

Russian Roulette

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The collapse of the former Soviet Union generated much satisfaction among many Americans, Europeans, and others who, with justification, saw the evils of that empire as proof of the failures of the Communist system on which it was based. No political system hitherto invented provides protection against the worst instincts of rapacious rulers and their acolytes, and many of those who thought that Karl Marx had done so found themselves contemplating their fate in the gulag, where tens of millions perished while Soviet bigwigs partied in their dachas. The theoretical merits of Communism turned out no better in practice than Naziism or Fascism, whether tested in Russia, China, or Cambodia.

But the world may yet come to appreciate the seven decades of Communist control over the Soviet empire for what it did to constrain the Russian reach for global power. Communism's end-justifies-the-means produced conditions under which fear, and hence corruption, suppressed initiative and innovation. Communism's inherent inefficiencies spawned an economic system destined to disintegrate in a globalizing world. The Communist imperialists extended their power over a vast colonial empire reaching from central Asia to central Europe, requiring massive investments in policing as well as armed intervention. Entire populations (for example the Chechens and the Tatars) were exiled to remote desert areas at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives, then "pardoned" by more moderate rulers to return to their abandoned abodes where Russians had taken their place. To the wider world, Russia's Cold-War leaders might threaten "we will bury you," but the cost of their ruthless rule inhibited their capacity to do so, and the Cold War stayed cold except in proxy settings.

Now Russia is the "free and open" society that might have emerged from the Revolution a century ago, its lost empire a national preoccupation, its former colonies resentful, its Communist-era settlers abandoned to newly sovereign governments, its allies near and far looking to Moscow for succor. In their unconstrained social-spatial engineering, the dominant Russians of the former U.S.S.R. redrew boundaries and awarded territories and peoples to "republics" of which they were not historically a part on the arrogant assumption that all Soviet member states would be Moscow's vassals in perpetuity. Thus a Soviet dictator in 1954 capriciously transferred the Crimea Peninsula to Ukraine as a reward for Ukraine's contribution to the Soviet Union's well-being, not imagining that, before the end of the century, Ukraine would be a sovereign state in fact rather than in Communist mythology. As a result, millions of Russians today find themselves under the government in Kyiv (Kiev) rather than Moscow.

The Slavic diaspora in what Russians still call their "near-abroad" continue to arouse nationalist emotions in the new Russia. Millions of Russians have returned to their ancestral home, but many more remain beyond the border, from Kazakhstan to Estonia. And others – Slavs as well as non-Slavs – who allied themselves with the Communist cause during the Soviet period also have Moscow's attention. Indeed, while the current crisis in Georgia has been simmering for years, its escalation relates directly to the last convulsions of another Communist collapse, that of Yugoslavia, and its largest fragment, Serbia.

The devolution of the former Yugoslavia initially yielded five states, of which Serbia was the largest and in many ways the most complex, with Hungarian, Montenegrin, and Kosovar (Albanian) minorities under Belgrade's government. The Hungarian minority in the north did not agitate for secession, but coastal Montenegro left the Serbian fold in 2006 without serious problems and became another of Europe's ministates, with a population below 700,000. The Muslim majority of Kosovo, landlocked leftover of the Ottoman period and numbering about 1.8 million, victims of Serbian subjugation during the devolutionary period and inalterably opposed to further Serbian domination, attained independence in 2008 with the support of the United States and a majority of (but not all) European states. Russia vociferously objected to Kosovo's independence, supporting the Serbian position that Kosovo is a historic part of the former kingdom and vowing to veto any application it might make to join the United Nations.

While the international community's attention was focused on the Kosovo issue, the simmering trouble between Russia and Georgia worsened, and it was no coincidence. Even as Moscow continued to object to Kosovo's recognition, Russian military equipment and troops began to converge on two stretches of Russia's international border: those of Abkhazia, a corner of Georgia on the Black Sea coast, and of South Ossetia, in the Caucasus Mountains. While Georgia was one of the 15 Socialist Soviet "republics," these two pockets of Georgia – as well as a third, Ajaria, also on the Black Sea coast – were simply administrative acknowledgments of ethnic-minority realities. Indeed, the Ossetians straddled the border between Russia and Georgia: North Ossetia lies one small entity removed from Chechnya, and South Ossetians make up just 3 percent of Georgia's population. Russians and Russian military "peacekeepers" strengthen Moscow's presence in this enclave of Russian loyalty, and in Abkhazia, too, the Russian presence outnumbers the 2 percent Abkhazians. Even before the intervention of August 8, 2008, the government of Georgia had little control over either piece of the "near abroad."

It has been the stated objective of the Tbilisi government to assert its jurisdiction over the three minority territories on its margins, but Moscow has obstructed this initiative in various ways, ranging from the closure of transport routes (and thus commercial traffic) between Georgia and Russia to the award of Russian passports to residents of Abkhazia and North Ossetia. Newspapers and other media commentary in Russia ask why, if Kosovo can be wrested from Serbia because locals there want independence, the same rights cannot be accorded to North Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russian commentators are arguing that Georgia's suppression of Ossetians and Abkhazians is no less ruthless than that of Kosovars by Serbia.

But by militarily intervening as the Russians have, including the bombing of targets in Georgia itself, Moscow appears intent on creating a crisis that will demonstrate its capacity and willingness to wage war for its interests in the "near abroad" despite serious risk of potentially uncontrollable escalation. Kosovo may have been part of the kindling, but Russia resented NATO encroachment toward its borders, American-planned construction of missile-defense systems in Poland and the Czech Republic, EU involvement in Ukraine's long-range plans (Georgia has also proclaimed its hope to join the EU, and you will see the EU flag, beside the flag of Georgia, stand behind President Saakashvili's desk during interviews) and other slights. One question is whether Russian bombers will target the Georgian section of the oil pipeline linking the Caspian Sea reserves to the Turkish port of Ceyhan. Another is whether,

should Russia impose a naval blockade on Georgia, Ukraine will deny it the use of its Crimean naval bases, potentially drawing Kyiv into the conflict and creating a motive for Russian action there as well.

A belligerent Russia has already choked off the flow of natural gas to Europe during a dispute over payments, has allowed a murder case (allegedly by a Russian agent in London) to damage relations with the United Kingdom, has turned a blind eye to criminal activity in Moldova, has obstructed efforts to persuade Iran to alter its nuclear practices, has imprisoned business leaders deemed politically inconvenient in ways chillingly reminiscent of gulag times, and has sent bombers flying into airspace in the Cold-War mode. The brutality of its post-Soviet campaigns against Muslim Chechens was seen in context of the wider “war against terror”, but the destruction now being visited on Georgia suggests that a new page has been turned.