

Getting Russia Wrong: The Role of Misperception in Generating Flawed Analyses

Stanley K. Ridgley, PhD, IMBA, Assistant Professor of International Business,
Temple University, USA

ABSTRACT

It is time for the West to part from the illusions about Russia it has maintained for more than 15 years. Those illusions are based on our own abstract models. Unless we strive to understand Russia on her cultural terms – what motivates her leadership, her people, her institutions – then we will be forever relegated to head-scratching over Russia as “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma” when she need not be. A clear understanding of how state and economy are constructed and how they interact is possible only with an understanding of how culture influences a country’s politics and economics. Such an understanding can help us craft alternative explanations for events, behavior, and institutions that are at least as compelling as those contrived by the conventional narrative that dominates the Western consciousness.

Keywords: *Russia, Culture, Russian Business, Putin*

INTRODUCTION

Western understanding of Russia is often distorted for reasons related to hubris, misperception, and over-reliance upon a Western Universalist paradigm. In the past decade, a degree of Western cultural messianism has led to severe cultural dissonance in Russia, which was manifested in the 1990s in social chaos, economic underperformance, and political corruption. That cultural dissonance is only now dissipating under the successive administrations of Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedyev, but the West misinterprets the current cultural trends in Russia as something they are not.

The West appears needlessly hostile to these trends, because it is not the path that we, ourselves, would have chosen for Russia; her leaders are not the men and women that we, ourselves, would have chosen. The West’s systemic negative perception of Russia has far-reaching political, social, and economic impact; if we do not bring our understanding into line with reality, we may find ourselves needlessly hamstrung with respect to our business dealings with this important emerging market. Is there something operative that causes us to systematically misperceive Russia and her personalities and politics? I believe that there is, and it leads us to the central puzzle of this article. The central puzzle is this: Why do we always seem to get Russia wrong? Moreover, why are we always slow to understand that we have it wrong?

Accordingly, this article contends that we have been looking at Russia the wrong way for close to 15 years as a result of utilizing a flawed analytical framework. By viewing Russia the “wrong way,” I mean that since the end of the Cold War, a degree of misperception has been at work. The West has relied upon home-grown abstract theories to explain events in Russia, to analyze her political and economic development, and to understand her leaders. We have largely committed the fallacy of “mirror-imaging,” pretending that the Russians would be “just like us” if given the chance.

The results of analyzing Russia in this way have been less than satisfactory. We remain perplexed. We do not understand why the Russians appear to act against their own interests, as we've defined them. Instead of understanding why things work the way they do, we wring our hands over why things aren't working the way we believe they *ought* to work, as measured against our own expectations. We seem never look to ourselves as the source of misunderstanding; instead, we fret that we haven't yet compelled *them* to understand that to perform as *we* want them to perform is in their best interest. And inevitably, we blame the Russians themselves for not meeting expectations that we ourselves have created.¹

And so the cycle is created, the circled closed. We do not change our approach; we lecture and we hector and we contrive carrots and sticks to coax Russia along a path that the West has set for her, only to be disappointed at the results yet again. We disappoint ourselves because we view, explain, understand, and predict Russian events and behavior based on a deeply flawed paradigm that shapes our analyses and informs our explanations.

The Paradigm of Western Perception

The paradigm developed by the West in explaining Russia has been passed down almost intact from when it was first conceived and applied to Russia concurrent with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. It is a simple paradigm, western-made and carrying a heavy component of optimism and missionary zeal. If it incorporates cultural elements at all, it is only as a by-product of Western cultural influences, invisible to most Western observers precisely because they *are* Western cultural influences.

This Western view of Russia's political and economic development at the dawn of the Russian Federation in 1991-1992 was that Russia was traversing a course from a centralized political and economic system toward the Western model of democratic capitalism. It naturally followed that Russia was locked onto a linear path and that political acts and events in Russia should be judged against the benchmark of "progress" or "retreat." This view produced a powerful metaphor. It positioned Russia on a linear politico-socio-economic track, able to go in only two directions, forward or back. Moreover, these two directions were dubbed "progress" or "retreat" – forward toward democratic capitalism or a retreat from it. People, events, institutions, and policy are all assessed whether they push Russia "forward" on this track or cause her to "backslide" from democratic capitalism.²

The original paradigm was primarily economic because of the international community's recognition that Russia would require financial aid during her transition from communism to something better. It was a product of the Western democratic-capitalist tradition, itself a cultural product. The

¹ For a compendium of this type of journalistic myopia and blame-shifting, see Stephen F. Cohen, *Failed Crusade: America and the Tragedy of Post-Communist Russia* (updated edition), (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 65: Many reporters and Russia watchers contended that Russian responses to failed U.S. reform initiatives meant that Russians "don't get it" and were the result of "immature voters," which also meant that "nothing good will ever come of Russia." In fact, one Canadian editorial writer, John Robeson, went so far to charge that: "Normal for Russia is filthy, corrupt, menacing, and hollow." (citations from Cohen, *Failed Crusade*).

² Neil Buckley, Guy Dinmore, and Daniel Dombey, "Memories and meaning: the west recalls Russia's past but is wary of its future," *Financial Times* (May 6, 2005), 13: "... the US has ramped up criticism of Russia's '**backsliding on democracy**'" Lilia Shevtsova, "Russia 2005: The Logic of **Backsliding**," Lecture at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., 24 March 2005. Jonathan Weiler, Ph.D., "Democracy's Eclipse in Russia: Why Is the United States So Concerned?" *Foreign Policy in Focus* (FPIF Policy Report (March 2005) www.fpif.org: "Bush's comments represented the culmination of months of growing U.S. dissatisfaction with the **backsliding** of democracy in Russia, a dissatisfaction ostensibly based on three recent developments in Russia" Editorial, "Russia, a Glass Half Full?" *Christian Science Monitor* (Boston, MA, March 4, 2005), 8: "For the last 10 days, Russia's **backsliding** on its young democracy has been under intense scrutiny." Arshad Mohammed, "US revives criticism of Putin on Russian democracy," Reuters (February 15, 2005): "Washington has become more vocal about Russian **backsliding** on democracy and the rule of law, notably in comments from former Secretary of State Colin Powell, but it is wary that such criticism may push Putin in the opposite direction." Peter Lavelle, "Commentary: Why the Kremlin doesn't care," United Press International (October 12, 2004): "Claiming Russia is **backsliding** in the most important area of democratic development, the West sees Putin as a major disappointment."

paradigm was – and is – optimistic, messianic, and universalist. In the early 1990s, this economic paradigm sometimes went by the name of the Washington Consensus. But the paradigm was quickly expanded by the popular media and many scholars to encompass politics and society.³ It became an easy metric to determine the good guys from the bad guys in Russia's complex and fluid post-Soviet environment. The paradigm provided firm touchstones and a growing mythos about Russia that was reinforced in the public consciousness by news media and scholars predisposed to the paradigm's worldview. It permitted us to see what we wanted to see in Russia. It filtered out dissonant information. Call it a *prism* through which we viewed the Russians and their inscrutable Byzantine intrigues, and through which we view the Russians even today.

The Misperceptual Prism

That the West contrived this particular way of viewing Russia comes as no surprise to students of foreign policy and the problems of perception and misperception that invariably arise where the actions of great nations are concerned. Political scientist Robert Jervis put his finger on something important in the 1970s and 1980s when he analyzed and disaggregated the symptoms and causes of misperception in foreign affairs.⁴ But simple awareness of the possibility of misperception seems not to curtail it one whit. As Jervis notes, the lessons of circumspection and care are rarely learned in this bailiwick, and the same mistakes occur repeatedly. Where language and cultural barriers and political and historical differences add to the confusion, it is easy to misperceive the actions of an opposite number. If we add the element of uncertainty when we face a genuinely unique historical event, such as the collapse of Soviet communism, then misperception will be the norm.

A number of factors lead to misperception. Four of them have relevance to the construction of the post-Soviet analytical framework that has held sway for many years. The first barrier to accurate perception is *overconfidence*. This means that people: . . . think they are tapping more information than they are, overestimate the degree to which they combine evidence in complex ways, and flatter themselves by thinking that they search for subtle and elusive clues to others' behavior. Acting on this misleading self-portrait, people are quick to overreach themselves by trying mental operations they cannot successfully perform.⁵

The second barrier is *false value trade-offs*. "People often believe that the policy they favor is better than the alternatives on several logically independent value dimensions." In other words, people do not really evaluate the trade-offs present in a range of options; instead, they are swayed by one argument and then "evaluate the other costs in a way that reinforces their initial inclinations."⁶

The third barrier is *bias*: [T]he tendency for people to assimilate new information to their preexisting beliefs, *to see what they expect to be present* [emphasis added]. Ambiguous or even discrepant

³ "In April [1992] a special gathering of government, business, media, and academic representatives recommended that the United States and its allies 'deeply and swiftly engage themselves in the process of transforming the political and economic orders of these former Soviet republics.' . . . the United States was to teach ex-Communist Russia how to become a capitalist and democratic country and oversee the process of conversion known as a 'transition.' Certainly, Russia was not to be trusted to find its own kinds of change, lest it wander off, as a media enthusiast of the crusade warned, on 'a strange, ambivalent path of its own confused devising.'" Stephen F. Cohen, *Failed Crusade: America and the Tragedy of Post-Communist Russia* (updated edition), (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 8, 9.

⁴ For a detailed review of supporting studies in psychology and international relations, see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

⁵ Robert Jervis, "Deterrence and Perception" in *Strategy and Nuclear Deterrence* (Steven E. Miller, ed.), (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 74.

⁶ Jervis, "Deterrence and Perception," 76.

information is ignored, misperceived, or reinterpreted so that it does the minimum damage to what the person already believes.⁷

The fourth barrier is the *fundamental attribution error*, sometimes called the “correspondence bias.” This error is a concept from social psychology that explains the tendency toward misperception and miscommunication in many situations:

Three decades of research in social psychology have shown that many of the mistakes people make are of a kind: When people observe behavior, they often conclude that the person who performed the behavior was predisposed to do so—that the person’s behavior corresponds to the person’s unique dispositions—and they draw such conclusions even when a logical analysis suggests they should not.⁸

In other words, people ascribe personal motives to explain a person’s actions when those actions might well have been prompted by external situational factors constraining the person.

These four perception errors form a prism through which the West has viewed Russia for more than a decade. This prism was and remains a confection almost entirely resulting from a sharply drawn portrait of Russia by journalists, scholars, and politicians over the past 15 years that distorts reality and filters out nuance. It was developed as a by-product of our own Western paradigm and informed by the commission of the four major errors of misperception. The prism dictates to a great extent how Americans view Russia and Russians, and it led to a *misperception* of the actual political, social, and economic reality in Russia in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse in late 1991. These errors of misperception have combined to mask the real Russia from us in favor of a narrative about Russia that we have devised – a Russia filled with stylishly dressed Westerners speaking fluent English and talking sagely of the market, a Russia of masses yearning for freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and the guarantee of fair elections. The narrative does not reveal the real Russia yearning for order, stability, predictability, fairness, and economic security. In short, a Russia yearning for cultural consonance.⁹

Effects of the Prism

With the West eager to share its politico-economic paradigm with post-Soviet Russia, all four barriers to accurate perception were operative in the immediate post-Soviet period. Cold War certitudes had been swept away far more quickly than a thoughtful substitute paradigm could be constructed to deal with the situation. In the wake of the sudden peaceful dissolution of the world’s second most militarily powerful state, healthy introspection seemed to give way to euphoria. Western statesmen of the time seemed to suspend their critical faculties. It is now apparent that at that crucial historical juncture, with euphoria carrying the day, the statesmen of the time had likely dropped their guard and committed errors in judgment that they had avoided so earnestly in the Cold War period: 1) overconfidence, 2) false value trade-offs, 3) bias, and 4) the fundamental attribution error.

These factors distorted our view of Russia’s transition, and they are intertwined to an extent, but two of them stand out as significant. The *bias* to assimilate new information to preexisting beliefs and to see what is expected played a major role in shaping the political and economic posture of the West toward

⁷ Jervis, “Deterrence and Perception,” 78.

⁸ Daniel T. Gilbert and Patrick S. Malone, “The Correspondence Bias,” *Psychological Bulletin*, (January 1995, vol. 117, no. 1), 21-38.

⁹ “Cultural Consonance” is a term I coined to describe the harmonious meshing of a society’s indigenous political and economic institutions with the society’s native cultural substructure. When foreign institutions are imported into and imposed on a society, in the absence of the requisite cultural supports that gave birth to the imported institutions, it can result in a condition I call “Cultural Dissonance,” which can lead to social and economic disorder and a wholesale rejection of the institutions. For a full explication of the term cultural consonance, see Stanley K. Ridgley, “Cultural Consonance and Cultural Dissonance: The Role of Culture in Institutional Success and Failure,” *The Journal of Global Business Management* (October 2009, vol. 5, no. 2), 274-284.

Russia in the ensuing decade. The *fundamental attribution error* played a role in helping to shape the West's view of Russia's personalities and to explain their activities. It still does to a large extent. With the West's initial focus on President Boris Yeltsin as a kind of messiah, the fundamental attribution error helped to obscure essential aspects of the Russian social, political, and economic context. It allowed the application of Western economic policies in Russia that evolved from an economic point-of-view holding sway in Western policy circles in the late 80s and early 90s. This point-of-view was called the "Washington Consensus."

The "Washington Consensus" developed in the 1980s as an agreement among the IMF, the World Bank, and the U.S. Treasury on the fundamentally "right" economic policies for developing countries.¹⁰ Proponents of the consensus were government policy makers, economic and financial advisors, journalists and scholars, all comprising a group claiming "special expertise on post-Communist Russia." Professor Stephen Cohen calls the proponents of this consensus the "Russia Watchers," and has criticized them bitterly for their unreasonably optimistic posture toward Russia's politics and economy. They "professed to know the cure for what ailed their subject, gave regular assurances about the ongoing treatment, and, while noting occasional relapses, predicted a full recovery."¹¹

Pillars of the Consensus

The Washington Consensus was built around three macroeconomic pillars: Fiscal austerity, privatization, and market liberalization. The Consensus arose in response to the need to address economic development in Latin America in the 1980s. But there were problems with it. A one-size-fits-all mentality led to the application of an inappropriate economic model to a society where the prerequisite institutions necessary to support the model to provide the desired results were nonexistent.¹² As well, it was discovered that the sequencing of transition elements is just as important as the elements themselves in moving to a free market economy.¹³

The Washington Consensus also had an unintended effect with regard to how Russia is perceived by the West. Because of fervent belief in this Western economic model and its attendant package of democratic political values, it provided an easy method of differentiating between Russia's good guys and bad guys. Events in Russia subsequently were judged by this yardstick and led to only two alternative positions – you favored the reforms advocated by the Washington Consensus, or you were against them. You were part of the solution, or you were part of the problem. The prism that was constructed did not admit any middle-range explanation. As a result, anyone who opposed the Consensus remedy would be considered an obstructionist or "conservative." On the other hand, Russian supporters of the extreme policies advocated by the International Monetary Fund would of course be considered "reformers." Perhaps even "bold reformers." It is with these "reformers" that the West cast its lot.

Here, the *fundamental attribution error* helps to explain why there was born a powerful myth of the "young reformers" in the early 1990s. Once the West was sympathetically predisposed to the young

¹⁰ Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003, 2002), 16.

¹¹ Stephen F. Cohen, *Failed Crusade: America and the Tragedy of Post-Communist Russia* (updated edition), (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 7.

¹² Michael McFaul, *Russia's Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 15. "In the Soviet and Russian experience, lack of knowledge about the market and democratic institutions was especially acute, making it difficult to judge the effects of institutional designs or the preferences of different actors for these designs."

¹³ Joseph Stiglitz provides a detailed discussion of how dogmatic IMF policies and the equally dogmatic policies of other proponents of the Washington Consensus actually worsened conditions in the countries in which the degree of rapidity of privatization became the only benchmark for success. See discussion in Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003, 2002), 53-88.

reformers, it meant that their actions could be excused as the result of situational factors beyond their control, and that the actions of their opponents would invariably be explained as the result of venal motives, regardless of the situational factors. This period also saw the beginnings of the narrative template that would shape and tailor the news coming out of Russia to the present day. A result of the Consensus was to set up an artificial dichotomy between those who supported the path of reform set by Yeltsin's team – the good guys – and anyone who advocated a different path – the bad guys. Today's journalism is complicit in perpetuating this problematic view of recent Russian history and seems uninterested in examining it from a fresh perspective. In fact, Stephen Cohen has contended that the Western media seem impervious to facts and failure and merely alter posture to maintain their internal consistency.

By the fall of 2000, the American media's decade-long narrative of post-Communist Russia had largely collapsed. In the revised version that soon emerged, the Yeltsin era retained its hallowed place as a story of heroic reform; even new Moscow correspondents recounted it as a time when "Yeltsin was struggling to consolidate democratic forces . . . against a tenacious opposition from nationalists and Communists."¹⁴

Warped Narrative

Paradoxically, this narrative was born of American optimism, goodwill, and the universalistic social norms that characterize the West's culture. The narrative tells a story of good and evil, and it features villains and heroes drawn from our own American experience. The narrative relates current events in Russia as if they were replays of early American capitalist development, complete with robber barons, bold reformers, and developing democracy. This narrative allows Western journalists quickly to eyeball events in Moscow, shoehorn facts into the appropriate slots, and craft stories purportedly representative of "Russia."

But the narrative is grossly flawed. It is the product of a misapprehension of the Russia situation in 1991, a pursuit of dubious policies in the face of mounting empirical evidence of failure, and an enshrinement of a false history of the 1990s based on the faulty assumptions that drove policy in that decade. No single controlling authority decreed that this would be the official view of Russia. It was cobbled together from a congeries of Western foreign policy repertoires and wishful thinking. In a closing of the loop, the paradigm itself was then reinforced by wholehearted acceptance of its assumptions and repetition of its mantra.

One result of this focus on a single narrative is general ignorance on the part of most Americans about most things Russian and a kind of funhouse distortion of the remainder.¹⁵ The stories about Russia that make it into the mainstream Western media are rarely of the "good news" variety. Typically, they do not burnish the image of 21st Century Russia as a normal country striving for membership in the World Trade Organization and for recognition as a good place to do business. "The popular vision of Russia resembles the reflection in a distorting mirror: its features are recognizable, but they are stretched and twisted out of proportion."¹⁶ This phenomenon has created a great informational vacuum, and Americans

¹⁴ Stephen F. Cohen, *Failed Crusade: America and the Tragedy of Post-Communist Russia* (updated edition), (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 259.

¹⁵ Susan Jacoby, "Now That We're Comrades, We Don't Care Anymore," *Washington Post* (November 9, 2003). "The dearth of news coverage . . . contributes to ignorance of what is going on in Russia today. Television images tend to focus on crime and terrorism. Everyday Russian life, from education to medical care, actually received more extensive American press coverage in the old Soviet days."

¹⁶ Andrei Shleifer and Daniel Treisman, "A Normal Country," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2004), 22.

must fill in details for themselves based on tendentious coverage of Russian issues. Most of that coverage comes out of Moscow, hardly representative of Russia as a whole. It is an unbalanced view, and isolated voices in the US occasionally call attention to this destructive tendency. In a controversial *Foreign Affairs* piece in 2004, two academics identified this lockstep negativism *vis-à-vis* Russia and offered several reasons for its existence: “So why the dark, at times almost paranoid, view? Why the hyperbole about kleptocracy, economic cataclysm, and KGB takeovers?”¹⁷ The answers they suggested did not indicate the noblest of motives among the ranks of Russia watchers, both amateur and professional.

“In the early 1990s, there was no enthusiasm in the West for what was happening here,” concludes Evgenni Volk, president of the Moscow-based non-profit Hayek Foundation.¹⁸ With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the commensurate diminishment of the Soviet threat, Americans had quickly moved on to other issues. The press narrative was thus able to develop autonomously, incubating throughout the 1990s, and emerging as conventional wisdom. Once established, this press narrative developed incredible inertia. It found new personalities and topics to flesh out the template. Earlier, the narrative generated a proliferation of young-energetic-reformer-apologias in the mid-1990s. Upon the election of Vladimir Putin to the presidency in 2000, the emphasis changed to anti-Kremlin sharpshooting.¹⁹

The U.S. press’s anti-Kremlin reporting of the Putin period and its pro-Kremlin coverage of the Yeltsin years had one feature in common: both were at best one-dimensional, lacking important context as well as memory. . . . Above all, there was no acknowledgment that the new Kremlin leader’s offenses at home, like the growing political role of security forces . . . were direct outgrowths of Yeltsinism, as had been Putin’s presidency itself, or that many of Yeltsin’s acts had been more egregious.²⁰

These types of stories perpetuate the conventional cultural paradigm, which has remained largely unchanged since 1991-92.

Vladimir Putin – The West’s Obsession

The most recent version of the conventional paradigm finds its expression in the West’s hostility toward Russia’s prime minister and former president, Vladimir Putin. The contemporary narrative is woven with Putin as the villain blocking Russia’s progress along the track toward the “expansion of liberty” and with various assorted “liberals” as his heroic opposition.²¹ Since Vladimir Putin assumed the presidency by appointment on the last day of 1999, the Western media personified him as the classic anti-democrat. His KGB past casts him in the role of ideal bogeyman in opposition to the liberal heirs of the “young reformers.” Putin’s former profession all but guarantees that stories are laced with lurid descriptions of nonexistent crackdowns and of “fear stalking the streets.” As Putin “tightens his grip” on power in service to “creeping authoritarianism,” he naturally has staffed his administration with “cronies” who are responsible for the ongoing “democratic backsliding.” Even with the election of Dmitri

¹⁷ Andrei Shleifer and Daniel Treisman, “A Normal Country,” *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2004), 37. Shleifer expanded on the theme in his own book. See Andrei Shleifer, *A Normal Country: Russia after Communism*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005). “But there were also some less pure motivations for focusing on the darker side of Russian life.” The authors cited press “sensationalism,” activist dissatisfaction with the perceived negative results of globalization, and fuel for US domestic political battles.

¹⁸ Author interview with Evgenni Volk, Moscow (July 8, 2005).

¹⁹ Matt Bivens, “Chubais and the Privatization of History,” *The Moscow Times* (April 26, 2004).

²⁰ Stephen F. Cohen, *Failed Crusade: America and the Tragedy of Post-Communist Russia* (updated edition), (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001) 263.

²¹ “Russia . . . has *retreated* during President Vladimir Putin’s tenure from some of the *democratic advances* since the collapse of communist rule. Putin has *consolidated economic and political power* and *clamped down* on the press. . . . The *backsliding of democracy* in Russia could become an irritant in Bush’s second term and a sour note as the White House presses for expansion of liberty in the Middle East and elsewhere. [emphasis added]” Ann Gearan, “Rice Seeks Russian Democracy Commitment,” Associated Press (February 5, 2005).

Medvedev to the presidency in 2008, the drumbeat against Putin did not diminish. It is still Putin at the immoral heart of most stories and editorials on Russia in the popular Western press and in the increasing numbers of vignette-laden books churned out by former journalists and bureau chiefs having served in Moscow.

Take the work of former *Washington Post* bureau chiefs Peter Baker and Susan Glasser. Baker and Glasser's book *Kremlin Rising: Vladimir Putin's Russia and the End of Revolution* is based on their four-year stay in Russia. These two succumbed to the same guilty pleasure that ensnares many journalists serving a stint in Moscow – among them most recently, Andrew Jack, David Hoffman, Chrystia Freeland, Matthew Brzezinski, Rose Brady, and Richard Threlkeld. It's a tradition that goes back many years to Robert Kaiser's 1976 book *Russia: The Power and the People*, Hedrick Smith's *The Russians*, Harrison E. Salisbury's various narratives from his experience as a correspondent in Moscow with the United Press in the 1940s and later in the 1950s for the *New York Times*, and finally to the dishonorable Walter Duranty, whose dispatches for the *New York Times* in the 1930s assisted Joseph Stalin in covering up some of the worst crimes in history.²²

Steeped in current events and the opinions of their own self-selecting cadre of journalistic compatriots and local contacts, journalists depart Russia believing they have a special insight to tell a story. Baker-Glasser's book is particularly egregious in its treatment of Putin. The book's first eight pages confirm the contempt the authors hold for Russia's president, now prime minister. In that handful of pages, Putin is referred to eight times, and in this way: [A] onetime KGB spy . . . a political cipher . . . the president from the KGB . . . the little-known secret police chief . . . this product of the KGB . . . the spy who became president . . . the election of an unknown secret police chief . . . a nobody spy.²³

Regardless of what follows in the remainder of their book, can anyone trust that these two journalists have provided an objective and nuanced portrayal of Vladimir Putin and today's Russia? Or might we expect a breathless and flawed work based on the views of a narrow and unrepresentative spectrum of the Russian public? Nonetheless, this book received uniformly approving media reviews upon its publication in June of 2005, with only rare criticisms at the margins.²⁴

Of course, if you've decided beforehand that Putin, whose popularity rating in Russia oscillated between 60 and 80 percent during his presidency, is an authoritarian work-in-progress, then the natural result is a surfeit of stories about "grip" and "democratic backsliding" rather than careful analysis and richly detailed background. If you have slotted the "ex-KGB spy" Putin into the "creeping authoritarianism" template, messy details aren't necessary. In short, if you commit the sins of *overconfidence*, *false value trade-offs*, *bias*, and the *fundamental attribution error*, you can write a story about Russia wielding little more than negative clichés concerning "repression" and "democratic

²² See S. J. Taylor, *Stalin's Apologist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

²³ Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, *Kremlin Rising: Vladimir Putin's Russia and the End of Revolution* (New York: Scribner, 2005), 1-8.

²⁴ See reviews: James M. Goldgeier, "Rolling Back Reform," *Washington Post Book World* (July 17, 2005); William Grimes, "In Russia, a Free Market, Less Freedom," *New York Times* (July 1, 2005); Carlin Romano, "Sounding the alarm on 'new' Russia," *Philadelphia Inquirer* (July 17, 2005); Andrew Meier, "'Kremlin Rising': A Modern KGB Colonel," *New York Times* (July 17, 2005); Robert C. Toth, "Managed Democracy," *Moscow Times* (July 8-14, 2005). *The Moscow Times* is a relentless critic of Vladimir Putin, and in its commissioned review, it found in the Baker-Glasser book a foil for its own hyper-critical stance; said the *Times*' reviewer: "The image that emerges is of a cold and ruthless man, quick to learn but without depth, grace or humor; easy to anger and liable to take offense at criticism; loyal to his former employer, the FSB; and probably intent on resurrecting the Russian empire." Carlin Romano wrote a glowing review of *Kremlin Rising* for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Just two weeks prior to the publication of Mr. Romano's review, I submitted an op-ed piece to the *Inquirer* that focused on one of the themes of this book, namely that Western media are predisposed to print only bad news about Russia and not to give Vladimir Putin a fair hearing. The piece was called "Let's be fair to Mr. Putin." The op-ed page editor refused the piece, stating that: "I really don't need a Putin piece on the page at this time. Putin hasn't done anything outrageous recently." The editor seemed oblivious to the irony of the comment.

backsliding.” How viral are these negative clichés? Let’s look at one example resulting from the fundamental attribution error – the trope of Vladimir Putin’s “grip.”

Throughout Putin’s presidency, a day hardly went by without press references to Putin’s “grip.” In the two years between July of 2003 and 2005, more than 300 stories in the Western press referenced Mr. Putin’s “grip,” none of them flattering. *The Times of London*, *The Economist*, *The New York Times*, *Time*, *AP*, *UPI*, *CNN*, *National Public Radio*, *The Boston Globe*, *Investor’s Business Daily*, and *Agence France Presse* among many others cited Putin for his grip-tightening on everything from Russian companies to the Kremlin to the government to the provinces, even to entire countries. In September of 2004, in fact, a day did *not* go by without a story featuring this workhorse cliché. In that month alone, the Western press accused Putin of “tightening” or “strengthening” his “grip” no fewer than 73 times. *The Moscow Times*, in particular, could be relied upon to make use of this standardized anti-Putin rhetoric regularly, as it did in an April 20, 2005 story in which US Secretary of state Condoleezza Rice “called the Kremlin’s tight grip on power and the media ‘very worrying’” while rights activists simultaneously complained of “Russia’s backsliding on democracy.”²⁵ And lest the point be lost somewhere in the midst of all of the metaphors, Western journalists tack on additional descriptors of Putin, such as “butcher of the Chechens.” They even make references to Dracula.²⁶

Toward a New Approach

It is apparent that the conventional paradigm we use as a frame of reference to understand Russia is seriously flawed, and it is clear that this paradigm has been distorting our perception of Russia for almost two decades. In fact, I believe that this linear track paradigm was constructed largely through errors arising from misperception, particularly the *bias* of assimilating new information to our own preexisting beliefs, and then perceiving only what is expected. *Bias* coupled with the *fundamental attribution error* applied to Russia’s president and his policies have combined to distort our view of the Russians.

If, ultimately, we do not understand why the Russians behave as they do, we cannot know how to respond. Indeed, it *guarantees* that we will respond wrongly. I believe that the missing factor in the conventional paradigm is that it does not consider the impact of indigenous *culture*. But if this factor is not considered – if it is simply ignored in favor of homegrown models that we superimpose onto that country – then we are relegating ourselves to groping about in a darkness of our own making.

In hopes of lighting a lamp in the darkness, this article suggests that we bring culture back into the analysis of Russia and her recent history. I offer an alternative paradigm, a way of understanding Russia by searching for answers in Russia herself, not by relying upon inappropriate Western economic models and not by reinforcing a discredited paradigm that has led to our misperceiving Russia for years. Accordingly, this article makes five arguments.

The **first** argument is that we in the West have generally misperceived events, personalities, and processes in Russia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and that we will continue to do so unless we address the roots of misperception. The **second** argument is that our misperception has primarily involved the four errors of *overconfidence*, *bias*, *false value tradeoffs*, and the *fundamental attribution error*. The **third** argument is that we in the West are willing prisoner to our own cultural proclivities toward Western universalism and to the mistaken notion that liberal democratic economic policy prescriptions can be transplanted into any cultural environment. The **fourth** argument is that it is not possible to create, build,

²⁵ Saul Hudson [Reuters], “Rice calls the Kremlin’s Grip ‘Very Worrying.’” *The Moscow Times* (April 20, 2005), 3.

²⁶ Martin Wolf, “We make common cause with Putin at our peril,” *Financial Times* (September 22, 2004), 15. “Vlad the Impaler,” *The Economist* (November 1, 2003), 13.

or inspire the proper institutions in a society to pave the way for economic change, for the reason that we simply don't know how to create institutions in the first place. The **fifth** argument is that Western policy prescriptions led to *cultural dissonance* in Russia in the 1990s that is only now being corrected under Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedyev. *Cultural consonance* is that state of affairs when a nation's social and cultural norms and its superstructure of institutions, organizations, and formal rules are in alignment, and this reflects the natural development of institutions, organizations, and informal constraints evolving organically from a state's social norms.²⁷

A Cultural Approach

In contrast with explanations derived from the conventional wisdom, I believe that a cultural approach toward evaluating these events can add insights of color and detail and motivation. A clear understanding of how state and economy are constructed and how they interact is possible only with an understanding of how *culture* influences a country's politics and economics. Such an understanding can help us craft alternative explanations for events, behavior, and institutions that are at least as compelling as those contrived by the conventional narrative that dominates the Western consciousness. If our present means by which we try to understand and evaluate Russia systematically omit or dismiss the effects of culture, then we surely *do* need an *explicit* methodology of inclusion of cultural factors to rectify that absence.

The newly elected Vladimir Putin delivered a "millennium manifesto" in 2000 upon his assumption of the presidency; virtually ignored in the West, we would have done well to pay it close attention. In it, Putin called explicitly for the creation of a "Russian Way" of political and economic development that incorporates the cultural touchstone of the "Russian Idea."²⁸ It seems prudent for us in the West to develop a cultural approach to understanding Russian behavior. We need such a rich and pragmatic approach if we wish to truly understand the relationship between the state and the market and the tension that exists between these two organizing principles of social life in modern Russia.

This article suggests a corrective to the overconfidence, bias, false tradeoffs, and fundamental attribution errors that have plagued our understanding of Russia for so many years. It is necessary to part with the illusions fostered by misperception. And as the old Soviet propagandist Vladimir Pozner reminds us, parting with deeply held beliefs is never easy.

Parting with illusions is a painful process, for those illusions are drugs to our thought processes. They change our perception of reality We become addicted to illusions, for they give pleasure. But when reality forces its way in, we discover that we are no longer capable of dealing with it.²⁹

It is time for the West to part from the illusions about Russia it has maintained for more than 15 years. Those illusions are based on our own abstract models. Unless we strive to understand Russia on *her* cultural terms – what motivates her leadership, her people, her institutions – then we will be forever relegated to head-scratching over Russia as "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma" when she need not be. We will be left wondering, as the *Financial Times's* Quentin Peel lamented about Vladimir

²⁷ Here, I utilize Douglass C. North's distinction between institutions and organizations. "Institutions are the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction." Organizations are "groups of individuals bound by some common purpose to achieve objectives." Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 3, 5.

²⁸ Vladimir Putin, "Russia at the turn of the millennium," (December 29, 1999). Cited in Richard Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's Choice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 251-262.

²⁹ Vladimir Pozner, *Parting with Illusions* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1990), 311.

Putin, how this “unremarkable bureaucrat and former middle-ranking KGB officer should enjoy such adulation is a mystery.”³⁰

We can assert with confidence that Russian-American relations are at *both* a critical crossroads and on the threshold of a new era. For our own part, we would do well to understand why Russians elect leaders with characteristics that *they* find salutary but that *we* may find anathema – leaders to whom they give 70 percent approval ratings and from whom they receive a restorative and affirming reassurance that Russia will endure. There really are no outright mysteries regarding Russia. There exist only willful ignorance, Western ethnocentrism, and the hubris of certitude that block our understanding. When we finally understand this, we will then be on our way to developing robust and cordial relations with Russia.

³⁰ Quentin Peel, “The wayward logic of Europe’s neighbor,” *Financial Times* (February 26, 2004), 13.