needs to directly take on the myth of an American conspiracy. He needs to tell President Putin what we hear from his top advisors, and rebut the myth. He needs to show that the facts simply do not support Russia's fears. He needs to make clear that in fact the evidence remains strong that the US wants Russia to pursue a strategy of development, prosperity, and security in cooperation with the United States and Europe.

The stakes have become the future of Russia itself. Russia's self-destructive policies risk further isolating and embittering what has become a fearful, poorly informed, isolated Kremlin leadership. President Bush needs to launch a new US Russia policy in Bratislava, one that relentlessly conveys the truth about US policies and welcomes frank discussion about Russian concerns. President Bush needs to tell his counterpart that Putin's isolation is failing him and risking Russia's future. President Putin has isolated himself from his fellow citizens: he needs to see that the real strategy for Russian greatness and prosperity lies in listening to them.