

The USSR and Cold War Legacy: Implications for the Current International Agenda

Interview with Michael A. Reynolds, Director of the Program in Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies and Associate Professor in the Department of Near Eastern Studies of Princeton University, USA

ABSTRACT

Michael A. Reynolds is an American historian and political analyst. His teaching and research range over the geography of the Middle East and Eurasia and covers the themes of empire, international relations, nationalism, geopolitics, ethnic conflict, and religion and culture. He is the author of *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908-1918* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), co-winner of the 2011 American Historical Association's George Louis Beer Prize, a Financial Times book of the summer, and a Choice outstanding academic title. He is the editor of *Constellations of the Caucasus: Empires, Peoples, and Faiths* (Markus Weiner, 2016). Reynolds also writes on contemporary issues related to Turkey, Russia, the Caucasus region and U.S. foreign policy. His writings have appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Newsweek*, *The National Interest*, and *War on the Rocks*, among other venues. He holds a PhD in Near Eastern Studies from Princeton and an MA in Political Science from Columbia.

The conversation was conducted by Sergey Markedonov, Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of International Analytics

Sergey Markedonov: It is hard to debate the origins of the Soviet Union's collapse objectively and impartially. What we see is a competing popular discourse on "the largest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century" and the collapse of the "last empire," the "evil empire," the totalitarian state. In the meantime, the late Soviet Union had both a multi-party system and diversity of opinions, and its leadership was rather under-supported, finding itself under severe criticism from both proponents of democratization and advocates of the Stalinist "order." Can you identify the fundamental causes (internal and external) of the collapse of the USSR, and has the international system been reshaped by these changes?

Michael Reynolds: First, I should state that I believe it is neither possible nor desirable to analyze human relations "objectively." We necessarily and inevitably, albeit not necessarily consciously, apply moral frameworks in our evaluations of

human interactions. This is inescapable. It is one of the primary reasons why the study of human behavior differs fundamentally from the study of material objects and why the methodologies of the latter are ultimately of limited utility when applied to the former. The project of modeling the “social sciences” on the “natural sciences” has resulted at best only in a modest success. I believe in the importance for scholarship of a more basic virtue, honesty. A scholar when analyzing sources and formulating hypotheses, first and foremost, must be honest with his or herself and with the audience about the assumptions, evidence, reasoning, and conclusions of the research.

Regarding the collapse of the Soviet Union, I believe that the fundamental reason is straightforward: the exhaustion of Soviet ideology, of Marxism-Leninism. The Soviet Union was no ordinary state. It had been founded as an instrument of Marxism-Leninism. At the most basic level, that ideology held that the elimination of private property would lead to the creation of a radically different and better human being and human society. A little after six decades, the leadership of the Soviet Union could no longer deny what had become evident to virtually everyone: Marxism-Leninism could not even deliver material prosperity, let alone create a better human being or society. Indeed, many in the USSR had come to conclude that Marxism-Leninism generated primarily human and environmental degradation.¹

When the belief in Marxism-Leninism evaporated, the justification for the rule of the Communist Party disappeared with it. And with the Communist Party's loss of legitimacy, there was precious little to justify maintaining the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Other factors often cited as causes of the USSR's collapse, such as nationalism or economic conditions, could assert themselves only in the context of ideological exhaustion. I should note that the question of *how* the USSR unraveled is also an important question, and arguably a more complex one to answer.²

S.M.: In your view, which world order is more predictable and stable or, on the contrary, more chaotic – the one based on the bipolar confrontation between the USSR and the United States, or the (dis)order that prevails today? What are the strengths and flaws of the old and new world systems? What lessons from the Cold War do you believe remain relevant today?

M.R.: The question of what form of “world order” is the most stable has long been a favorite question of international relations scholars, but unless we carefully specify the conditions of that order (What is stability? Stability for whom? What counts as bipolarity? etc). I do not think it is a useful question outside the confines of the Ivory Tower. The world order is what it is, not what we choose to call it. It is in constant flux and does not transition neatly between discrete categories like bipolar, multipolar, unipolar.

1 Martin Malia made a powerful case for the centrality of ideology in his book, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991*. (New York: Free Press, 1994). Malia in the same book delivers a critique of the incapacity of the social sciences to grapple with ideology. Yuri Slezkine's recent book, *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), explores the centrality of ideological and metaphysical concerns in the Soviet experience. Although Y. Slezkine is primarily concerned with the founding of the USSR, his insights about the primacy of ideology are essential to understanding the Soviet collapse.

2 Stephen Kotkin provides a concise yet sophisticated explanation of both why and how the USSR fell apart in his *Armageddon Averted: 1970-2000*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Ronald Suny emphasizes the importance of nationalism in the Soviet collapse and the paradoxical role of the Soviet Union in fostering nationalism in *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993). Mark Beissinger explores in detail how nationalism drove the unraveling of the Soviet Union once it began in *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

That being said, when I reflect on the Cold War experience and the world today, two things come to mind. The first is the loss of the ever-present fear of a nuclear confrontation. During the Cold War, elites and populations throughout the world understood that the fate of global civilization, of human society itself, was at stake. The nuclear powers retain essentially just as much destructive power as they did during the Cold War, yet today we give little attention to the awesome destructive power of nuclear weapons and the potential of conflicts to escalate to a nuclear exchange. This is despite the ongoing proliferation of nuclear technology and weapons to South Asia and the Middle East.

The second thing that comes to mind is how the United States in the post-Cold War world has grown accustomed to its dominance. America's foreign policy elites today take American power for granted. Indeed, they believe that it is a birthright and imagine that America's power reflects American virtue. Further, they assume that those outside America can or should understand American power in the same way. In other words, they assume that America's opponents, those whom Washington D.C. sees as villains, understand themselves as villains.

This creates what could be a very dangerous dynamic, particularly as America's elites preside over the decay of the sources of American power, fritter that power away abroad and at home, and remain oblivious to the emergence of new threats.¹ The existence of the USSR compelled America at home to nurture its resources and abroad to practice diplomacy and pursue a grand strategy that provided a framework to allocate scarce resources. Absent the USSR, America seems determined to run itself down and run itself out.

S.M.: The breakup of the Soviet Union brought about series of ethno-political conflicts and civil wars. Some of them, like the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, are still of pressing concern, yet the situation in Abkhazia or South Ossetia seems resolved only through the prism of Russia's strategic vision. Furthermore, in 2014 a standoff erupted in southeastern Ukraine, something that is not considered to be the major challenge to the whole of European security. Do you concur that the collapse of the Soviet Union is in some ways still underway? The old structures were destroyed, but new national/state identities are still in transit and not fully formed.

M.R.: I do not agree that the demise of the USSR is still ongoing. The USSR collapsed definitively in 1991 with the repudiation of Marxism-Leninism. If I had to point to a longer continuity, I would sooner say that we are witnessing the aftershocks of the fall of the tsar in 1917 and the subsequent unraveling of the Russian empire. I think one should be careful when imagining the USSR as a continuation of the Russian empire. For most purposes, I believe 1917 represented a massive rupture and the "Russian empire" and "Soviet Union" cannot be simply understood as "Russia" with different names.

1 On the frittering of that power, see Walt, Stephen M. *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018. For a critique that locates the failing of American foreign policy at a still deeper level, see McDougall, Walter. *The Tragedy of U.S. Foreign Policy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016.

Certainly, however, there are continuities between Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union and the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation.¹

Vladimir Putin managed not only to stabilize the Russian state but even to revive Russia as major world actor. These are real achievements. But he has failed so far to answer the fundamental question of the February Revolution – Who should rule Russia? His inability to establish a system of succession may prove to be his greatest legacy. What will come after Putin is a question to which no one can pretend to have an answer.

One of the most important structural changes shaping events today is the continued demographic decline of ethnic Russians.² The demographic factor has not been as decisive as some have predicted, not least because Russia is hardly alone in experiencing demographic decline.³ Indeed, the populations of several of its neighbors are shrinking faster than its own. Nonetheless, surging populations were one of the factors underpinning the growth of Russia and the other European great powers into the early twentieth century, and the long-term decline of Russia's population necessarily constrains Russia's potential. Russia is far from alone in this, but nor is it immune.

S.M.: The Soviet Union's disintegration went hand in hand with the breakup of the "second Yugoslavia" (SFR Yugoslavia). The two countries have experienced both ups and downs in bilateral relations throughout their history. But the events of the late 1980s and early 1990s seem to have made the developments in these once united states synchronized. What, in your view, are the similarities and differences between these two disintegrations? And what is their impact on the modern world order, especially on the balance of law and power in international relations?

M.R.: The exhaustion of Communism as an idea determined the collapse of Yugoslavia as it did the USSR. In the Yugoslav case, Milosevic embraced Serbian ethno-nationalism a source of legitimacy that might substitute for Communism.⁴ This is not to say that Milosevic or the Serbs were solely responsible for the conflicts that followed. Rather, it is to observe that the fading of Communism opened a vacuum that needed to be filled. The Serbs' demographic decline vis-à-vis the Kosovars was another critical factor driving the conflict over Kosovo. Fortunately, the territorial-administrative structure and demographic settlement patterns of the Soviet Union were such that ethnonational conflicts were restricted to the periphery, largely the Caucasus, namely Abkhazia, Ossetia, Karabakh, and, of course, Chechnya.

1 With the demise of the USSR, explorations of continuity between Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union are no longer charged with immediate political significance. For one interesting argument for continuity, see Holquist, Peter. "In Accord with State Interests and the People's Wishes: The Technocratic Ideology of Imperial Russia's Resettlement Administration," *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (spring, 2010): 151–179. Notably, unrelenting critics of Bolshevism and sympathizers alike invoked continuities between Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. See, for example, Pipes, Richard. *Russia under the Old Regime*. 2nd ed. New York: Penguin, 1993. See also Lewin, Moshe. *The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Social History of Interwar Russia*. New York: New Press, 1994. Malia, who like Pipes was a fierce critic of Soviet Communism, saw the Soviet period as an aberration. See the aforementioned *Soviet Tragedy* as well as *Russia under Western Eyes: from the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

2 There is a large literature on this. One of the most prolific – and alarmist – experts has been Nicholas Eberstadt. See, for example, Eberstadt, Nicholas. "The Dying Bear: Russia's Demographic Disaster," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 6 (November–December, 2011): 95–108.

3 For a thoughtful assessment, see Michael Kofman, "Russian Demographics and Power: Does the Kremlin Have a Long Game?" *War on the Rocks*, February 4, 2020, accessed April 7, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/02/russian-demographics-and-power-does-the-kremlin-have-a-long-game/>.

4 Vujacic, Veljko. *Nationalism, Myth, and the State in Russia and Serbia*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

S.M.: The USSR is usually compared with the current Russian Federation. It is no coincidence the discourse on the “New Cold War” has become popular even in the academic literature.¹ How can you evaluate commonalities and differences between the two entities as mentioned earlier in terms of their domestic developments and foreign policies as well? Of course, Russia is a successor of the USSR in the UN Security Council and in its rights to inherit the Soviet property abroad and nuclear arsenals deployed on the four former Union republics’ territories. However, it is far from the planned economy and revolutionary communist ideological principles. What do you think about this comparison?

M.R.: The current stand-off between the United States and Russia bears little resemblance to the Cold War, although some advocates of confrontation in both countries would like people to believe otherwise. The differences are several. First, the Cold War represented a genuine ideological clash between two camps, each representing fundamentally different visions of democracy: the liberal democratic and comparatively free-market societies of Europe and Asia led by the United States and the Communist bloc led by the Soviet Union. Both camps claimed to be heirs to the European Enlightenment and to champion the ideals of equality, democracy, freedom or liberation, progress, science and technology, and material prosperity. Moreover, since the *raison d’être* of the Soviet Union was ultimately to export Communist revolution around the world, competition and confrontation were inevitable.

The geopolitical aspect of this confrontation was also important. The United States and the Soviet Union both represented continental-scale powers with aspirations to shape the broader globe. Their interests overlapped in the Eurasian rimlands and, outside of the nuclear sphere, there was little interdependence that would have meliorated competition in those rimlands and elsewhere. Thus, some sort of rivalry was probably inevitable, much as Alexis de Tocqueville prophesized.² Nonetheless, the ideology was the animating force.

There is no comparable ideological clash today. The Russian Federation does not pretend to offer a comprehensive alternative to liberal democracy, let alone seek to export that alternative around the globe. Russia does not inspire legions around the globe as the Soviet Union did, and accordingly lacks the kind of “soft power” and global community of supporters and sympathizers that it had in the Cold War. The fizzling out of the hysterically hyped “Russia Gate” scandal in the Trump era underscores this. To be sure, rapidly evolving normative preferences of American elites allow them to find in Putin’s Russia much to decry. Thus, the absence of same-sex marriage in Russia and restrictions on the distribution among schoolchildren of literature on homosexuality are now seen as evidence of repression, despite the fact that same-sex marriage was adopted throughout the U.S. only six years ago. Russian financial support probably has influenced electoral politics in some European states, and it likely can and does exploit seams of dissatisfaction, Russia today in Europe has nothing like what the Soviet Union did in the form of the Italian, French, and other Communist Parties and such movements as the Nuclear Freeze movement.

1 Sakwa, Richard. “‘New Cold War’ or twenty years’ crisis? Russia and International Politics.” *International Affairs* 84, no 2 (2008): 241–267; Legvold, Robert. *Return to Cold War*. Cambridge: Polity, 2016.

2 de Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. P. 395–396.

Moreover, Russia is roughly only one-half the size of the Soviet Union and its geostrategic position is far less advantageous. Neither the size nor organization of its economy present any challenge to the American. NATO dwarfs Russia in resources. Only in the nuclear realm does Russia amount to a threat to the United States. It is worth noting that Washington's inept implementation of irresponsible policies in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria resulted in Russian victories at the expense of the United States. Notably, however, none of those Russian successes have impinged vital American interests.¹

Russia is thus a comfortable and convenient rival for the American national security establishment. Although Russia is not truly a peer competitor and cannot really threaten the United States outside the nuclear realm, the American national security establishment (and lately increasingly other parts of the American political establishment) can portray Russia as a major and imminent threat in order to justify the maintenance and expansion of bureaucratic programs. Russia's army, navy, air force, and intelligence services provide excellent foils for their American counterparts. Indeed, the American national security establishment was custom built to counter the Soviet threat, and today the invocation of a Russian one is convenient. The same applies to NATO, a vast bureaucracy that now serves several functions, not the least of which is providing a market for arms and keeping America linked to Europe. Those are probably worthwhile functions, but in themselves they are not sufficient to justify NATO's continued existence. NATO came into existence for the purpose of countering the Soviet threat and its continued vitality requires an analogous threat.

And unlike the case with China, where economic interdependence and significant American business interests weigh in against confrontation, there is no real lobby or other countervailing forces calling for better relations with Russia. Indeed, if anything, economic competition in the energy and agricultural spheres complements the military and geopolitical competition.

In short, the American national security establishment, including the vast array of private industries and contractors that supported and supplied the government bureaucracies, became so large and powerful during the Cold War that in the post-Cold War era it has become autonomous and virtually unaccountable.² It became the proverbial tail that wags the dog. The attacks of 9/11 and the Global War on Terror (GWOT) that followed those attacks further augmented the establishment, infusing it with generous funding and expanded authority. Indeed, the GWOT birthed the creation of a vast new bureaucracy, the Department of Homeland Security. The American government has lavished its national security establishment with money but has not insisted on accountability. Thus, despite presiding over a series of remarkable failures and mishaps, American foreign policy and national security elites have escaped any reckoning. On the contrary, many have been handsomely rewarded in the private sector for their service in the government sector.

S.M.: Last, yet not least question is about differences and commonalities between Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin. It is a sort of conventional wisdom to cite the famous

1 Reynolds, Michael A. "Against the Blob: America's Foreign Policy in Eurasia's Heartland is Becoming Its Own Worst Enemy," *Baku Dialogues* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2020): 40–59.

2 Glennon, Michael J. *Double Government and National Security*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Munich speech (2007) of the second president of Russia and the absent declarations of the first Russian leader at the OSCE summit in Budapest or his farewell speech in Istanbul in 1999. In both cases, however, Yeltsin blamed the West and expressed his (and Russia's) dissatisfaction with NATO expansion and that Moscow's policy toward Chechnya was depicted as "double standards." The first serious crisis between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War occurred in 1999 in connection with NATO's bombing of Belgrade. Is it possible to deduce the necessity of downplaying the personal factor in contemporary Russian foreign policy, since now it looks like as if it grossly overestimated? What is your view on this, and do you see any opportunities to alter Moscow's major priorities in the international arena?

M.R.: One of the distressing aspects of the American discourse on Russia is the disproportionate focus on the person of Vladimir Putin.¹ I say it is distressing because it simultaneously allows Americans to indulge in the illusion that their role in stoking tensions between Russia and America is immune from rational criticism while diverting their attention from fundamental sources of those tensions over which they have little control. It creates a volatile mixture of self-righteousness and complacency.

To be sure, Putin is, to use a phrase of his own, a "colorful person." He grabs attention. And our human nature predisposes us to favor narratives in which flesh and blood individuals, as opposed to abstractions like institutions, are at the center. In addition, Putin with his past as a KGB officer and his self-presentation as a dynamic, masculine, and tough personality comes across as someone from central casting angling for the villain role in a James Bond film. Putin's image thus has been an asset to those who wish to emphasize the malign and threatening nature of Russia.

Whereas Putin's image has captivated the American media and foreign policy establishment, his words have made less of an impression. There is one exception that illustrates a broader point, and that is Putin's remark in 2005 that "the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [twentieth] century." Many commentators, including such influential figures as John Bolton, flagged this phrase to support their contention that Putin is determined to re-establish the Soviet empire.² Commentators are content to point to Putin's 2007 Munich speech as a hostile act in itself and rarely bother to analyze what Putin actually said.

In order for the thesis that the person of Putin is the driving force behind a policy of revanchism to be credible, the corollary that a different Russian leader would pursue a substantively different foreign policy must be true. Most American analysts assume this as a given.

Boris Yeltsin was as pro-Western a Russian leader as one might hope. Yet, as you note, Yeltsin felt compelled to rebuke the West on at least two occasions, in 1994 and 1999. Few American analysts choose to recall Yeltsin's critique (nor Primakov's). Recognition of a fundamental continuity in the ways that Yeltsin and Putin understood

1 In the latest issue of *Foreign Affairs* Timothy Frye acknowledges the undue focus on Putin's person in analyses of Russia. He then provides his own analysis. It is intelligent and thoughtful, but nevertheless also focused on Putin. Timothy Frye, "Russia's Weak Strongman," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2021, accessed April 7, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2021-04-01/vladimir-putin-russias-weak-strongman>.

2 Katie Sanders, "Did Vladimir Putin call the breakup of the USSR 'the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century?'" *Politifact*, March 6, 2014, accessed April 7, 2021, <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2014/mar/06/john-bolton/did-vladimir-putin-call-breakup-ussr-greatest-geop/>.

Russia's security would undermine the narrative that Putin's aggressiveness mandates further expansion of NATO and confrontation with Russia.

To answer the question of to what degree Russian foreign policy would differ if Putin were not in power requires resort to counterfactuals. To make those counterfactuals convincing would require argumentation too extensive for our format here. Thus, let me instead here cite no less an authority than Robert M. Gates on the continuities in Russian foreign policy between Yeltsin and Putin. Gates wrote his doctorate on Soviet politics before going on to serve as Director of the CIA under George H.W. Bush and then Secretary of Defense under George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Gates was known as an anti-Soviet hardliner during his time in the CIA under Ronald Reagan. In other words, no one can credibly accuse Gates of being a Russophile or a Putin sympathizer.

Gates writes that American President Bill Clinton in 1996 "soft-pedaled" NATO expansion in order to assist Yeltsin's re-election chances. Clinton and his administration understood that the expansion of NATO was highly unpopular with the Russian public across the board and that NATO was, therefore, a volatile issue for Yeltsin. Further, Gates explains that Russians had a legitimate reason to object to NATO expansion. NATO is not simply a wartime defensive alliance and its expansion would impinge on Russian power. In 1999, Gates observes, NATO undercut Russia when one NATO member and two candidate members – Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria – blocked Russia from intervening on behalf of Serbia by denying Russia permission to use their airspace.¹ Moscow's displeasure, however, meant little to Washington at the time. As Gates reflects in his memoirs, "When Russia was weak in the 1990s and beyond, we did not take Russian interests seriously."²

Confusion about whether or not Russians can legitimately see any threat coming from America or its allies also clouds American thinking. For example, the former American ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul, in advice to the incoming American president, urges Joe Biden to "emphasize that the [NATO] alliance is a defensive one and has never attacked Russia." Russian opposition to NATO is a function of Putin's unhealthy mind, according to McFaul. As the title of his article, "How to Contain Putin's Russia," implies, McFaul argues that America's problem is with Putin, not Russia. Moreover, according to McFaul, what drives Putin's anti-Americanism is paranoia, a form of irrationalism.³

Yet although McFaul staunchly denies that America sought to mobilize domestic opposition in Russia during his time in the Obama administration and as ambassador, he does believe that previous American governments have used domestic opposition movements to "destabilize things" in Serbia and elsewhere and that George W. Bush's administration backed the so-called "color revolutions" in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan.⁴ Some American analysts, however, would beg to differ with McFaul about

1 Gates, Robert M. *Exercise of Power: American Failures, Successes, and a New Path Forward in the Post-Cold War World*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020. P. 265–266.

2 Gates, Robert M. *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014.

3 Michael McFaul, "How to Contain Putin's Russia," *Foreign Affairs*, January 19, 2021, available April 7, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2021-01-19/how-contain-putins-russia>.

4 David Remnick, "Letter from Moscow: Watching the Eclipse," *The New Yorker*, August 2, 2014, available April 7, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/08/11/watching-eclipse>.

the Obama administration's reticence to mobilize domestic oppositions, including inside Russia. One study, for example cites "Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's open support for the White Revolution in Russia from 2011 to 2012" as one policy initiative that further alienated Russia.¹ While not quite as direct as McFaul regarding U.S. efforts to mobilize domestic oppositions, Gates acknowledges American support for civil society movements as "a vital instrument of national power."²

Putin in Munich had warned against expanding NATO to Georgia and Ukraine. In his memoir, *Duty*, Gates concludes his discussion of the Georgian and Ukrainian crises thus, "trying to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO was truly overreaching." Neither Georgia nor Ukraine represented critical, let alone vital, European or American interests. Washington accordingly had no intention of fighting alongside either. As Gates puts it, "Were Europeans, much less the Americans, willing to send their sons and daughters to defend Ukraine or Georgia? Hardly."³ For Russia, by contrast, those countries do impinge on vital interests. Georgia borders on Chechnya, the most unstable part of the Russian Federation. Ukraine, whose history, people, and economy is intertwined with Russia's, shares an extensive land and sea border with Russia.

Gates recognizes the grave folly of Bush's Georgia policy, describing Georgia's Mikheil Saakashvili as an "aggressive and impetuous nationalist" and acknowledging that it was Saakashvili who precipitated the 2008 Georgian-Russian War (albeit under incitement from Moscow).⁴ Given Ukraine's importance to Russia, the attempt to bring Ukraine into NATO was, in Gates' own words, "an especially monumental provocation." The whole effort to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO was, Gates concludes, premised on "recklessly ignoring what the Russians considered their own vital national interests."⁵

In short, after reading Gates, it is difficult to agree with the idea that the person of Vladimir Putin is the key variable that accounts for the high level of tensions between the United States and Russia. The reckless implementation of provocative and irresponsible actions are of greater explanatory value.

For citation

Reynolds, Michael A. "The USSR and Cold War Legacy: Implications for the Current International Agenda." *Journal of International Analytics* 12, no 1. (2021): 12–20.
<https://doi.org/10.46272/2587-8476-2021-12-1-12-20>

Цитирование

Рейнолдс, М.А. СССР и наследие холодной войны: последствия для современных международных процессов // Международная аналитика. – 2021. – Том 12 (1). – С. 12–20.
<https://doi.org/10.46272/2587-8476-2021-12-1-12-20>

1 Ziegler, Charles E. "A Crisis of Diverging Perspectives: U.S.–Russian Relations and the Security Dilemma," *Texas National Security Review* 4, no. 1 (Winter 2020–2021): 12, 31.
 2 Gates, Robert M. *Exercise of Power*, 270.
 3 Gates, Robert M. *Duty*, 157. For more on the Washington's fecklessness in both crises, see *Exercise of Power*, 292–297, 313–320.
 4 Gates, Robert M. *Exercise of Power*, 293; Gates, Robert M. *Duty*, 167–168.
 5 Gates, Robert M. *Duty*, 157.