

## Engaging Russian society key to resolving crisis tk

Jun 04, 2014

Current debate in the West revolves around the question of Russia's actions possibly threatening the security and stability of Europe. What are the Kremlin's power sources, and what is its Achilles' heel?

Tuesday morning's round table discussion centered on these questions, with Senior Fellow at the CATO Institute Andrei Illarionov opening the talks. He expressed the view that Europe is now in a "full-fledged war, a World War IV with Russia." He calls the Cold War "World War III." And Narva, in Estonia, and Latgale, eastern Latvia are the next targets.

"The Anglo-Saxon world is the main obstacle to re-establishing this [re-assertive] Russian world." To achieve this, Russia needs a "neutral continental Europe, an alliance with it," he says.

Russia's strengths today include an ideology of its world, which unites the country. Information technology too, in the sense that U.S. intelligence failed regarding Russia's 2008 war with Georgia and this year's move into Crimea – the U.S. didn't see these coming.

Subversive activity is a strength. The Soviet Union was prepared in 1939 for its move to occupy the Baltics, as it had a plan ready for Ukraine today, he said.

Its economy, says Illarionov, "is not collapsing." And, working in Russia's favor is a complete ignorance or disrespect for international law.

President Vladimir Putin's regime is not all strength. Weaknesses include the government's culture of lies and fraud. Long-term this will work against it, though in the short term it gives lots of benefits.

And though the economy now is solid, it has an inherent weakness, relying heavily on high oil prices, says Illarionov. The size of the economy and military are major weaknesses in the case of conventional war, with opponents enjoying the advantage.

But efforts to halt Putin's foreign incursions don't need to take on a militaristic tone. Russia is a big country, with many levers of influence.

Environmental activist Yevgeniya Chirikova said she is surprised by the constant references to the Soviet Union. In her view, Russia is more like an African colony of the West, with its reliance on sending raw materials abroad. She refers to President Putin as an African king rather than as a new Stalin or Hitler.

But much of the blame she places on the West: Who buys Russian oil and gas? she asks. And the money is turned around to support propaganda against the West. The West, she says, needs to refuse Russian energy and dry up its source of funds.

More need for self-assessment came from Russian politician and Kremlin critic Boris Nemcov, who said that for the West, Putin is a “pain in the neck, but the West doesn’t want to sacrifice anything. [But, it will] have to sacrifice something for peace.”

Putin has been lucky, he argues, with the high global oil prices, which have “enabled a stable budget and huge reserve funds. But he has worked in Russia to destroy brains.”

Nemcov puts Putin in the category of a destroyer, not a builder, of a strong and prosperous society. “In the Baltic States he has managed powerful propaganda machines, with his imperialist sentiment a revenge for the Cold war. He rides high on the strengths of Russia’s international status, its nuclear weapons and a UN Security Council seat, though these mask a pathetic government. He’s destroyed the functioning of it.”

“The people in Russia are sick of the crooks in power, though an effective propaganda hides it all.”

But the worst of it all may be that, as Nemcov says, Putin has “no big goals, just to keep power and money. He’s a cynical person, with only personal goals. This doesn’t make for a good ruler.”

Equally biting comments are reserved for the West, which appears to want peace, and the good life, at any cost. “Europeans need to make a decision: do they want to live next to a neighbor that is ready to attack them?”

Senior fellow at the National Review Institute John O’Sullivan noted that the West “overestimates Russia, Putin’s power. Because of this, he has already won.” The West’s weakness is his strength. And, a growing anti-Americanism in European politics serves to Putin’s benefit.

He sees many weaknesses in Russia. These include worsening demographics, poor public health, and a growing Muslim population that doesn’t sit well with Putin’s focus on a pro-ethnic Russian agenda.”

Western nations, says O’Sullivan, need to boost efforts in the media in such areas as the Voice of America broadcast directly to Russia, and information campaigns – a sophisticated media machine – need to connect with the Russian people. Militarily, more troops need to be sent to the Baltics.

The EU and Russia will eventually need to bridge the widening gap they now face, when the guns are put down. Will this be possible, and what is needed to free Russian society from the Kremlin’s grip?

Dialogue is possible within one civilization. But are the West and Russia the same civilization? Do we have the same views, duties, rights? These questions were posed by philosopher and former European Parliament member Leonidas Donskis.

The West’s long relationship with Russia has a tradition of deep dialogue. It is not only one of politics and diplomacy, but one of the arts and culture. So, “What do we do when barbarism appears?” asks Donskis.

“From a practical aspect, both societies have a close history, culture, but politically, they are on different planets.”

Donskis is not optimistic regarding talks with Russia. There are alternatives when politicians cease to communicate, which include building relationships at the student level, in cultural life.

“We are obliged to communicate with Russian society, to fight for the souls, hearts and minds of humanity. Europe has no right to lose, to be defeatist, to say that all is now lost,” urges Donskis. In agreement was scholar and writer Rein Raud, who said that there needs to be as much cultural interaction as possible. This could lead to a “crack through the wall.”

Clearing up misunderstandings between the two societies may be the first step in finding a solution. The journalist Sergei Parchomenko said that Europe needs to start studying the modern Russian language to understand that country today. Many words, he says, don't mean what they seem to mean, in the modern usage. Misunderstanding results.

Musician and filmmaker Alexander Lipnitski, an optimist, says that similar to the Cuban missile crisis, what's happening today in Ukraine represents an opportunity for healing: it should now be possible to analyze the past 20 years. Western leaders were able to negotiate with the Soviet leaders, said Lipnitski. They need to do the same today.

One participant, closing the debates, mentioned Russians and their history in neighboring countries, that over the last 300 years its people have supplied infinite resources for the conquest and subjugation of neighboring countries, willing to die for the czar, their leader. Russia needs to resolve this, he said, if there is to be the possibility for a peaceful future.

Donskis cautioned that “freedom can be lost overnight.” Twenty years after Eastern Europe, Russia, fought for and regained their independence from the scourge of communism, this is a warning that the world should once again pay attention to.