**How could Russia become like this?**

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We human beings, states and organisations, seem to be very good at making borders and dividing people in a myriad of ways, in cultures and colours, lands and languages, faiths and ideologies, rich and poor, and much more. The war in Ukraine shows us this, yet again, when Russia has invaded Ukraine, being unable to sort out differences with its neighbour and the West. Russia says Ukraine has become too Western and NATO has come too close to its borders.
But in our time, it ought to be possible to trade and talk across borders, and there isn’t any aggression from NATO’s side towards Russia. There ought to be closer cooperation between the West and Russia, not only in trade of gas, oil, wheat and more, but also in other fields, indeed in Russia’s development of democracy. After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the West has placed massive sanctions on Russia, which in the long run will lead to further schisms between Russia and the West, if maintained; that would be in nobody’s interest.
I believe Russia had thought that the West would have been pragmatic and business-like even after the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February this year, and it probably thought the ‘special operation’ would be shorter than it has turned out to be. After Crimea was annexed in 2014, and armed conflicts in East Ukraine and in neighbouring countries, the West’s reaction was moderate, although with some sanctions.
Russia on its side said they felt NATO’s military might came too close to the Russian borders and sphere of interest. It had also begun to harbour intentions of re-establishing some of the lost empire-status of the Soviet Union. It seems the West didn’t quite understand this, especially not Europe. The US understood more of it since it is itself always defending its territory and sphere of interest, and expanding it to more corners of the world. The Cold War was gone but new sustainable relations were not developed, and not a new development ideology for Russia.
In many ways, Russia was humiliated after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989-91; communism had failed and with that Russia’s ideological and military leadership connected to that at home and worldwide. The mistake that the West made in the 1990s was not to include Russia in a closer dialogue about the huge country’s future, including the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).
It seems the West’s political scientists, historians, psychologists, diplomats, civil society organisations, and others, somehow thought that their capitalist economic system, their thinking about democracy and development, had won, being superior to what the Soviet Union had stood for—and that there was little reason for talking with the loser and finding constructive ways ahead.
Russia itself seems to have drifted along in the 1990s with quite erratic leadership under President Boris Yeltsin from 1991–1999, allowing privatisation of state-owned companies and the oligarchs getting a chance to appear and gain enormous wealth without having done much for it, rather just taking over government companies. Those who benefitted were often top politicians and civil servants who were at the right place at the right time, taking advantage of the new time without proper government rules and vision.
People saw many good government institutions and organisations in the social sectors being dismantled or collapsing, resulting, inter alia, in pensions and other government services and benefits becoming close to worthless in monetary terms. Had there been a culture of democracy in the country, and in the people’s minds, this would not have been as easy, but it was a top-down system.
Since 1999, President Vladimir Putin (69) has been Prime Minister and President in Russia, sometimes swopping posts with Dmitry Medvedev (56). During his first presidential term from 2000-2004, and maybe even the second one from 2004-2008, and also during Medvedev’s term from 2008-2012, it ought to have been possible for the West to have supported Russia to develop in a more democratic direction.
Already during Yeltsin’s term in the 1990s, there was also a window of opportunity, but the West and the people of Russia seem not to have realised that the new Russia needed help to develop democratically. We should know that this was the first opportunity ever for the vast country of Russia to go from dictatorship to democracy.
Alas, the opportunity was missed and Russia under Putin has developed more and more in an autocratic direction, and he has as leader become more ‘tsar-like’. Medvedev was probably more liberal, but considering his recent statements that may have been more an image than a reality. It should be mentioned, though, that the Russian people have in recent decades enjoyed improvements in their standard of living, especially in urban areas.
I believe that the West failed Russia severely in its change and development after the fall of the Soviet Union, also being a disadvantage to the West. However, the Russian leaders must take most of the blame. A country like Russia, tremendously rich on natural resources, and with a well-educated population, should today have been an advanced and modern country, not only economically but also politically.
Lack of democracy has led to Russia’s stagnation, in spite of the Putin-Medvedev era on the surface often having looked to Europe and the West, both of them coming from St. Petersburg (earlier Vladivostok), where they can almost look across to the West, and Russia having long borders both with Finland and Norway
Russia has not had a clear ideology and development plan after the fall of the Soviet Union, well, except for dreaming of recreating some of the greatness of the past when it during the Cold War was almost at par with the US and at least taken seriously internationally. This is becoming clearer now during the Russian war in Ukraine, with its expansionist ambitions, considering Ukraine its own lost territory and land.
There were more than just warning signs earlier, such as the conflict in Georgia, Chechnya, and other neighbours to the south and east. Belarus, to the west, is certainly considered part of the Russian sphere.
It is quite overlooked, but the current Russian war in Ukraine is also a religious war. Russia seems to consider Western Europe and the US to have become decadent, immoral and in a religious decay. Moscow is considered the third city of Christianity, the capital of the Eastern Orthodox Church, after Rome for Catholicism, and even Protestantism, and Istanbul (earlier Constantinople) as the capital of the Orthodox Church.
It has only been a few years since Ukraine pulled away from the Russian Orthodox Church, led by the Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, but both countries belong to the same branch of Christianity. President Putin uses the Church for rallying people around re-building a stronger Russia, with its stricter social and family values at home, and a more aggressive foreign policy. In other words, Russia is trying to define its sphere of interest also as for religion, with many seeing Moscow as the ‘final home’ of Christianity, not Rome, and not Constantinople.
Religion, language and culture are used as elements of a superstructure as Russia tries to recreate its lost standing and identity nationally and internationally. But Russia and the West, and other countries in the region, should rather try to cooperate closer, not create new borders. At the same time, each country, or groups of countries, must be allowed to keep its own identity and have its own development approaches.