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Viewing Russia From the Inside

By George Friedman

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Last week I flew into Moscow, arriving at 4:30 p.m. on Dec. 8. It gets dark in Moscow around that time, and the sun doesn't rise until about 10 a.m. at this time of the year — the so-called Black Days versus White Nights. For anyone used to life closer to the equator, this is unsettling. It is the first sign that you are not only in a foreign country, which I am used to, but also in a foreign environment. Yet as we drove toward downtown Moscow, well over an hour away, the traffic, the road work, were all commonplace. Moscow has three airports, and we flew into the farthest one from downtown, Domodedovo — the primary international airport. There is endless renovation going on in Moscow, and while it holds up traffic, it indicates that prosperity continues, at least in the capital.

Our host met us and we quickly went to work getting a sense of each other and talking about the events of the day. He had spent a great deal of time in the United States and was far more familiar with the nuances of American life than I was with Russian. In that he was the perfect host, translating his country to me, always with the spin of a Russian patriot, which he surely was. We talked as we drove into Moscow, managing to dive deep into the subject.

From him, and from conversations with Russian experts on most of the regions of the world — students at the Institute of International Relations — and with a handful of what I took to be ordinary citizens (not employed by government agencies engaged in managing Russia's foreign

and economic affairs), I gained a sense of Russia's concerns. The concerns are what you might expect. The emphasis and order of those concerns were not.

Russians' Economic Expectations

I thought the economic problems of Russia would be foremost on people's minds. The plunge of the ruble, the decline in oil prices, a general slowdown in the economy and the effect of Western sanctions all appear in the West to be hammering the Russian economy. Yet this was not the conversation I was having. The decline in the ruble has affected foreign travel plans, but the public has only recently begun feeling the real impact of these factors, particularly through inflation.

But there was another reason given for the relative calm over the financial situation, and it came not only from government officials but also from private individuals and should be considered very seriously. The Russians pointed out that economic shambles was the norm for Russia, and prosperity the exception. There is always the expectation that prosperity will end and the normal constrictions of Russian poverty return.

The Russians suffered terribly during the 1990s under Boris Yeltsin but also under previous governments stretching back to the czars. In spite of this, several pointed out, they had won the wars they needed to win and had managed to live lives worth living. The golden age of the previous 10 years was coming to an end. That was to be expected, and it would be endured. The government officials meant this as a warning, and I do not think it was a bluff. The pivot of the conversation was about sanctions, and the intent was to show that they would not cause Russia to change its policy toward Ukraine.

Russians' strength is that they can endure things that would break other nations. It was also pointed out that they tend to support the government regardless of competence when Russia feels threatened. Therefore, the Russians argued, no one should expect that sanctions, no matter how harsh, would cause Moscow to capitulate. Instead the Russians would respond with their own sanctions, which were not specified but which I assume would mean seizing the assets of Western companies in Russia and curtailing agricultural imports from Europe. There was no talk of cutting off natural gas supplies to Europe.

If this is so, then the Americans and Europeans are deluding themselves on the effects of sanctions. In general, I personally have little confidence in the use of sanctions. That being said, the Russians gave me another prism to look through. Sanctions reflect European and American thresholds of pain. They are designed to cause pain that the West could not withstand. Applied to others, the effects may vary.

My sense is that the Russians were serious. It would explain why the increased sanctions, plus oil price drops, economic downturns and the rest simply have not caused the erosion of confidence that would be expected. Reliable polling numbers show that President Vladimir Putin is still enormously popular. Whether he remains popular as the decline sets in, and whether the elite being hurt financially are equally sanguine, is another matter. But for me the most important lesson I might have learned in Russia — "might" being the operative term — is that Russians

don't respond to economic pressure as Westerners do, and that the idea made famous in a presidential campaign slogan, "It's the economy, stupid," may not apply the same way in Russia.

The Ukrainian Issue

There was much more toughness on Ukraine. There is acceptance that events in Ukraine were a reversal for Russia and resentment that the Obama administration mounted what Russians regard as a propaganda campaign to try to make it appear that Russia was the aggressor. Two points were regularly made. The first was that Crimea was historically part of Russia and that it was already dominated by the Russian military under treaty. There was no invasion but merely the assertion of reality. Second, there was heated insistence that eastern Ukraine is populated by Russians and that as in other countries; those Russians must be given a high degree of autonomy. One scholar pointed to the Canadian model and Quebec to show that the West normally has no problem with regional autonomy for ethnically different regions but is shocked that the Russians might want to practice a form of regionalism commonplace in the West.

The case of Kosovo is extremely important to the Russians both because they feel that their wishes were disregarded there and because it set a precedent. Years after the fall of the Serbian government that had threatened the Albanians in Kosovo, the West granted Kosovo independence. The Russians argued that the borders were redrawn although no danger to Kosovo existed. Russia didn't want it to happen, but the West did it because it could. In the Russian view, having redrawn the map of Serbia, the West has no right to object to redrawing the map of Ukraine.

I try not to be drawn into matters of right and wrong, not because I don't believe there is a difference but because history is rarely decided by moral principles. I have understood the Russians' view of Ukraine as a necessary strategic buffer and the idea that without it they would face a significant threat, if not now, then someday. They point to Napoleon and Hitler as examples of enemies defeated by depth.

I tried to provide a strategic American perspective. The United States has spent the past century pursuing a single objective: avoiding the rise of any single hegemon that might be able to exploit Western European technology and capital and Russian resources and manpower. The United States intervened in World War I in 1917 to block German hegemony, and again in World War II. In the Cold War the goal was to prevent Russian hegemony. U.S. strategic policy has been consistent for a century.

The United States has been conditioned to be cautious of any rising hegemon. In this case the fear of a resurgent Russia is a recollection of the Cold War, but not an unreasonable one. As some pointed out to me, economic weakness has rarely meant military weakness or political disunity. I agreed with them on this and pointed out that this is precisely why the United States has a legitimate fear of Russia in Ukraine. If Russia manages to reassert its power in Ukraine, then what will come next? Russia has military and political power that could begin to impinge on Europe. Therefore, it is not irrational for the United States, and at least some European countries, to want to assert their power in Ukraine.

When I laid out this argument to a very senior official from the Russian Foreign Ministry, he basically said he had no idea what I was trying to say. While I think he fully understood the geopolitical imperatives guiding Russia in Ukraine, to him the century long imperatives guiding the United States are far too vast to apply to the Ukrainian issue. It is not a question of him only seeing his side of the issue. Rather, it is that for Russia, Ukraine is an immediate issue, and the picture I draw of American strategy is so abstract that it doesn't seem to connect with the immediate reality. There is an automatic American response to what it sees as Russian assertiveness; however, the Russians feel they have been far from offensive and have been on the defense. For the official, American fears of Russian hegemony were simply too far-fetched to contemplate.

In other gatherings, with the senior staff of the Institute of International Relations, I tried a different tack, trying to explain that the Russians had embarrassed U.S. President Barack Obama in Syria. Obama had not wanted to attack when poison gas was used in Syria because it was militarily difficult and because if he toppled Syrian President Bashar al Assad, it would leave Sunni jihadists in charge of the country. The United States and Russia had identical interests, I asserted, and the Russian attempt to embarrass the president by making it appear that Putin had forced him to back down triggered the U.S. response in Ukraine. Frankly, I thought my geopolitical explanation was a lot more coherent than this argument, but I tried it out. The discussion was over lunch, but my time was spent explaining and arguing, not eating. I found that I could hold my own geopolitically but that they had mastered the intricacies of the Obama administration in ways I never will.

The Future for Russia and the West

The more important question was what will come next. The obvious question is whether the Ukrainian crisis will spread to the Baltics, Moldova or the Caucasus. I raised this with the Foreign Ministry official. He was emphatic, making the point several times that this crisis would not spread. I took that to mean that there would be no Russian riots in the Baltics, no unrest in Moldova and no military action in the Caucasus. I think he was sincere. The Russians are stretched as it is. They must deal with Ukraine, and they must cope with the existing sanctions, however much they can endure economic problems. The West has the resources to deal with multiple crises. Russia needs to contain this crisis in Ukraine.

The Russians will settle for a degree of autonomy for Russians within parts of eastern Ukraine. How much autonomy, I do not know. They need a significant gesture to protect their interests and to affirm their significance. Their point that regional autonomy exists in many countries is persuasive. But history is about power, and the West is using its power to press Russia hard. But obviously, nothing is more dangerous than wounding a bear. Killing him is better, but killing Russia has not proved easy.

I came away with two senses. One was that Putin was more secure than I thought. In the scheme of things, that does not mean much. Presidents come and go. But it is a reminder that things that would bring down a Western leader may leave a Russian leader untouched. Second, the Russians do not plan a campaign of aggression. Here I am more troubled — not because they want to

invade anyone, but because nations frequently are not aware of what is about to happen, and they might react in ways that will surprise them. That is the most dangerous thing about the situation. It is not what is intended, which seems genuinely benign. What is dangerous is the action that is unanticipated, both by others and by Russia. At the same time, my general analysis remains intact. Whatever Russia might do elsewhere, Ukraine is of fundamental strategic importance to Russia. Even if the east received a degree of autonomy, Russia would remain deeply concerned about the relationship of the rest of Ukraine to the West. As difficult as this is for Westerners to fathom, Russian history is a tale of buffers. Buffer states save Russia from Western invaders. Russia wants an arrangement that leaves Ukraine at least neutral.

For the United States, any rising power in Eurasia triggers an automatic response born of a century of history. As difficult as it is for Russians to understand, nearly half a century of a Cold War left the United States hypersensitive to the possible re-emergence of Russia. The United States spent the past century blocking the unification of Europe under a single, hostile power. What Russia intends and what America fears are very different things.

The United States and Europe have trouble understanding Russia's fears. Russia has trouble understanding particularly American fears. The fears of both are real and legitimate. This is not a matter of misunderstanding between countries but of incompatible imperatives. All of the good will in the world — and there is precious little of that — cannot solve the problem of two major countries that are compelled to protect their interests and in doing so must make the other feel threatened. I learned much in my visit. I did not learn how to solve this problem, save that at the very least each must understand the fears of the other, even if they can't calm them.