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Redecorating with Iron Curtains

Though no longer evil commies, Russia's been restored to credible villain status



VICTOR VARGAS

Near the end of the Cold War, all those crazy Tom Clancy novels and James Bond films would have seemed really far-fetched. Only paranoid people believed that the Soviets would ever think of using something like a radioactive substance to murder a defector in Britain, and the very idea that the Reds would use a rare blowfish poison to scar a candidate in a democratic Ukrainian election was laughable. But now, in the 21st century, unbridled capitalism has turned Russia into a darkness the West hardly dreamt possible.

Now, strong suspicions of assassinations of individuals opposed to Vladimir Putin's regime are a reality instead of mere speculation. While no one has proven conclusively that the Kremlin ordered the termination of journalists and defectors, there are so many connections and arrows pointed at Russia that the idiom of "if it quacks like a duck..." has never been more applicable.

But the problem with this country has gone beyond mere assassinations and bullying. The Russia of today has managed to combine the worst parts of democracy, authoritarianism, and capitalism into a cocktail of pure malevolence.

Freedom of the press in the Russian Federation is all but dead—the only outlets for criticism that remain are on the Internet and through "Putin-approved" stations. The powerful Soviet military machine is being resurrected and re-equipped with the new weapons that Russia's developed, such as the most powerful conventional weapon in the world: "the Father of All Bombs."

Patrols and testing of European and American defences reminiscent of the Cold War have resumed with a vengeance. The whole of Europe is being threatened by the Kremlin's oil and natural gas politics (which has already sent the Ukraine into chaos at least once) and now the Russians have set their sights on expansionist policies like claiming the North Pole. At least when they were communists, they had the unifying moral belief that they could create a utopian world where everyone was classless and equal. Their new dogma of choice is profit at all costs and glory to mother Russia—and the West is to blame.

The Russia of the 21st century has managed to combine the worst parts of democracy, authoritarianism, and capitalism into a cocktail of pure malevolence.

When the Cold War ended, Westerners hailed it as the end of the "Evil Empire," with cries of "capitalism triumphs" and "go America." For giving up its Eastern European sphere, its Soviet republics, and communism, Russia was promised a golden age of freedom, prosperity, and Chinese products throughout the land. Instead, they ended up with a defunct currency, the world's most infamous mafia, and a communist ruling elite that simply turned into the wealthy upper class. And for the most part, the West rubbed it in Russia's face.

Americans, in particular, screwed it up. Comedians laughed it up with jokes about how Boris Yeltsin was a drunkard and that the Russians weren't even worth anything anymore. Hollywood

went from portraying the Russians as competent villains to inept thugs for hire. In the diplomatic arena, they pushed to expand NATO into Eastern Europe—despite Russian objections—and then American pundits claimed that the Russians were irrelevant. And it was all of this that paved the way for Putin and the new, evil Russia to come back to the forefront.

Putin is popular because he's the embodiment of the strong man: he's fit, he doesn't drink, he's cold as steel, and he delivers on his promises. He understood that the whole idea that capitalism alone can preserve freedom completely falls apart once people realize that liberty doesn't ensure you your daily bread—and he exploited that fact for all it was worth.

Then, as if the last decade wasn't enough for Putin's ascension, President Bush gave us the "War on Terror," giving Putin the excuse he needed to crush the Chechens and any other opposition. Bush's other gift was the Iraq War, which gave the new regime the ability to grandstand and show opposition to America once again.

What's worse, the United States and the West are no longer in a position to challenge Russia. The US has to contend with its own war, a massive debt, and threats from Iran and North Korea—and NATO has been divided and quiet since the Iraq War began. Meanwhile, opposition inside of Russia is all but crushed: when Kasparov, the famous chess champion and social activist, can only amass 1000 people to protest the government on human rights, things have gone down the gutter. Right now, Russia is free to do whatever it pleases.

Perhaps the only hope for a non-evil Russia lies in Putin's successor. If the world is lucky, it'll be someone who tries to return freedom to the nation. But more than likely, the next guy will only solidify Putin's "reforms," and solidify Russia's return to the league of enemies for the next 50 years.