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NEW EUROPE (Op-Ed Yearbook Submission)

The Day Georgian Democracy Died

By Mikheil Saakashvili

Though the US presidential election of 2016 may be the most infamous of Russia's attempts to interfere in democratic processes abroad, it certainly was not the first. For years, the Russian government has honed its tactics in domestic elections, then targeted Eastern Partnership countries, and ultimately, scaled up these influence operations to shake the West's faith in democracy. Unfortunately, I speak from first-hand experience: In the Kremlin's war for influence, Russian President **Vladimir Putin** has used Georgia as his proving ground.

Like any tyrant, Putin perceives democratic countries – especially those along Russia's border – as threats to his regime. Since the Rose Revolution of 2003 ushered in my pro-Western, reformist government, the Kremlin has displayed escalating aggression in its attempts to bring my country back from the brink of freedom. Moscow has orchestrated cyber-attacks, funded fringe political movements, and even launched a conventional invasion in 2008. Over 20% of Georgian territory is occupied to this day, in violation of ceasefire agreements and international law, and Russian armed forces continue the illegal construction of fences along whatever they deem to be the “border” on any given day.

Beyond conventional warfare, Putin's regime has also targeted Georgia with relentless streams of propaganda to establish an exclusive sphere of influence over the region. Entities connected to the Russian government finance conferences, media outlets, and NGOs, united by a mission to discredit liberal values and erode democratic institutions.

Nevertheless, Georgia remained a rare success story in a challenging region.

...Until, one day, it wasn't.

Reasonable people may disagree on the exact timeline of Georgia's democratic backsliding. Did it start on November 28, 2018, when – according to Chatham House – a fraud-riddled presidential election “damaged” my country's hard-won “democratic credentials?”¹ Or was it a few weeks earlier when the Transparency International Secretariat expressed its alarm over “state capture” in Georgia?²

Some would argue that the real turning point was May 31, 2018, when a suspect in the murders of two teenagers dodged justice thanks to a relative in the prosecutor's office, triggering mass street protests and the resignation of the Prime Minister.³

But in hindsight, many would admit that democracy died much earlier: October 1, 2012, when Moscow's investment in Georgia began to pay dividends. On that day, oligarch **Bidzina Ivanishvili**'s Georgian Dream coalition won the parliamentary elections – thanks in no small part to Kremlin-backed information operations aimed at misleading the Georgian public. Ivanishvili, whose climb to the peaks of wealth is only dimly understood, earned his fortune in Russia as the largest individual shareholder of state energy giant Gazprom. He has a *known* net

¹ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/georgia-s-presidential-campaign-damages-its-democratic-credentials>

² [Transparency International](https://www.transparency.org/en/press-releases/2018/10/01/georgia)

³ <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-tbilisi-protests-continue-leader-calls-on-political-parties/29267739.html>

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worth today of \$4.6 billion – equivalent to nearly a third of Georgia’s GDP.⁴ Perhaps most alarming, he holds no official position, so he is completely unaccountable to the Georgian people.

Under Ivanishvili’s informal rule, Georgia’s once-promising democracy has come to resemble the patronage system in Putin’s Russia. Therefore, it is not surprising that Georgia’s westward trajectory has faltered since Ivanishvili rose to power. In February 2018, the US Director of National Intelligence issued the agency’s Worldwide Threat Assessment, which highlighted the oligarch’s propensity for stifling political opposition, consolidating power, and – in the face of an existential threat from Russia – weakening Georgia from within. High-level corruption, burgeoning crime, economic stagnation, and a politicised court system contribute to widespread popular discontent.⁵

Despite this grim reality, Ivanishvili and his ruling party insist that Georgian democracy has never been stronger. In doing so, they erode the public’s faith in democracy and replace it with cynicism. Among the disillusioned, Russian soft power flourishes.

Over the past six years, Ivanishvili has effectively done Putin’s job for him: Georgia has come to resemble a microcosm of Russia. Consider, for example, the recent presidential election. Throughout the campaign, the pro-Western opposition fell victim to distinctly Russian-style election-meddling tactics. Hackers targeted campaign-linked social media accounts, including my own, while Facebook bots boosted the ruling party candidate. Russian-style “troll factories,” like the St Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency charged with meddling in U.S. elections, wielded disinformation to mislead – and often terrorise – voters.

In parallel, Georgian Dream officials launched a concerted effort to impose uniform discourse on the public square. Independent media, as in Russia, was a prime target. When the director of Georgia’s most popular TV channel criticised the ruling party’s presidential candidate, Georgian Dream Speaker of Parliament **Irakli Kobakhidze** called him a “failed, inept fascist.” When reputable civil society leaders spoke out in defence of press freedom, Kobakhidze smeared them as “accomplices of fascism.”⁶

Then, as in Putin’s Russia, the ruling party attempted to control the public through fear. Throughout the campaign, Ivanishvili and his allies referred to the opposition as a “criminal, dirty force” rather than a legitimate political movement.⁷ With this inflammatory rhetoric, the authorities not only demonised opposition politicians like me – but also, and perhaps more dangerous, they cast the hundreds of thousands of Georgians who vote against the ruling party as *enemies of the state*.

Following the opposition’s strong performance in the first round of the election, Georgian Dream officials began threatening “civil war” in the event of our coalition’s victory. Such ominous statements track with the Kremlin’s narrative, which holds that Georgians are incapable of self-government — and moreover, that unrest in Georgia requires Russian intervention for “peace-keeping.”

⁴ <https://www.forbes.com/profile/bidzina-ivanishvili/#8c0b78445989>

⁵ <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/informal-rule-has-triggered-crisis-democratic-institutions>

⁶ <https://civil.ge/archives/257321>

⁷ <https://civil.ge/archives/265066>

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Finally, Ivanishvili and the ruling party applied distinctly Putinist electoral techniques to reshape Georgia's political landscape in the image of Russia's. Just as "dead souls" turn out in droves to vote for Putin's United Russia party, Georgian Dream used the IDs of deceased people – and falsified voter rolls – to push its candidate to a Pyrrhic victory.⁸ And like Russia, Georgia has become home to a host of "pocket opposition" parties. Directly or indirectly supported by the authorities, these political forces play scripted roles in a satirical performance of democracy. One of them, the overtly pro-Kremlin fringe party Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, rushed to host rallies against my coalition – in effect, boosting Ivanishvili's candidate – the week before the runoff. Though it may seem absurd for a self-proclaimed "opposition party" to stage protests in favor of the government, it's just another day in Putin's Georgia.

In 2012, Georgia's international partners praised me for presiding over my country's first peaceful transition of power, following a free and fair election. But refusing to step down, or clinging to power through force and fraud, never crossed my mind. I had championed democracy throughout my two terms as president, and I was determined to leave my country's highest office upholding the same values that had guided me there.

Nevertheless, I understood on that day what the world has now realized six years later – that authoritarian forces can destroy democracy by weaponising the very institutions that comprise it. Though Georgia is an especially soft target, we have seen that the West is not immune. Today, as rising tides of populism and authoritarianism threaten to drown internationalism, it is only by amplifying engagement with democratic forces (and holding accountable undemocratic ones) in the Eastern Partnership that the rest of Europe can avoid Georgia's fate. Likewise, strengthening NATO's capabilities and commitments to collective defense – and welcoming NATO-aspirant countries who share the values of the alliance – is crucial to protecting liberal norms and values from Putin's ambitions.

Those who wish to uphold liberal values worldwide ought to take Georgia as a cautionary tale: Putin does not need to invade another country when he can control it from within.

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⁸ <http://rustavi2.ge/en/news/120235>



OPINION: Mikheil Saakashvili: Corruption Knows No Party



ANATOLY RUHADZE/AFP/Getty Images



MIKHEIL SAKASHVILI
PRESIDENT OF GEORGIA

September 19, 2018
5:20 PM ET

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In the aftermath of Paul Manafort’s guilty plea on Friday, the disgraced political consultant’s agreement to cooperate with special counsel Robert Mueller dominated the headlines.

Almost every major media outlet presented Manafort’s plea agreement as a momentous turning point in the Russia investigation. Speculation abounded that Manafort would implicate others who worked on the Trump campaign — and perhaps even the president himself — in criminal activity.

But the **superseding criminal information**, which Mueller filed hours before the plea agreement, painted a more complex picture — of the Obama administration. The document includes scanned letters from Manafort to former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich, in which the consultant updated his Kremlin-backed patron on developments in Washington between 2010 and 2013.

The descriptions of the Obama White House in these letters as “flexible” on Russia and “sympathetic” to Manafort’s Russian-backed client are consistent with my own experience as the president of Georgia during that time. Yet coverage of the Manafort case has all but ignored these revelations.

This is a mistake. The Mueller investigation is a historic opportunity for Americans to gain a greater understanding of Russian influence operations, which have long destabilized my region and posed a serious threat to the United States. Unfortunately, many media outlets are politicizing a nonpartisan matter of national security.

Instead of speculating on what Manafort might reveal about Trump, I will highlight what Manafort's letters actually tell us about the Obama administration and Russia.

Shortly before Obama was re-elected in 2012, Manafort wrote a revealing letter to Yanukovich, in which he described State Department officials as "bureaucrats who place human rights as the foundation of U.S. policy." This emphasis on human rights presented an obstacle for Manafort's autocratic Ukrainian client, who was infamous for jailing opponents and silencing critics.

By contrast, Manafort noted the Obama administration's willingness to not only "work closely with us" and "engage" with Yanukovich, but to "constrain" the State Department's opposition to this cooperation. Indeed, Manafort wrote that the Obama White House "agreed to keep the [State Department] from making active pronouncements in Washington" criticizing Yanukovich's abuses of power.

At the start of Obama's second term in February 2013, Manafort assured his client that the "emphasis of the president's national security team will not be so much on human rights" — an encouraging development for Yanukovich, whose human rights violations were becoming more egregious by the day.



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Why would the Obama administration override the State Department's concerns about human rights violations in Ukraine? Manafort offers an explanation in the same letter, which refers to "the support that the Yanukovich government has provided to the priorities of the Obama government."

Given the context, these "priorities" are almost certainly connected to Obama's much-touted "reset" with Russia. In other words, the Obama White House was apparently pleased that Yanukovich's government supported a closer relationship with Russia as well.

Another explanation for the Obama administration's apparent openness to Manafort's influence operations may be found in Greg Craig, who served as Obama's White House counsel and later became a partner at Skadden Arps. During the Yanukovich lobbying effort in 2012, Manafort allegedly commissioned Craig's law firm to write a report about the trial of Yanukovich's political opponent, Yulia Tymoshenko.

Given Craig's background in the Obama administration, I presume White House officials would have been receptive to his efforts on behalf of Yanukovich. Now, Craig is **reportedly under investigation** for undisclosed lobbying, as he should be.

As someone who has always admired America's democratic institutions, I find these allegations disheartening but not surprising. As president of Georgia, I was disappointed by the willingness to further Russia's objectives displayed by prominent Obama administration officials.

One month before the Georgian parliamentary elections in 2012, longtime Clinton family advisor Sid Blumenthal sent an email to then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in which he essentially acted as an unregistered lobbyist for my opponent Bidzina Ivanishvili, a Russian-backed oligarch.

Blumenthal **sent Clinton a memo** from John Kornblum, who served as ambassador to Germany during Bill Clinton's presidency, and noted that Kornblum was "working with" Ivanishvili's political party.

Meanwhile, my opposition to Vladimir Putin was no secret. Just four years earlier, Russia had invaded my country to depose me and undermine Georgia's integration with the West. Given my background, Kornblum's memo to Hillary Clinton urging her to boost my opponent in the 2012 Georgian elections was revealing. "To support Saakashvili," Kornblum wrote, "would [ensure] we never have a reasonable security relationship with Russia."

While many of Ivanishvili's lobbyists registered as foreign agents in accordance with federal law, Kornblum apparently did not. The implications of Kornblum's back-channel communications with Clinton are troubling.

As the largest individual shareholder of Russian state energy giant Gazprom, Ivanishvili had unlimited resources to launch a **massive lobbying effort** in Washington in advance of the elections. Essentially, Kornblum acted as the conduit for Gazprom money to influence U.S. foreign policy.

Manafort had a long history doing the bidding of Kremlin-linked oligarchs in Georgia, as well. Indeed, the FBI **retrieved a binder** labeled "Georgia" from Manafort's residence, alongside a number of binders related to his Ukraine projects. The exact contents of the Georgia binder are not public, but Manafort was coordinating with steel magnate Rinat Akhmetov to boost opposition to my government in 2008.

Four years later, alongside his lobbying for Yanukovich, Manafort also supported Ivanishvili's campaign. Therefore, I am not surprised that Manafort's letters to Yanukovich cast the Obama administration as "sympathetic" toward the Russian-backed regime in Ukraine.

I have no doubt that Manafort committed serious crimes in the course of his Eastern European projects, and I am glad he is facing justice. But when it comes to the question of Russian collusion, the American media's intense scrutiny of the Trump administration—to the exclusion of the Obama administration—misses the bigger picture.

Unscrupulous lobbyists like Manafort would work with anyone willing to accomplish their goals because they lack guiding principles. Any ideology or party affiliation they may profess is secondary to greed.

People in my region, which Putin has always considered Russia's "backyard," understand that corruption knows no party. It is time for Americans to understand this as well.

Mikheil Saakashvili is the president of Georgia.

The views and opinions expressed in this commentary are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of The Daily Caller.

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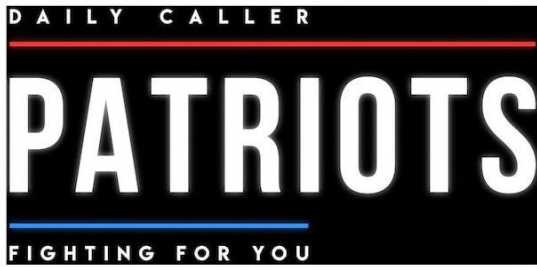
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Just Like Obama, Trump's Russia Policy Speaks Louder Than His Words

BY: MIKHEIL SAAKASHVILI

JULY 18, 2018

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Following Monday's summit in Helsinki, many American pundits and lawmakers on both sides of the aisle criticized President Trump for what they perceived as his failure to hold Russian President Vladimir Putin accountable for interfering in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Sen. Jeff Flake (R-AZ) slammed Trump's "shameful" performance, and former Central Intelligence Agency director John Brennan went so far as to call Putin the "master puppeteer" of the Oval Office.

Some may expect me to lend my voice to this chorus of condemnation. After all, I have personally experienced the devastating consequences of Putin's expansionism. In 2008, when I was the president of Georgia, Russia shocked the world by invading my country. To this day, one-fifth of Georgia's territory remains under illegal Russian occupation, and Georgia lacks a clear roadmap to NATO membership.

The Helsinki summit did not change my view of the Russian president. As I have reiterated many times, Putin is pure evil. There is no doubt in my mind that U.S. intelligence agencies arrived at the correct conclusion: Russia did meddle in the U.S. 2016 election, and Putin himself directed the operation. Again, I speak from personal experience on this topic: In 2012, Russian intelligence services interfered in the Georgian parliamentary elections, boosting the Kremlin's preferred candidate through disinformation operations.

Thus, my opinion of President Trump's policy vis-à-vis Russia is perhaps more positive than one might assume from my background. My reasoning is two-fold: After a lifetime of firsthand experience with Russian aggression, I must evaluate Trump's actions against the proper historical context. In doing so, I have found that Trump's actions speak for themselves.

The Outrage Seems Selective

On the first point, I consider it unfair that Trump's performance in Helsinki has garnered harsher criticism than other incidents in recent memory. In 2012, for example, a hot microphone at a global nuclear security summit picked up then-President Barack Obama assuring Russian President Dmitry Medvedev that he would have "more flexibility" to negotiate with Putin after the presidential election.

During a debate with GOP opponent Mitt Romney the same year, Obama casually dismissed the Russian threat, quipping: "The 1980s called; they want their foreign policy back." Although Trump could certainly have been more forceful by condemning Putin's crimes, his statements at the Helsinki press conference were nowhere near as concerning as his predecessor's remarks about Russia.

This brings me to my second point: Trump's actions toward Russia speak louder than words—and so did his predecessor's. Indeed, the Obama administration's foreign policy undermined America's credibility in my region, which Putin considers Russia's "backyard." There are many opinions about Trump's rhetoric on Crimea, but it is a fact that the Russian land grab in Ukraine happened on Obama's watch.

How, exactly, did this happen? During and after Ukraine's revolution of 2014, which ousted a Kremlin-backed dictator, on a daily basis the United States cautioned Ukraine not to escalate in response to Russian aggression. Thus, Putin saw an opportunity to annex Crimea without risking a direct confrontation with the West—and he seized it. Putin is a bully, but not a fool.

What a Difference Two Years Makes

Rather than changing his course after Moscow redrew the borders of Europe by force, Obama doubled down. Despite bipartisan consensus in favor of selling lethal defensive weapons to Ukraine, and vocal support from his own administration officials (including Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton), Obama repeatedly refused to authorize the sales.

Instead of anti-tank weapons, the Ukrainians defending their territory from Russian invasion received hot blankets and canned goods from the Obama administration. At the same time, Obama asserted that the Ukraine conflict had “no military solution.” With these words—and more importantly, these actions—he was perceived by some on the Russian side as accepting the Kremlin’s sphere of influence in Ukraine.

Despite my warnings, the Obama administration also essentially turned a blind eye to Russian meddling in Georgia’s 2012 elections. The result was devastating not only for Georgia, but for American interests: A Kremlin-backed oligarch (who has substantial interests in Russian energy firm Gazprom) ascended to power in a strategic U.S. ally. Moreover, Russia’s meddling in Georgia’s elections functioned as a proving ground for information operations later used in the United States. To his credit, Obama accepted this reality in 2016, when he expelled dozens of Russian diplomats, but this response was too little, too late.

By contrast, Trump authorized the sale of lethal defensive weapons to both Ukraine and Georgia in 2017. The Trump administration went beyond the congressional mandate in sanctioning Russian authorities involved in the annexation of Crimea. Earlier this year, the United States imposed the harshest sanctions yet, targeting Russian oligarchs as well as government officials.

Trump’s rhetoric on energy at the Helsinki summit, which has been largely overlooked, is also a reason for optimism. The backbone of the Russian economy

is energy, and Russia's dependence on fossil fuels is Putin's Achilles heel. At Monday's press conference, Trump stated that U.S. liquefied natural gas exports would "compete" with Russian gas in Europe. This reflects Trump's comments at the NATO summit, where he criticized Germany for supporting the Nord Stream II pipeline. Trump was correct to call attention to this project, which will enrich the Kremlin at the expense of struggling pro-Western allies like Ukraine.

Trump Should Amp Up American Commitments

Nevertheless, I must caution President Trump that criticizing domestic opponents in front of foreign adversaries could have been misperceived by Putin as a concession. To quell this impression and fend off undesirable consequences, I recommend taking several steps.

First, the U.S. should return to the Reagan-era policy of containing Russia on every front. Trump's support for a stronger military is central to this strategy. Just as President Reagan advanced "peace through strength," Trump's proposal for a Space Force echoes Reagan's "Star Wars" defense program.

Reagan-era increases in military spending escalated the collapse of the USSR, as the Soviet economy could no longer sustain competition with the United States on military innovation and readiness. Likewise, Trump's strengthening of U.S. defense will overstretch Russia's resources to the breaking point. This is especially true when the Russian economy is weak, as it is today, and Russian power-brokers are cut off from capital markets due to sanctions.

Another way to contain Putin's ambitions is to step up NATO's presence in Eastern Europe, offering countries like Georgia and Ukraine a roadmap to accession. In calling on NATO allies to increase military spending in line with

their commitments to collective defense—while increasing the Pentagon's budget—Trump is already taking a step in the right direction.

In his interview with Chris Wallace after the summit, Putin again articulated Russia's bid for an exclusive zone of influence in Eastern Europe, stating that Russia would never allow Georgia or Ukraine to join NATO. The United States must also unequivocally refuse Russia's bid for hegemony. America is at its strongest when conducting foreign policy that upholds American values.

Second, if Russian adventurism continues, Trump should respond by activating the “nuclear option” of sanctions: Blocking Russia's access to the SWIFT international payment system. Moreover, Trump could amplify the impact of the effective sanctions against Russian oligarchs, by expanding these sanctions to Kremlin-connected businesses and individuals outside Russia, and their offshore accounts worldwide. The United States should also consider restricting the registration of Russian shell companies, which are often used for money laundering.

While these tough measures on Russia would advance U.S. interests and the security of my region, diplomacy is also necessary. We do not know what Trump and Putin discussed behind closed doors in Helsinki, and we should not make assumptions. As Reagan continued to meet with Soviet leadership until the Axis of Evil disintegrated, so Trump should continue talking to Putin.



MIKHEIL SAKASHVILI

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Ex-Georgian President: Mr. Trump, Putin does not bluff but you have the upper hand – use it



OPINION By Mikheil Saakashvili, | Fox News



Trump to Putin: The world wants to see us get along

President Trump and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin deliver opening remarks in Helsinki before their closed-door meeting.

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As in the U.S., politics in the former Soviet Union can be highly polarized. But in the run-up to President Donald Trump’s summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Helsinki on Monday, many in my region share the same concern: Will the self-described “master negotiator” agree to a deal that poses an existential threat to American allies in Eastern Europe?

I am somewhat more optimistic about the summit’s prospects for several reasons—but cautiously so.

First, I have known Trump for many years. In 2012, when I was the president of Georgia, he visited my country to evaluate potential real estate development.

After this visit, Trump praised our favorable business environment and simple taxation system. My team and I carried out the reforms that created this environment, and we did it to reject the Soviet legacy of corruption, opacity, and nepotism—which still characterize the Russian system. During our conversations, I had the sense that Trump understood this reality. I hope and believe his clear-eyed understanding of Russia’s business environment bodes well for Monday’s summit.

Second, while it is true that Putin tried to meddle in the U.S. elections and almost certainly favored Trump, it is also true that the Russian leader seriously miscalculated Trump’s motivations. Putin expected to get an American version of his old Italian friend Silvio Berlusconi, who could be easily corrupted and manipulated. Instead, Putin got a determined, nationalistic, and highly unpredictable U.S. president—who staffed his national security team with well-known Russia hawks and Putin critics, such as John Bolton, Fiona Hill, and Gen. James Mattis.

Third, the Trump administration went beyond formal compliance with CAATSA in imposing historically harsh sanctions on Russian power brokers earlier this year. In my region, sanctioning government officials is not enough: Oligarchs and the authorities have always been inextricably linked.

For the first time in the history of the U.S.-Russian bilateral relationship, the Trump administration acknowledged this nuance, by imposing sanctions on politically-connected oligarchs. These sanctions dismantled any pretense that oligarchs are legitimate business owners by treating them as they are—subsidiaries of the Russian government.

I have several other reasons for optimism, including Trump’s criticism of the Nord Stream II pipeline deal at this week’s NATO summit and his authorization of lethal defensive weapons sales to Ukraine and Georgia last year—a dramatic reversal of Obama’s policy.

In spite of these promising signs, however, I must caution Trump to avoid the mistakes his predecessors have made with regards to Putin’s Russia.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, I sensed a widespread perception among Americans that the U.S. had “won” the Cold War. Since then, American policymakers have consistently underestimated Russia’s ambitions. Many opinion leaders and policymakers believed we had reached “the end of history,” where the liberal world order, predicated on self-determination, multilateralism, and territorial integrity, had triumphed for good over totalitarianism, imperialism, and bipolar spheres of influence.

The Western misperception of the Russian threat—in tandem with Putin’s obsession with the “Western threat”—had devastating consequences for my region, including Putin’s invasions and annexations of Georgia and Ukraine.

Unlike many of his Western counterparts, Putin does not bluff. He is honest about his ambitions. And why shouldn't he be honest, when he does not have to pay the political price? Nevertheless, Western leaders often fail to listen.

Unlike the American foreign policy agenda at times, the Russian agenda is clear and consistent. Putin will continue instigating and exploiting “frozen conflicts” in NATO-aspirant post-Soviet countries like Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, so that no independent state in his backyard will be welcomed into the Western alliance. Moreover, by promoting nationalistic, extremist, and corrupt politicians in the former Soviet space, Putin weakens Russia's neighbors by amplifying social divisions.

The Helsinki summit is arguably the biggest test of Trump's foreign policy acumen thus far, and he cannot afford to fail.

As someone who has met with Vladimir Putin more than thirty times, has had to repeal his military attack and survived assassination threats from him, I have the following recommendations for President Trump: Be Reaganesque. Talk to the Russians, but start tough, and remember to “trust but verify” at each turn.

Both Presidents Bush and Obama made the same mistake of trying to reset relations with Russia early in their presidencies. By hiding the sticks and producing too many carrots, Bush and Obama attempted to demonstrate good will—which Putin interpreted as weakness. The language of sheer force is what Putin understands best.

President Trump should not lose sight of the fact that he doesn't owe Putin anything: Indeed, Trump holds the upper hand.

Despite Putin's bravado, the sanctions are hurting him tremendously. And the very fact of the meeting legitimizes Putin in the eyes of Russian elite, who were getting nervous during the long delay in holding the summit.

Now, it's America's turn to make demands. Russia should stop positioning itself as equal to the United States and stop pretending its foreign adventures, be they in Syria, Ukraine or Georgia, are part of a global fight against American expansionism. Moreover, Russia must stop threatening the U.S. with new weaponry, as Putin did during a recent address to the Russian Parliament.

Furthermore, Trump must dash Putin's hopes that the U.S. will ever accept Russia's land grabs in the former Soviet space. In this respect, not only Ukraine should be mentioned, but also Georgia—where Russia occupies one-fifth of the NATO ally's territory, in violation of a withdrawal agreement Moscow had previously signed.

The bottom line should be that America will respect the borders of Russia if Russia starts to respect the borders of its neighbors. Unlike many in my region, I believe Trump should make a deal with Putin, with very specific terms: America will not undermine Putin's regime inside Russia—Putin's

greatest fear—if Putin stops undermining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other countries. Only if Russia withdraws unconditionally from Ukraine and Georgia should the U.S. agree to discuss lifting sanctions.

Finally, Trump—and the rest of the world—would do well to manage expectations. A real deal cannot be made at the very first summit, as Reagan’s experience with Gorbachev demonstrated. When Gorbachev tried to sell their first summit in Iceland as a success, Reagan bluntly contradicted his Soviet counterpart. Only with calculated skepticism in the beginning will the U.S. achieve victory in the end.

Mikheil Saakashvili was the President of Georgia from 2004-2013 and led his country through the Russian-Georgian War of 2008. His perspective is shaped by his personal experience with Trump, Putin, and Russian interventionism as the head of state in a NATO-aspirant country partly occupied by Russia.

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