

REVIEW ESSAY

Russian Crossroads: Towards the New Millennium

by Yevgeny Primakov
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REVIEWED BY JEFFREY MANKOFF

Yevgeny Primakov, the onetime head of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, minister of foreign affairs and, ultimately, prime minister, is the type of Russian rarely trusted or liked in the West. A nationalist with an avowed distrust of the West's motives in world affairs, Primakov at times fits neatly into Cold War stereotypes about Russian statesmen—plodding, dogmatic, suspicious—in the mold of his mentor, longtime Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko (dubbed “Mr. Nyet” by his Western adversaries). In the Western morality tale about post-Soviet Russia, Primakov typically occupies the dim purgatory between such widely admired figures as the liberal economist Grigory Yavlinsky and the universally vilified, like the ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. In spite of his seeming grayness in comparison, Primakov is a more complicated and interesting figure than this reputation would suggest. The publication of Primakov's memoirs in English, therefore, offers a welcome and rarely seen perspective on Russian politics in the 1990s, especially on post-Soviet Russia's attempts to define a new grand strategy that neither fits into the old Soviet mold nor adheres completely to the West's outlook.

Primakov's negative reputation in the West can be partly attributed to his time as head of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, or SVR. (Russian spooks have, of course, always seemed to evoke particular aversion in the United States and Europe.) However, as Primakov points out, most of his career was spent in journalism and academia, and his service in the SVR was limited to heading the organization from 1991 until he was appointed foreign minister in 1996. Despite his relatively brief involvement in espionage, Primakov provides a wealth of information on the operations of both the KGB and Western intelligence agencies during and after the Cold War. The ac-

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count of his time as foreign minister, from 1996 until 1998, is even more impressive. It lays out a new vision of Russia's role in the world that remains influential. Primakov's tenure as prime minister, for eight months in 1998-1999—until the ascension of Vladimir Putin—was relatively unremarkable by comparison. Primakov himself is conscious of having been little more than a placeholder as head of the government.

Primakov's insight into the cloak-and-dagger world of intelligence is considerable. As an academic, he worked closely with the infamous British double agent Donald McLean, who defected to the USSR when Scotland Yard was closing in on him. Based on his conversations with McLean and his experiences attempting to keep Russian agents in place during the turmoil of the early 1990s, Primakov concludes that ideology is often overrated as a motivation for betraying one's country. He argues that most Soviet agents were not doctrinaire communists but had more general political motivations—opposition to Nazism, now replaced by "Islamic extremism and religious fanaticism," or American unilateralism.

After heading the SVR for five years, Primakov was appointed Russian foreign minister in January 1996 at the insistence of President Boris Yeltsin. During his tenure in the Foreign Ministry, Primakov presided over the emergence of a new, distinctly Russian grand strategy that continues to inform Kremlin diplomacy today, long after Primakov's retirement. Most significantly, Primakov criticized the notion—predominant in Russian foreign policy circles between 1991 and 1996—that Russia's natural role was to march in lockstep with the West. Russia, Primakov contended, was too big and its interests too diverse to follow the path of post-1945 Germany and Japan, allies of America but with their foreign policy determined almost wholly by Washington. Instead, Primakov argued that Russia should insist on being treated as an equal by the West, pursuing cooperation where Russian and Western interests overlap but refusing to sacrifice Russian national interests where they do not. National interest, rather than Western approval, was to be the guiding principle of Russian foreign policy under Primakov, as indeed it has continued to be up to the present.

This approach was evident in Primakov's prickly reaction to the proposed expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe. Primakov points out that, in 1990 and 1991, Western statesmen gave Moscow guarantees that they would not admit the former Warsaw Pact countries into

NATO. However, since Russia did not insist on a legally binding guarantee, NATO expansion was pursued vigorously in the late 1990s once Western leaders thought it was in their interest to do so. Unable to stop the process of expansion, Primakov was instrumental in the creation of special structures, like the NATO-Russia Council, which gave Moscow a voice in NATO deliberations and served notice that Russia would remain a force in global affairs.

Primakov's desire to see Russia play an independent role was visible even during the high point of cooperation between Moscow and the West in the early 1990s. As personal envoy of Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev to Saddam Hussein in the run-up to Operation Desert Storm in 1990-1991, Primakov provides a fascinating character sketch of the former Iraqi dictator based on firsthand knowledge that few in the West possess. Primakov believes that despite Saddam's streak of stubbornness and cruelty, he nonetheless remained a realist at heart with a keen sense of his own interests. Consequently, Primakov argues that Desert Storm was not a triumph of the rule of law against Saddam's despotism but a needless waste of life that could have been avoided if Western leaders had shown greater flexibility.

Primakov was eager to find a formula that allowed Saddam to save face and preserved stability in the Middle East even as Iraqi troops would be expelled from Kuwait immediately. While acknowledging that Saddam's expectation of receiving diplomatic compensation for withdrawing his troops from Kuwait was unrealistic, Primakov nonetheless offers a useful alternative to the standard account of the run-up to Desert Storm and provides an assessment of Middle Eastern politics profoundly skeptical of George W. Bush's visionary agenda for the region.

The sketches of other world leaders—especially those with whom Western statesmen have had little interaction—are equally valuable. Slobodan Milosevic, self-absorbed and irresponsible, was willfully blind to the danger posed by Kosovo. Fidel Castro comes across as a warm and sincere, if somewhat impulsive man. Primakov tells the story of how, during the tortured negotiations in Havana at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Castro received word that the wife of Anastas Mikoyan, the Soviet plenipotentiary, had suddenly died. Castro broke the news to Mikoyan and offered to cancel the negotiations to let Mikoyan return to the Soviet Union. Mikoyan refused, arguing that “the world's destiny depend[s] on our decisions.”

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Mikoyan walked to a window and began silently crying. Castro immediately announced that the negotiations were over and that he would accept Moscow's proposal to remove nuclear missiles and bombers from Cuba. In the 1990s, Primakov writes that Castro was eager to improve ties with the United States and hoped to use the newly popular Russians as a channel to Washington. Once again, Primakov implies that the West's outmoded, rigid thinking wasted an opportunity to end the divisions left over from the Cold War.

Primakov represents the realist school of diplomacy and, moreover, does so from a distinctly Russian perspective. This mixture of cold calculation and skepticism of the "end of history" in Russia's relations with the West helps explain the continuing distrust of Primakov in Western circles. Primakov continually emphasizes that the West sought throughout the 1990s to take advantage of Russia's weakness, whether by expanding NATO, attacking Serbia, or increasing its influence in the post-Soviet republics.

Russia and the West have many common interests, most notably the war on terrorism. However, Primakov believes that Russia should be an equal partner of the West rather than a subordinate inside the Western camp. This emphasis on Russia as an independent force in world affairs is unsettling to many Western statesmen more comfortable with Bill Clinton's embrace of "Brother Boris" or George W. Bush's gaze into the soul of Vladimir Putin. As Russia charts its own course in the world, the West will be forced to contend with Primakov's vision.

Whether that vision will benefit Russia in the long term remains questionable. Primakov is surely right that Russia is too large and diverse to pursue the path followed by Germany and Japan after 1945. Even if both sides wanted it to, Russia could never join Western political and security structures like the EU or NATO without overwhelming them. At the same time, with borders reaching to Central Asia, China, and the Pacific Ocean, Russia must confront a diverse range of challenges not directly affecting Europe. Russia's embrace of a separate identity on the international stage, therefore, is a natural development as it seeks to define its place in the post-Cold War world.

Primakov's strategy of Russian exceptionalism carries certain dangers, however. By seeking to separate Russia from the West, Primakov and Putin—who has largely embraced Primakov's vision of Russia in

the world—have weakened Russia’s incentives to democratize and liberalize. Freed from the necessity of building domestic institutions that conform to Western standards, Russia under Primakov and Putin has suffered from a creeping authoritarianism. Nor has Primakov’s new grand strategy been completely beneficial to Russia’s world standing. Yes, Primakov gave Moscow greater freedom of action vis-à-vis the West, but only by weakening Russia’s own ability to influence Western actions and alienating Russia’s weaker neighbors who, like Ukraine and Georgia, have fled into Western embrace. Post-Primakov Russia is a more assertive, nationalistic force in world affairs, but it is also one that has increasingly lost a sense of its own weakness. By grasping for the straw of greatness, Russia finds itself more and more isolated.

As the man most responsible for this transformation, Primakov remains a pivotal figure. His extensive knowledge—of the Middle East, espionage, and foreign statesmen—makes his memoir an important contribution to the debate on Russia’s place in the post-Cold War world. There are, of course, flaws in Primakov’s account. In particular, he is unreflective about the internal political changes that have taken place in Russia over the course of the last decade. He is unstinting in his support for Vladimir Putin, whose own approach to the world reflects much of his own thinking (despite Putin’s role in forcing Primakov out as Prime Minister in 1999). His account of the trouble in Chechnya, which has been central to Russian politics for over ten years, is abbreviated and unrevealing, as is his analysis of Russian relations with the other post-Soviet republics (his memoir was published before the revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan). Nonetheless, Primakov, the father of contemporary Russian grand strategy, has written an engaging, revealing look at Russian diplomacy during a crucial period of transformation that has not yet reached its culmination. ■