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The New Cold War: Putin's Russia and the Threat to the West

Edward Lucas

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“It is chilling to see a friend’s name on a death list” is the chilling first line to Edward Lucas’s brilliant book. Anna Politkovskaya was murdered on October 7, 2006, no doubt because “She was the foremost critic of the Kremlin’s savagery in crushing the rebels in breakaway Chechnya, scathingly depicting the authoritarian, cruel and wasteful turn that her country had taken under [then Russian President now Prime Minister Vladimir] Putin.”

Bloody murder rivets western readers’ attention on Lucas’s message: “Russia is reverting to Soviet behavior at home and abroad, and in its contemptuous disregard for western norms.” Worse, “The outside world has been inattentive and complacent, partly due to greed and wishful thinking, and partly because of serious distractions elsewhere.”

Lucas’s “shorthand term for the new era of uneasy confrontation between the west and the Kremlin is ‘the New Cold War.’” It is a catchy but unfortunate phrase because it implicitly promises what Lucas cannot deliver.

Marxism-Leninism explained the old Cold War, but Russia is not a warmed-over Soviet Union. Lucas writes, “Now Russia is no longer a closed society...Nor is Russia a global adversary...Russia has not become a military menace to the west...The old ideological conflict is over too.” So what is happening?

Alas, Lucas is no theorist. The book offers no coherent theory to explain why Putin’s Russia is as it is and why it menaces the west. But it is and it does, so *The New Cold War* is a must-read for anyone interested in contemporary world affairs.

Lucas is an insightful, experienced and well connected journalist. In a clear and easy style, he traces Putin’s rise to tsardom and then catalogs and organizes Russian misbehavior.

If there is no coherent theory, there is an unmistakable coherence to Lucas’s account. “The new Cold War,” he writes, “is fought with cash, natural resources, diplomacy and propaganda.”

Each item and each theme has, of course, appeared in the newspapers. But the daily trek to the recycling bin prevents most of us from seeing a full picture.

Moscow is trying to bludgeon meaningful life out of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe). It perpetuates border disputes with Estonia and Latvia. It occupies bits of Georgia and Moldova. Its 2007 cyber attacks on Estonia catapulted the notion of computer warfare from the theoretical to the practical.

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The FSB (*Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti*, successor to the KGB) and GRU (*Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravleniye Generalnove Shtaba*, Russian military intelligence) stir up trouble, particularly in countries formerly subject to the Soviet Union or the Warsaw Pact.

And Russia's principal weapon is energy. "The big strategic worry used to be the Soviet navy's capacity to blockade Europe's sea lanes. Now it is the Russian gas company Gazprom's ability to blockade its pipelines." That sets up what Lucas calls "the Kremlin's favorite tactic: divide and rule."

Lucas's journalistic approach to a book risks a short shelf life, but the book not only establishes a factual baseline, it also indicates clear trends. Writing before Russia's August 2008 war on Georgia, Lucas suggests why Putin was fussing over the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty. It "could be the first stage in a military intervention...conceivable in an artificially stoked conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia or Abkhazia, or both."

More disturbing, when the west failed to react to earlier probing attacks upon Georgia, "The Kremlin will have drawn a striking conclusion: that Georgia's allies are largely unwilling to speak out in its defense."

As Lucas paints it, Russian misbehavior is not a series of one-off delinquencies, but a criminal syndrome.

Indeed, the book draws an image of Russia as a transcontinental kleptocratic cesspool run by a crime syndicate. It operates by "bombast, bullying and bribery...threats and selective arm-twisting...When all else fails, Russia uses the methods of terrorists and gangsters."

"The less resistance Russia meets, the more assertive it becomes." Today, "the west is losing the new Cold War." Losing what? And why should a bloke in Birmingham, Boston or Bologna care?

Putin's Russia is insidious partly because it lacks the unifying theme of communism. The USSR was easier to explain in Birmingham or Boston. Moreover, though aggressive, its messianic mission also dictated caution.

In contrast, when will the gangsters of the Kremlin—spurred by greed, aggression, antipathy to the west and lack of resistance—miscalculate and swagger across an indelible red line? Attacking NATO ally Estonia? Selling advanced weapons to Iran? Stoking the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt? Taking a step too far with Hugo Chavez in Venezuela?

The New Cold War is the handwriting on the wall. Read it and consider Lucas's final admonition: "Until we make it clear that we believe in our own values, we cannot defend ourselves against the subversion and corruption that are leaking into our citadels of economic and political power."

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