



Bush's Russian diversion

In a move eerily reminiscent of the days of the Cold War, the U.S. government has just summarily expelled six Russian diplomats and ordered 45 more to leave the country.

The official U.S. explanation is that this move has a single goal — retaliation for Russia's alleged 15-year use of FBI agent Robert Hanssen to obtain American state secrets. This would be a rational and understandable move. However, given recent developments in American rhetoric and foreign policy vis-a-vis Russia and the domestic situation in the United States, a different context for understanding arises.

As contrasted to the touchy-feely End of History, Global Community rhetoric that characterized the Clinton administration, the people now in charge of the White House view themselves as steely pragmatists schooled in the ways of realpolitik.

Although Bill Clinton was certainly willing enough to bomb Iraq and Yugoslavia, this was always accompanied by uplifting talk about upholding the values of the Community of Nations. Not so with Bush. The talk about the "indispensable nation" enforcing international values has become subdued. Instead, America will uphold its own (that is, George W. Bush's) values.

Since having assumed the presidency, Bush — or more frequently the people in his administration, who more often than not seem to be the ones pulling the strings — has taken a so-called hard line toward Russia.

CIA Director George Tenet, for instance, called Russia a "threat" to American interests, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld labeled it an "active proliferator" of dangerous military hardware. Add to this the presence of stories printed in the not-terribly-reputable Washington Times about Russian nuclear weapons being moved into the Kaliningrad Oblast, stories that have "floated balloon" written all over them, and it becomes clear that the U.S. administration either considers Russia to be a grave threat, or it very much wants people to think that it is.

But, in fact, the only threat Russia, which is at present a country struggling to get back on its feet, poses lies in the possibility of an accidental nuclear launch at one of its decaying ICBM facilities, unless one considers objecting to National Missile Defense (NMD) to be a threat.

What goal could the Bush administration have for so depicting Russia as a threat? The answer probably lies more in the domestic than the political arena. The heady days of the American economic boom are over, with bloody carnage reigning in the land of the dot.coms, layoffs at their highest level since 1992 and analysts pronouncing the dreaded word "recession." In addition, the country is currently headed by a man who has no foreign-policy experience whatsoever. Indeed, Bush has never even been to Europe.

Knowing the American public, which tends to blame its economic woes on whoever happens to be in the White House at any given moment, the onus of the blame will fall on Bush, making it highly unlikely that he will be more than a one-term president.

Taking a hard line toward a Russia successfully portrayed as a danger would accomplish two things. First, it would provide Bush with a much-needed foreign-policy "success." Second, it would distract the American voting public away from such genuine issues as the tanking economy, China/Taiwan relations, the Balkans and so forth, about which Bush appears to be doing precious little other than repeating Reaganite mantras ("Slash taxes! Outlaw abortion! Get tough on drugs!"). The Bush administration is, after all, so close to being Reagan Lite that all it needs to be complete is a Cold War.

It is only natural that Russia in particular should be singled out as a threat. Bush's advisors Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice were trained and steeped in Cold War thinking; and so, to them, it seems all too easy to identify Russia as the Enemy. Presumably, they think it will be easy to convince the American public that this is the case. After all, wasn't Russia the Evil Empire that had nuclear missiles pointed at us?

The ironic thing is that this policy will not work. The days of the Cold War, when Americans were haunted by thoughts of evil Russkies hiding under their beds, are over. The American public, which has always been isolationist in temperament (we are discussing a country in which 40 percent of the population thinks Canada is in Europe, after all), considers itself to be at the top of the global heap and, rightly or wrongly, essentially unthreatened. Its concern is with the domestic arena — the economy, abortion, drugs and violence in schools.

Insofar as the diplomatic expulsions were in fact motivated by a genuine concern for the security of state secrets, it should be remembered that Hanssen was not recruited by the Soviet Union. He volunteered his services in exchange for money and, after having done so, was able to get away with it for 15 years. This means something is seriously wrong at the American end of things. If the United States thinks it can mend holes in its security by expelling a few diplomats who may or may not be spy handlers, it should reconsider. These diplomats can easily be replaced, and as long as there are people in the American government willing to sell classified information for money, they will do so. The best way to encourage them to flock to the Russian Embassy in droves would be to really make Russia an enemy.



Russia, the West and Gaidar

'Father of reform' still has much to offer the fledgling market economy



By OTTO
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An analysis of
what drives
Russia's economy.

Two well-known figures celebrated their 70th birthdays recently — first it was former Russian President Boris Yeltsin, then, a month later, former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. All the Russian newspapers gave the two birthdays wide coverage, regardless of their political leanings and views of the two men.

Another date has just gone by — Yegor Gaidar's 45th birthday; but only a few papers noted it, and then only in a few lines. To be fair, Gaidar himself didn't exactly seek out publicity and celebrated his birthday at his dacha with his friends. But Gaidar made just as much of a mark on recent Russian history as Gorbachev and Yeltsin. What's more, Gaidar's name is also inextricably linked with ongoing discussions on the future of Russia.

Gaidar was head of the government for a mere six months — a tiny length of time compared to, say, the five-year tenure of Viktor Chernomyrdin. But no one would think to call the reforms of the '90s the Chernomyrdin reforms. Few people call them the Yeltsin reforms. They are called the Gaidar reforms, and sometimes this is said as praise, sometimes as a curse.

It's not just that it was under Gaidar's direction that Russia took its first steps toward real market reform and that subsequent leaders have only continued what Gaidar began, with a greater or lesser degree of success. It's also that in his practical political steps and in his theoretical works, Gaidar defined the philosophy and essence of the modern reforms that Russia needs.

The original name of Gaidar's party — Russia's Choice "Vybor Rossi" — was in itself symbolic. For any politician today, their relation to Gaidar is above all a question of their choice of road to take.

Two days before Gaidar's birthday, the Coordination Council of SPS (Union of Right Forces) discussed the program documents for its party congress planned for May. The congress will see transformations within the party. The program documents' central idea is to put an end for once and for all to the utopian dream of a "third direction" for Russia's development — a unique Russian blend of a market economy and socialism. We have to recognize that if we don't want a return to socialism, the only alternative is to build a social and economic system on the Western model.

Gaidar's place in the centuries-old debate between advocates of a specifically Russian path and so-called Westerners is clear — he is a Westerner in the modern sense of the word. This in no way means giving less importance to Russian national interests or to the uniqueness of Russian life and culture. What it means is that Russia is a part of Europe not only geographically, but also culturally. This in turn means that the European model of social development, including economic and political liberalism, the priority given to human rights, the rule of law and role of civil society, applies to Russia, too.

"The father of Russian reform," who is still too young to merit such a pompous title, isn't going through the best moments of his political career. The party of which he is undoubtedly the intellectual leader is reluctant to make him its formal head, putting forward other names instead.

This is done for understandable reasons and is not unexpected. Back in 1991, when he agreed to head the economic section in Boris Yeltsin's first reform government, Gaidar imagined that he and his colleagues would be carrying out a purely technical task — they

would liberalize prices, something the Soviet leaders had been terrified of doing, and then would quit the political stage.

Many Russians didn't and still don't understand exactly what role the reformers played in events that changed their lives. Many think that the social upheavals brought about by delaying reform for too long were a consequence of reform itself. But in the end, Gaidar and his team became more than just political kamikazes.

To this day, they are labeled closeted academics with no knowledge of real life outside their offices. But it has turned out that the practice of setting economic policy just can't get by without these theoreticians. They made mistakes, but they were the only people who knew what had to be done. True, until they began reforms, they knew about the market economy only in theory, but their critics didn't even know the theory. As for the practice, no one in the country knew it since there hadn't been a market economy in Russia for the last 60 years.

All this now seems to be in the past. The reformers seem to have stopped losing political ground — they held onto their positions during the parliamentary elections of 1999 and even increased their influence. But the first year of Vladimir Putin's presidency has brought some new worries.

Putin has returned the Soviet anthem, put curbs on freedom of speech and moved closer to foreign anti-democratic regimes with which the former Soviet Union had good ties, and at the same time, he proclaims a liberal economic strategy, promises judicial reform and announces his intention to see market reforms through to their end.

There is no coherent logic to this array of policies. It all looks more like an attempt to find a third Russian direction. But there is no third direction, and history knows only two roads. The only way to avoid new upheavals is to choose the road defended by Gaidar and his team. ■