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Russian Roulette
by Zbigniew Brezinski

The ongoing upheaval in Kyrgyzstan and the peaceful Ukrainian and Georgian democratic revolutions reflect two major realities in the space of the former Soviet Union: First, the geopolitical pluralism which emerged as a consequence of the collapse of the Kremlin's imperial domination is now an irreversible fact, despite nostalgic efforts by Vladimir Putin to restore Moscow's control over the newly independent states. Second, the younger post-Soviet generation is increasingly impatient and disgusted by the corrupt, bureaucratic authoritarianism that has persisted in much of the area. The new political opposition tends to derive its vital strength from a genuine demographic discontinuity.

Violent, but so far repressed, demonstrations in Belarus, where Mr. Putin has been backing a primitive dictator, and the less dramatic but far-reaching recent repudiation of the Kremlin's authority by Moldova's previously pro-Moscow leadership also illustrate how out of touch the Russian president is with political trends. His surprisingly inept policies are accentuating Russia's self-isolation, and today, almost all of Russia's neighbors are either afraid of Russia, contemptuous of it, or a combination of both. Hardly an improvement on the past, it is not a good foreign policy record.

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That is why President Bush's decision to couple his forthcoming trip to Moscow in early May with a prior stop in the capital of Latvia and a follow-on stop in the capital of Georgia, as well as the pending visit to Washington by Ukraine's newly installed democratic president, are symbolically bold and strategically significant steps. The initial purpose of Mr. Bush's trip was to attend the celebration in Moscow of the 60th anniversary of the defeat of Nazism. However, overtones of Mr. Putin's planned celebration appeared to some Europeans, especially those only recently freed of Moscow's control, as a co-celebration of the victory of Stalinism. Their concerns were heightened by Mr. Putin's unwillingness to repudiate clearly the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact that enabled Stalin and Hitler to partition Central Europe.

The added visit to a Baltic capital by the president of America, one of the very few countries which refused for decades to accept the incorporation of the Baltic states into the Soviet Union, and a meeting there with the presidents of all three Baltic states (two of whom have declined the invitation to Moscow) will by itself speak volumes even if President Bush does not address the issue directly. Similarly, the visit to the freshly democratic Georgia -- from which Moscow still refuses to withdraw its troops (despite explicit promises) and within which

Moscow sponsors separatist movements (even while next door brutally repressing Chechen separatism) -- will be a major act of international reassurance for a beleaguered people.

It would have been much better if the Russian government itself had chosen to use the celebration of the defeat of Hitlerism for an unambiguous denunciation of Stalinism and of its 45-year-long domination of Central Europe. The occasion then would have been a moment for reconciliation as well as a celebration. Central and East Europe need such reconciliation with Russia, and Russia itself could benefit as much from it as Germany benefited from the Franco-German, and the more recent German-Polish, reconciliation.

But that kind of statesmanship can only come from leaders genuinely imbued with a deep democratic conviction. Viktor Yushchenko of Ukraine and Mikhail Saakashvili of Georgia have shown by the risks they have courageously faced that their beliefs transcend political opportunism. They gained thereby the fervent support particularly of the new, post-Soviet younger generation. The political future in the post-Soviet space is clearly with leaders like them. Such Russian leaders may not yet be visible in Moscow, but President Bush will be speaking to the future leaders even if he will not be able to see them. Many young Russians will be watching and listening and wondering why their lives should be shaped by nostalgia for a past that deserves to be permanently buried.

The events of the last few months are thus an augury of better days to come. The remarkable political maturity shown by the Ukrainians was an impressive display of a genuinely democratic culture sprouting in a country that until recently was paternalistically patronized by the Russian political elite. The Ukrainian youth dramatically displayed that democratic culture with patience and determination during their four-week-long encampment in the middle of Kiev, braving a blistering cold spell. Their example will have a contagious effect on their Russian counterparts, especially if in the meantime the West assists Ukraine in its westward trajectory.

A democratic geopolitical pluralism is beginning to surround Russia. Because the new states are so much less powerful, this environment in itself is incapable of seriously threatening Russia. However, their example will inevitably reinforce pressures within Russia for a similarly profound break with the authoritarian and chauvinist tradition that still dominates the Moscow political elite's mindset. And that break will come before too long, when the cumulative effects of increased contacts with the world, of democracy in adjoining and once dominated states, and of the inherent attraction of Europe prompt a basic redefinition in the minds of the younger Russians of their vision of what Russia ought to be.

Russian youth are well educated. Increasingly, many have traveled and studied in the West. Indeed, there is somewhere, perhaps at the Harvard Business School or at the London School of Economics, a young Russian who will

someday occupy the seat in the Kremlin currently filled by a graduate of the KGB. With the pace of history dramatically accelerating (and let us not forget how even just recently most in the West viewed Ukraine as a backwater of Russia), one cannot dismiss the possibility that this will happen much sooner than most can imagine. Russians still know their Marxism much better than Westerners, and it was Karl Marx who said, quite correctly, that "consciousness lags behind reality."

Further east in the former Soviet Union, political change will have to cope with a special complexity. The newly independent Central Asian states have retained leaderships directly associated with the previous Soviet system. Their titles have changed but not their political roles. Moreover, the political leaderships, while welcoming their new independence and doing much to consolidate it, have also remained faithful to the earlier Soviet-style secularism derived from official atheism. The West, fearful of Islamic fundamentalism, instinctively approved of that aspect.

The problem, however, is that the peoples of these countries are Muslims. Neither fanatical nor fundamentalist but still deeply faithful. Islamic identity is an organic part of the national identity of the demographically dominant younger generation, for whom emancipation from colonial rule opened up hitherto stifled political self-expression. Heavy-handed efforts by Soviet-trained leaders to repress Islamism indiscriminately thus poses the risk that political opposition may increasingly become militantly Islamist. That could give populist movements in the region an altogether different and more violent cast from what has lately occurred in the more European parts of the former Soviet Union.

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The sooner Russia itself becomes a democracy, the more likely it is that change in the former Soviet Union will both peacefully consolidate geopolitical pluralism and give the younger generation's revolutionary wave a truly democratic definition. But it is of no help to the future of democracy in Russia to pretend that its non-democratic regime is already a democracy. It is also not reassuring to Russia's neighbors when its government equivocates regarding a past that is universally regarded as criminal. Clarity on these matters is the prerequisite to genuine democracy.

In an unexpected way, the wider symbolic and strategic manifestations surrounding the forthcoming Moscow celebration of Hitler's defeat may thus speed up the final burial of Stalin's legacy.

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