

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union

Public Affairs

Serhii Plokyh, Joanne J. Myers

Transcript

Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good morning. I'm Joanne Meyers, director of Public Affairs programs of the Carnegie Council. I would like to welcome our members, guests, and C-SPAN Book TV to this Public Affairs program.

Our guest today is Serhii Plokyh. He is professor of Ukraine history and the director of the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University. His book, *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union*, will, as he writes, not only lift the curtain of time on the dramatic events leading up to the lowering of the Soviet flag and the [collapse](#) of the Soviet Union, but it will also provide a much-needed context for what is happening in [Ukraine](#) today.

The longstanding narrative of the end of the [Cold War](#) is one that has entwined the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the triumph of democratic values over communism. It is a narrative that has persisted for decades, with adverse consequences for America's standing in the world and the perception of what we could accomplish.

But for [Putin](#), the collapse of the Soviet Union was, as he has often said, the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century. This, in turn, has led many Western analysts to accuse him of using this current crisis to rewrite the history of the Soviet collapse and resurrect the Soviet empire.

The story of the uncoupling of the Soviet Union, as told in *The Last Empire*, presents a bold new interpretation of the Soviet Union's final months. While the Soviet Union disintegrated for a variety of reasons, not least the bankruptcy, moral and actual, of the Soviet system, in placing events in Ukraine and other republics at the center of the drama, Professor Plokyh provides the historical background for what is happening now. As [unrest](#) continues in the eastern part of Ukraine, with pro-Russian separatists destabilizing the region and complicating Kiev's efforts to integrate with the West, you might wonder why not only Putin but Russian nationalists view Ukraine as an integral part of their own national story and find it difficult to adjust to the reality of an independent Ukraine.

The Last Empire will provide many of the much-needed answers for understanding the historical roots of the crisis and why Moscow struggled with a growing spirit of independence among constituent republics.

Please join me in welcoming our guest today, Serhii Plokyh.

Remarks

SERHII PLOKHY: Joanne, thanks a lot for this wonderful introduction. I want to thank everyone for coming on this early Monday morning. Last week brought very interesting news from the region. The news had a word that was not there, in reporting, maybe for the last 20 or 24 years. That word was "union." In Astana, in Kazakhstan, leaders of three post-Soviet republics, [Russia](#), [Belarus](#), and [Kazakhstan](#), signed an agreement on the [creation](#) of an economic union. As far as I know, this is the first time since 1991 that the word "union" and not "commonwealth," and something that is quite comprehensive, is used in media and has re-entered the political vocabulary.

In December of 1991, it was from also Kazakhstan, not from Astana, but from Almaty, that the word came that another entity called "union," in particular, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, had [ceased to exist](#). At that time, leaders of 11 post-Soviet republics gathered together in Kazakhstan. Again, the same person, [Nursultan Nazarbayev](#), hosted the event. At that time, they decided that the union, not just the old union, but any kind of union, was gone. It wasn't just the Slavic republics. There were also Central Asian republics, representatives of other post-Soviet countries as well.

That turned out to be, in terms of the launch of my book, really disturbing news on one level. It is welcome news for me, as the author, because that reminded me about the situation two years ago, when the manuscript was more or less ready and I was looking for a publisher.

Quite a few publishers were not interested at all. I am really very fortunate with Basic Books and the publisher [Lara Heimert](#), who from the very beginning was interested in that, endorsed that. Yesterday I saw her at one of the events and they said that no one could predict what would happen in the post-Soviet space, except for Lara Heimert, who knew that and was interested in publishing this book.

Why I wrote this book—there are a number of reasons. One of them is quite personal, and that was that I wasn't, at that time, in the country. I wasn't in the Soviet Union, I wasn't in Ukraine, at the time when most of the events in my book took place. The chronological scope of the book is from July 1991—it starts with the last summit between President [George H. W. Bush](#) and [Mikhail Gorbachev](#)—then goes all the way to the end of December.

I left Moscow on the second day of the [coup](#), so I witnessed the beginning of the coup. Then I came back on December 21, after teaching at the University of Alberta, in Canada, for one semester. December 21 was when, in Almaty, they decided that there was no Soviet Union anymore.

When I came to the University of Alberta, they asked me to teach a course on the USSR in crisis. At that time, I was working on 17th century history. I said, "Come on. I can't do that."

The answer was, "Well, but the students want that." Coming from the Soviet Union, I thought that professors teach what they want, not what students want. [Laughter] I certainly changed my view on that. I decided, "Okay, I'll teach a course on the USSR in crisis," but I knew nothing about economics. I said, "Okay, let's teach about democracy and the triumph of democracy in Moscow."

I said, "I am coming from Ukraine. What I know, and my perspective, is very different. It's not about triumph of democracy. This is about mobilization of national identity." They said, "No. Who is interested in nations? Who is interested in the republics? This is not important." I said, "Well, that's the only course I can teach," so I prevailed.

By the time the course was over, the Soviet Union had disintegrated. Not exactly because of the triumph of democracy in Moscow, but because of national mobilization in the republics, including Russia.

When I revisited literature on the fall of the Soviet Union, it was three years ago. There was a 20-year anniversary of the fall of the Soviet Union. I found out that actually what I saw and what I read, I still wasn't satisfied with that.

There was little in terms of the perspective and the experience that I had, that was reflected in those books. The republics were not there. The history was focused on Moscow, and partly on Washington as well—very important parts of the story, which are also part of the story that I tell in my book—but the republics were not there.

That's why I thought that the only way to correct those misinterpretations and omissions would be to write a book. I had to act and formulate my argument against a number of existing already narratives of the fall of the Soviet Union. I'll start with Russia.

What is quite popular today in Russia in terms of interpretation and understanding of the causes of the fall of the Soviet Union are these kinds of conspiracy theories—that it was the CIA, or it was some kind of a mysterious Harvard project—that people ahead of time were planning the destruction of the Soviet Union, and actually that's what happened.

I didn't like that. I couldn't find much evidence to that. The evidence that I was finding was that the administration of President George H. W. Bush was trying its best to keep Gorbachev and the Soviet Union in place running all the way into late November 1991. So it's not exactly a conspiracy theory that is popular in Russia.

On the American side, there is, of course, the very strong narrative that links together the [end](#) of the Cold War—the American victory in the Cold War—and the disintegration or destruction of the Soviet Union.

Again, what I am trying to show, that the destruction—or disintegration or dismemberment or partitioning—of the Soviet Union was never the American goal in the Cold War. And by the way, the Soviet Union fell apart a year and a half after two leaders declared that the Cold War was over. The Bush-Gorbachev summit with which I start my story was presented to the public as the first post-Cold War summit so, again, things didn't really work nicely in that narrative as well.

Then there was another one that I liked the most, and I exploited to the best of my ability in my book, but I don't think that it explains everything. This is the narrative of the personal relationship between Gorbachev and [Yeltsin](#); the hatred of one politician by another.

I put a lot of information on the political background and personal relations into my book. But, again, no matter how important Gorbachev's and Yeltsin's relations were, by the time the Soviet Union fell apart in December of 1991, the battle of Russia against the center was already won by Russia.

By the time of the [Ukrainian referendum](#) of December 1, 1991, which sealed the fate of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev didn't have money to pay his secretaries and his assistants. All the money, all the resources, were taken by Russia already. The process started in the summer. The process started immediately after the coup. Oil, gas revenues—they became property of the republics and, in the case of oil and gas in Russia, they became property of Russian Federation and Russian Republic.

I'm done with my favorite part of research—showing how everyone else is wrong. [Laughter] You can't really write a book and then sell it to the publisher suggesting some kind of alternative vision and alternative view. What was my alternative vision and view?

I certainly put the end of the Soviet Union into the context of the Cold War. It is there. I certainly put the fall of the Soviet Union into the context of the economic decline and oil prices and all these other things that certainly made Gorbachev's attempts at reforms really very difficult.

But the main context there is what I consider to be the most important process of the 20th century, and this is the process of the disintegration of empires and the creation of national states on their ruins. I put the history of the fall of the Soviet Union into the context of the fall of the Ottoman Empire, of the Habsburg Empire, of the British Empire, French Empire, most recently, Portuguese Empire.

They fall more or less, especially in the second half of the 20th century, on one major issue; on the citizenship of the people in the colonies and people in the provinces. Once the empire decides, the people at the top, that they have to actually bear costs and have to pay benefits and treat those people as citizens and extend to them what sometimes is called the "welfare state," and once the math is done, the conclusion to which all and every metropolitan power comes to is that it is too expensive. It is too expensive in the 20th century. Empire doesn't bring benefits, economic and otherwise. It actually drains on your resources.

Russia is not different. They did the same math. They had to do it faster. In Britain they had debate about that that was going for decades. In Russia it was all actually done within a very short period of time—1990 and 1991.

I have this very interesting scene in my book, when President Yeltsin of Russia is sitting on the bench on the Sochi beach on the shore of the Black Sea, with his closest advisor at that time, [Gennady Burbulis](#). Burbulis explains to him and says that, "We don't have resources to keep republics along with us. If we don't do something drastic in terms of economic reform, your ranking and your popularity will be actually below the one that Gorbachev's is today. Something has to be done really fast, and we don't have resources to do it."

They tried also to sell this idea to Gorbachev, and the explanation was, "We'll let the republics go for now. We don't have resources to keep them, but once Russia is strong, 20 years from now"—we are almost 20 years from now—"the republics will come back." The vision of Russia and special Russian role in the region, and the future of republics coming back in one way or another—not in the way how it was arranged during the Soviet times—was there, and it was already quite prominent in the fall of 1991.

Russia left the Soviet Union, and Russia's benefit from leaving the Soviet Union, was much more significant than the benefit of any other metropolitan power before that.

Look at Britain. Colonies are gone. That means that the access to resources is now much, much more difficult. Look at Russia. Russia leaves the Soviet Union with oil and gas, so it takes the resources. They are part of the Russian Federation. This leaving other republics behind immediately makes whatever reform Yeltsin was considering at that time, and planning, makes them much easier.

Now, Yeltsin is not the only major figure in my book. I'm trying to tell my story through the actions and experiences of four major figures at that time, whom I blamed for everything positive and everything negative of what happened at that time. Those people are the president of the United States George H. W. Bush, Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, and [Leonid Kravchuk](#), the speaker of the Parliament and then president of Ukraine. Through him and also bringing in Nazarbayev and the Baltic states, I'm trying to also tell the story looking from below, looking from the republics and what is going on there.

What is my take on the American policy and what was happening at that time? I mentioned that in the United States, the policy was to keep Gorbachev going as long as possible. One would say, "Why a policy of that kind? Why if the Cold War is still over, why if the end of the Cold War is also the end of the Soviet Union?"

The reason is quite simple. First of all, since the first [Gulf War](#), the Soviet Union emerges as a junior partner of the United States on the international arena. To lose a partner like that would mean really facing an unknown and new realignment of forces in the world.

Working with the Soviet Union is good, especially given that the Soviet Union under Gorbachev is prepared to sign agreements on nuclear arms, that everyone believes at that time benefits the United States. They are prepared to cut down their support for [Fidel Castro](#), eventually withdrawing support from the government and their puppets in Afghanistan. That is one reason.

Another reason is that the nuclear arms changed the way that war is fought. That's why we have "cold war" and not "hot war"—because of nuclear arms. The main concern of Bush and his administration at that time is the Soviet Union turning into what they called at that time "Yugoslavia with nukes." You would have today's Russian/Ukrainian conflict over [Crimea](#) or [Donbas](#) with the two republics, and then Kazakhstan maybe joining Belarus as well—armed with nuclear missiles.

Thinking about the war didn't change—you still need the war, you need a victory, you need a parade—but nuclear arms changed the way that business is conducted. [Robert Gates](#), at that time director of CIA, wrote in his [memoirs](#), "We had a victory, but we didn't have a parade," exactly pointing in that direction.

What you see is actually the United States of America is trying to keep the Evil Empire—or something that was called "Evil Empire"—alive as long as possible. The United States of America are not happy with Yeltsin dissolving the [Communist Party](#) because that undermines Gorbachev's position and Gorbachev's standing within the Union and on the international arena, so the story that I present is much more complex than the narrative that we have today.

Now, what about other players? I talked a little bit about Yeltsin and his reasoning and the views of his advisors of why Russia should go on its own—first of all, when it comes to economic reform—and then see what would be happening.

What about Gorbachev? Gorbachev was of course there, trying to save the Soviet Union. Gorbachev was trying to save also his position at the top of the Soviet Union. But he was not the only person who was trying to do that, and in his [memoirs](#) now, he takes 100 percent of the credit.

Some of the people around him are saying that if he would make a deal with Yeltsin immediately after the coup—and at that time, Yeltsin wanted the confederation—the Soviet Union, maybe under a different name, but more or less with the same number of participants, would continue and would go on.

That's where the personal relations between Gorbachev and Yeltsin come into play. Gorbachev could not imagine any kind of arrangement where he would be under Yeltsin and would have to take orders from Yeltsin.

Last but not least, the republics—and the second largest republic, after Russia was Ukraine. Ukrainians [voted](#) on December 1, 1991, overwhelmingly. Over 90 percent of those who voted supported Ukrainian independence.

The result came as a surprise to many people, especially to Gorbachev. The reason was that in March of that same year—in March of 1991—there was another referendum where 70 percent of Ukrainians voted for continuing existence in the Union, but in renewed union.

What happened there?

First of all there was the economic, military, and political collapse of the Soviet Union during the coup between March and December of 1991.

But the second main reason was that the Ukrainian political elites, led by President Kravchuk at that time, they were not interested anymore in continuation of any kind of union experiment. Until Gorbachev came to power, the Ukrainian elites were a junior partner in running the Soviet Union.

They were brought to Moscow, first by [Khrushchev](#), whom they supported, and Khrushchev worked for more than 10 years as the party leader in Ukraine. Then Khrushchev was replaced by [Brezhnev](#), another product of the Ukrainian party machine, and again. Once Brezhnev died, the plans were that it would be [Shcherbytsky](#), the leader of the [Ukrainian Communist Party](#) who would succeed him—something that didn't happen.

That's where the alliance between these two largest groups in the Communist Party—in the management between Russians and Ukrainians, actually—came to an end, and really the conflict became irreconcilable. Good. Ukraine voted for independence. This is not the vote for the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Why does the Soviet Union fall apart almost immediately after that? Yeltsin gave explanation to that more than once in his telephone conversations and personal meetings with President Bush. We have these telephone conversations now. They're on the website—the [Bush Library](#) is a fantastic resource in general, as is the [Gorbachev Foundation](#), where I worked.

Yeltsin explains to Bush that, if Ukraine is not signing the union agreement, Russia is not signing it. The question is, why? "Otherwise we will be outvoted and outnumbered by Muslim republics." There would be two Slavic republics against three or four Muslim.

That was the position that Yeltsin took immediately. It was before the coup. That was the position, that the burden of the empire has to be shared. Russia on its own is not prepared to do that.

That's exactly what happens at the historical [meeting](#) in the hunting lodge in Viskuli in Belarus, in December of 1991. The negotiations start between Yeltsin and Kravchuk of Ukraine, and they start from Gorbachev's new union treaty. Kravchuk refuses to sign, and then Yeltsin says, "We are not signing either. Now let's look for a different way to arrange our relationship," and that's where the commonwealth is coming from.

A union without Ukraine was of no interest to Russia. A union without Russia was of no interest to any other republic. Belarusians immediately—they were not prepared for what would happen—but the decision was made, "We stick to Russia. That's where the resources are. That's where the expertise are." This is true for Kazakhstan, this is true for any others.

Once Russia is not there, when it is just an empty shell, when it's just Gorbachev—the Baltics left a long time ago, but the Central Asian republics are not interested either. They were almost pushed out of that crumbling empire. The Baltics were leading the way, the Ukrainians got in at some point, Russia decided it's not interested in the empire, but the Central Asian republics are still there. It was

only on December 21, 1991 that they actually also joined the commonwealth.

In the remaining few minutes, what I want to say is about the possible insights that this story, and the way I tell it, might have for events today in the region, and the Russian/Ukrainian conflict.

One of the main arguments of the book is that the Soviet Union fell not because of the relations between Russia and the center, not because of the policies of the United States, but because the two largest constituent parts of the union, Russia and Ukraine, couldn't agree on a *modus vivendi* (an agreement between those whose opinions differ).

What we see now is actually replaying off of the same theme, 23-24 years later. Russia signs an economic agreement with Belarus and Kazakhstan—the Kazakh leader was also invited to Belarus in December of 1991, but for a number of reasons didn't come.

There is a clear gap there, and that gap is Ukraine. Ukraine didn't sign, and what you saw over the period of the last year in terms of the Russian/Ukrainian relations, that was in many ways an attempt to actually get Ukraine on board. Certainly, losing Ukraine after the February Revolution and [Maidan](#) events in January and February of this year.

Now at play are the two regions that were very much also in the headlines in the summer and fall of 1991, and they are Crimea—the only region in Ukraine where the ethnic Ukrainians constituted the minority and ethnic Russians constituted the majority—and Donbas where, on the books, ethnic Russians are a minority, but in cultural and every other term, they are a majority.

For the first time, these two regions were called by name in a statement that was made by Pavel Voshchanov, who was, in August of 1991, Yeltsin's spokesman. At that time, what was happening immediately after the coup was that Yeltsin took away almost all of Gorbachev's powers, forcing him to cancel his own decrees appointing the minister of defense, the head of the KGB, and appointing his own people instead.

Russia was taking over, effectively, the Soviet Union. It was at that time that, from Yeltsin's office, there were warnings sent to republics—to Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and others—and Crimea and Donbas were mentioned; that if these countries leave the Soviet Union, that would mean the end of the agreements that Russia had with those republics regarding the borders. Borders would not be recognized anymore, and areas like Crimea and Donbas would be claimed by Russia.

It didn't work in the way Yeltsin envisioned it in August 1991. The reason for that was the rebellion of the republics. Not only Ukraine declared independence, but every other republic declared independence at that time, and the United States didn't want that to happen, so the position of the White House was really very important.

After that, Yeltsin changes the course. But these particular regions were already there, were there from the very beginning.

Another point linking events of 1991 to today that I want to make was about the question of what drives Vladimir Putin's policy in the region today—whether this is really unhappiness with the way the United States and the NATO countries are moving into the neighborhood, or there is something else. My take on that is that it should be something else.

Very often, what is mentioned as the reason for unhappiness is the promise given to Gorbachev by Western powers that NATO will not be moving eastward after the [reunification of Germany](#). History is

a funny thing. You can go into history and find almost everything you want to find there, except of the document that was actually written.

You go to September 1991 and you can see Yeltsin and Secretary of State [James Baker](#) discussing the issue of possible Russian membership in NATO—so you can manipulate history and go in to make a point of this episode or that episode.

What drives Putin's policy, it is the idea of re-creation—not the Soviet Union, not in the form how it existed—but the re-creation of, if not a commonwealth, then certainly a space that would be dominated by Russia; the vision that is already there in September and October 1991, and that waited to happen for a long period of time.

Last but not least—I know that this question will be asked anyway, so I'll answer it whether it is asked or not. That's the question of what we can learn from the crisis of 1991 and what the United States maybe can borrow from the arsenal, and today's [administration](#) can borrow from the arsenal, of George H. W. Bush.

One thing that worked really very well back in 1991 was the U.S. policy to take on board Western Europe and all major West European players at that time—taking in Germany, France, to get Canada on board.

Bush was on the telephone all the time during the coup in Moscow in August, and then leading up to the Ukrainian referendum and then immediately after that, building this alliance. When Bush spoke at that time that meant for all major players in the region that that was a unified position of the West.

That's why, in Viskuli in Belarus, when they [agreed](#) to dissolve the Soviet Union, Yeltsin and the leaders of [Belarus](#) and Ukraine, the first call goes not to Gorbachev. The first call goes to the United States, and it was very clear that Bush was speaking on behalf of the West in general.

That was very different from the way how the [disintegration of Yugoslavia](#) was handled, when Germany was playing its own policy and the United States was playing its own policy.

This unity of Western countries—of course it's much easier to say than to achieve it—but that turned out to be something really important back in 1991, assuring a peaceful, or relatively peaceful, demise of the empire.

One can look at these events and say that actually the demise of the empire is not over yet, that what we see is maybe the last chapters of the same story. I want to end on that, so if you want to know the beginning of the story, buy the book.

Sometimes I heard that buying is the moral equivalent of reading, so thank you very much for your attention. [Laughter]

Questions

QUESTION: Susan Gitelson.

In Putin's new union, he apparently wants to have political ties, but the reports are that the other two members want to restrict this to an economic union.

Secondly, since you are from Ukraine, what are the prospects of Ukraine ever coming back together with Crimea and the East, and so forth? What is the future?

SERHII PLOKHY: Thanks for these questions. I'll start with the second question, with Ukraine.

We are not sure. We don't know what will happen in Eastern Ukraine, and Donbas in particular.

What we know, the way things are turning out, is that Vladimir Putin was talking about so-called "Novorossiya." The seven or eight regions of Ukraine—that would include Donbas, but would also include Odessa and southern areas, northern shore of the Black Sea—there were provocations in all of those regions. What we see today is that the conflict zone is localized so it is in Donbas only, and it is too early to say what will happen there.

My hope is that when on June 7, Ukraine gets its legitimate [president](#)—now we have an interim [president](#)—that the situation changes on the ground in Ukraine but also the situation changes internationally. We'll see whether that will happen or not, but that is my hope.

In terms of the Crimea, Crimea for the first time that it's happened since the beginning of [World War II](#), the region was not just invaded. The region was annexed. It was attached to another country. This is, again, happening for the first time in 60 or 70 years of European history. So the Crimean situation is different.

My take on that is that if Ukraine succeeds in its attempts to join Europe—not necessarily joining the European Union, but bringing in judicial and business practices—in joining Europe in that way, Crimea would follow sooner or later.

The reason for that is not ethnic composition. The reason for that is geography. Most of the supplies to Crimea, they come from mainland that happens to be Ukraine. There is talk now that Russia will try to change geography by building a bridge between the Kuban region of Russian Federation and the Crimea. But as long as we have the geography as it is now, it would be really difficult for Crimea to exist and effectively function without close cooperation with Ukraine.

If we see Ukraine really succeeding in terms of its reforms—not sinking into corruption and not going the way of the authoritarian regimes of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan—I think that the chances in the longer perspective are good for Crimea coming back. There is one big if—whether Ukraine succeeds or not on that road.

In terms of the economic union, what we see now is something that is built on the foundations of another union, which was a customs union. Now a new level is built. We also have a military union that is there. What is common about these unions is that they are not just Russia-driven, but they are Russia-controlled. It's Russia who is the part of the union that is mostly interested in adding members.

It's a very different story from the European Union, where it's the members who are knocking on the doors of the European Union. Here, it's Russia knocking on the doors of the potential members. Again, the idea is not re-creation of the Soviet Union. This is not the agenda. The idea is creation of a very integrated—economically and, to a degree, politically—space that would be controlled by Russia.

QUESTION: Richard Valcourt, *International Journal of Intelligence*.

In your [book](#) on [Yalta](#), you dealt a lot with how [Roosevelt](#) and [Churchill](#) had to play into [Stalin's](#) desires. They didn't really understand what he was after. In your current book—I did buy the book, and I'm enjoying it—you dealt with [George Bush](#) and [Scowcroft](#), and how they dealt with [Gorbachev](#).

[*Editor's note: For more on General Brent Scowcroft, check out his [Thought Leaders Forum interview](#).*]

Now, how do you deal with this administration and its attempt to understand what Putin is trying to do there? Do we really understand what he's up to?

SERHII PLOKHY: Thanks for this idea. I never thought about comparing FDR and Bush senior in the way they handled the Soviet Union—and they handled it, of course, very differently.

What can I say about the current administration? In my Yalta book, I tell the story of FDR sending one ambassador after another to Moscow. They all come with this idea that they can work with Moscow. [Averell Harriman](#) is one of them. After two or three years, all of them come back absolutely disillusioned and as anti-Russian or anti-Soviet as one can imagine.

It seems to me that the story of Averell Harriman and ambassadors before him and after him is also the story of the current administration. They never were sent to Moscow, but they were sitting in Washington with this idea that, "Okay, if there is a little bit of goodwill, we can do that. We can work with Russia."

What we see now with the [ambassador](#) who just returned relatively recently from Moscow, when you look at the language that is used by the administration, they're at the stage of Averell Harriman after Stalin's refusal to support the [Warsaw Uprising](#) in 1944. They went very anti-Stalin.

That's where the current administration is at this point, in my opinion. Thanks for your question.

QUESTION: Philip Schlissel. I have two questions.

Number one, I wanted to know why anyone would want to go into an alliance with Belarus, which I understand is still a Stalinist dictatorship.

The other question is, what is Gorbachev now thought of in Russia?

SERHII PLOKHY: For Gorbachev, that was a moment of triumph, maybe, with the Crimea. He went publicly and said, "I told you so. I told you. You didn't listen to me 23 years ago that this would happen. Maybe it didn't happen in 1991. It is happening now. The reason why it is happening is because the dissolution of the Soviet Union happened in such an awful way and the people were put in the situation where they had to face the facts," because Gorbachev was advocating the old union referendum at that time, so that was his last position. That is on Gorbachev.

In terms of Belarus and Belarus being possibly a last European dictatorship—if you are either in the position of Putin or Nazarbayev, who run quite authoritarian regimes themselves, I don't think that the way that Lukashenko is a dictator really registers much and influences your decision in that matter.

In terms of other reasons, first of all, there's the geopolitical position of Belarus. Certainly being on the border with EU, with NATO; certainly being one of the corridors for supplying of Russian gas to Europe with Ukraine—of course, now it's difficult to predict what would happen there, including for Mr. Putin.

The more difficult things for Russia are, in Ukraine, the higher are the stakes of Belarus in that geopolitical game that is being played.

QUESTION: Ron Berenbeim.

I'm reminded in this talk of something I read once, that geography is about maps, and history is about chaps—so let's talk about chaps for a second. I remember, at least, that in 1991 most of the energy that I was aware of, in terms of dealing with the post-Soviet world, was to focus on direct relationships with Russia and encouraging reform, and so on.

Now, if I'd been asleep for 23 years, and some people might say that I have, I would wake up and see that Estonia was in NATO. I think I got it wrong on a *Jeopardy!* question recently, because apparently Albania is in NATO too. We had that critical choice to make between dealing directly with Russia or prying loose these neighboring states.

How much of what is going on is attributable to that fateful choice, that the authoritarian leaders of Russia and Kazakhstan and Belarus are just terrified that this is going to infect their world and feel encircled, and this is their way of dealing with it? One of the manifestations is the tremendous re-idolization of Stalin in all parts of that world.

SERHII PLOKHY: Certainly, the Russian leadership—I'm not sure about Kazakh leadership; it plays a different game—but the Russian leadership decided at some point; I think that happened at the time of the wars in Yugoslavia, that the relationship with the West will not be a relationship of allies, that those would be potentially confrontational relationships.

That take on where Russia goes and where the West goes now influences the position of Russia. What are they trying to create? They try to create an economic, political, and military union that would compete with the European Union and NATO on the one hand, and China on the other hand. That is the way how I see them looking at that.

In terms of the authoritarian regimes, Ukraine—not Estonia, not Latvia, not Lithuania—but Ukraine presents a major challenge to that kind of authoritarian arrangement that exists in Russia today because a good half of Ukraine speaks Russian.

In terms of many elements; not all, but many elements of political culture, they are very close, and many pro-democratic activists in Russia look at Ukraine and Kiev with hope that this middle class who has the ability to mobilize itself without support from the EU or the United States—maybe moral support, but that's it—that that could be a real domestic threat to the regime, to the regime in Moscow, to the regime in Belarus. Again, Kazakhs are in a different group.

It's looking at the rest as possible potential adversaries that is one reason for that politics. Another one is to preclude a successful east Slavic, mostly orthodox country from becoming democratic. Democracy in Ukraine—sometimes for good reasons but sometimes not for good reason at all—is portrayed just as chaos. That's the message that is sent to the domestic audience in Russia.

QUESTION: William Verdone.

I was going to ask a question about Gorbachev's legacy, but the gentleman here already did. Now I want to talk about Putin's legacy. Beginning of the next decade, where do you see his policies, where do you see him and, especially recently, with an economic coup with China in terms of gas and oil and commodities going both ways?

SERHII PLOKHY: You ask me to predict the future, and I was wrong so many times in predicting the future that I decided that it's a blessing that I'm being paid as a historian and not as a fortune teller, because I would be broke.

But what I can say is the way that I understand how Putin looks at himself and how he sees his legacy. This is, as far as I understand, the first time in the Russian/Soviet history that the leader is interested in history and reads books, the first time since Joseph Stalin. Khrushchev was not an avid reader, or Brezhnev, for that matter. Gorbachev read, but a different kind of books and a different kind of literature.

This is a person who is now in his third term, who, as far as he knows, is assured of another 10 years. One of the legacies that he wants to leave, in Russia and in the world, is not only stabilizing Russia and precluding it from the complete collapse, something that he is credited as doing in the first years, during the first term as the president.

But also, he looks at himself as, basically, someone who will bring Russia back more or less to the level of the Soviet power in the world, not re-creation of the Soviet Union, but re-creation of the Russian power in the post-Soviet space and in that way, bring back Russia as maybe not a second superpower, but certainly a major player in the world with Europe, the United States, and China.

That's the way I see it and how I read his goal. He reads books on Russian history, on Russian emperors. He reads books on international history. He looks at his legacy as the savior of Russia and bringing Russia back to the summit of world powers.

QUESTION: John Richardson.

We've talked a lot about Moscow, Kiev, and Minsk, and it's the *Rus*. It's the old part. Could you just address a little bit do they have any plan or any concept of what to do with the vast territory out to the Pacific, other than supplying gas to China?

SERHII PLOKHY: I'll go back to my lack of ability to predict things. I started this presentation by talking about teaching a course in Canada on the USSR in crisis. When the course came to an end and the Soviet Union was falling apart we played a game with students.

They said, "Okay, now you are a Soviet citizen and you can move to any part of the Union that you want but soon they will be 15 different countries. Where do you think you would want to live? Where the chances for economic prosperity would be the best?" And things like that.

At that time, everyone was talking about the Pacific Rim. That was a big thing and quite a few students decided that Vladivostok would be the best place to go to move to, to have a business, and things like that.

That was not my prediction. That was the prediction of one of my students. It didn't work out that way for a number of reasons. Militarization of the area is one of them, certainly. Moscow's control over the area is another one.

It's a big issue. What we see now, there are these campaigns, they're going up and down trying to re-settle people to the Far East. Inviting Russian émigrés from Brazil. There was, again I don't know how correct they are, but there were some attempts now after Crimea is taken over, also to talk about that. I don't think that many Crimeans would like to move to Vladivostok or to the Far East.

But certainly there is an understanding in Moscow that potentially there is a problem. Potentially because just the sheer numbers of Chinese populations and Russian populations on the border there. Again, economic challenges are enormous but that's the only thing that I can say about this.

QUESTION: Don Simmons.

Thanks to its kleptocratic government, Ukraine has a very large hard currency international debt. It's also in a position where it can be strangled by Russia either through the price of gas or through declining to allow Ukrainian exports into their country.

My question is, what do you think are the prospects of Ukraine developing a successful, self-sustaining, national economy?

SERHII PLOKHY: Ukraine was bankrupted by the previous government of President [Yanukovich](#). The estimates are different but apparently between \$5 billion and \$10 billion were taken out of the Ukrainian economy by that government alone.

Ukraine is today in deep crisis. One thing that is clear is that Ukraine, on its own, will not be able to overcome that crisis. Mr. Yanukovich's choice was to take a \$15 billion loan from Russia. The current government certainly relies most on financial support and advice from the European Union and the United States.

That's where the hope lies that actually they would be able to turn around the economy. I like Western money much more than Russian money, not because it's dollar and ruble but because Western money comes with strings attached and with control.

After dealing in the post-Soviet space for 20 years, actually, the land and institutions now have much more expertise and know to how handle this money and how to control and how to see what the results are.

First of all, the shock to the Ukrainian society as a result of lost territories in this war—something that should mobilize support for economic reform. Second is the support of the Western community. If of these two things, one of them doesn't work, Ukraine will be, a year from now even, in a more difficult situation than it is today.

JOANNE MYERS: I thank you very much. You've provided us a window into really understand what's happening there, the past and the present. Thank you.

Audio

Serhii Ploky presents a bold new interpretation of the Soviet Union's final months, which places Ukraine at the center of the drama. And by providing the historical background for what is happening now, he shows that there are many key points linking 1991 to today.

Video Clip

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