

Toward an Understanding of Russia

New European Perspectives

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Foreword

Over a decade after the end of Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet empire, the initial optimism on the part of some that Russia would become a responsible, modern state integrated into the “New World Order” has been replaced by a sense of wasted opportunity among some Western as well as some Russian elites. A large number of American scholars and analysts have focused on Russia and accumulated enormous amounts of knowledge. In addition vast resources have been devoted to assisting Russia in its transition to democratic capitalism. But their overall impact on democracy and capitalism in Russia has been discouraging. One should, therefore, ask whether knowledge automatically brings understanding and whether a lack of understanding can be overcome through material help. The answer to both questions is apparently negative.

This project was intended to help understand Russia better by bringing together the perspectives of American analysts with those of scholars who were much closer to Russia due to geography and history. Therefore, we invited 12 analysts from Central and Eastern Europe to share their views on issues ranging from Russia’s structure of power and President Vladimir Putin’s foreign policy goals to Russia’s energy policy. We hoped to learn from the differences between these perspectives.

Several of them are worth mentioning here. American analysts examined Russia’s potential to be a global actor that could challenge the United States, while analysts from the former Soviet empire concentrated on Russia as a European actor and its potential to influence that region.

More often than not, the majority of American analysts focused on Russia episodically, rather than systematically. This is the reason why extremely

contradictory evaluations of Russia emerge in times of major political change in Russia, or during a crisis in Russian-U.S. relations. Bismarck's dictum that Russia is never as strong as one is afraid and never as weak as one hopes is largely forgotten in Washington. Central and Eastern Europeans tend to have a more nuanced view of Russia and in their analyses, they seek to identify the essence of Russia's self-identity and its policies rather than to rely on ad hoc analysis of short-term political turbulence in Moscow.

We hoped that bringing these different viewpoints to bear could enhance U.S. analysis of the roots of the Russian situation, as well as help make American policy planners take a longer view in shaping policies toward Russia. The U.S. policy-planning structure invariably focuses on short-term policy timetables. But, as the "lost decade" has demonstrated, the emphasis on achieving goals rapidly in Russia may have to be tempered with an understanding of how time is viewed halfway across the world. This Central and Eastern European focus on long-term trends inside Russia, and their impact on Russian foreign policy, is especially valuable in light of the recent reorientation of Putin's policy toward America. Indeed, one needs to ask in observing the transformation of Russian foreign policy since September 11, whether the changes, which depend primarily on Putin's decisions, are not too fresh to serve as a basis for long-term U.S. commitments in its relations with Russia.

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