

Better Putin Than Weimar Russia

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I must admit to being a bit baffled by Jon Basil Utley's "[Libertarians and Putin's Catastrophic Corruption](#),"^[1] wherein we are presented with a litany of all that's wrong with Russia's un-free economy: bribery, no respect for property rights, corrupt courts, dependence on imports—and, perhaps most disturbing of all, "lousy roads!" (I'd advise Jon to pay me a visit out here in the wilds of northern California if he wants to see some *really* bad roads).

I'm baffled because I have to wonder how this is different from the rest of the world, or at least most of it. Utley is describing the general condition of what we used to call the "Third World," before political correctness eliminated that designation. That Russia has fallen into that category after the implosion of communism is hardly surprising: indeed, it was nearly inevitable.

I also have to wonder about the conclusion Utley draws from his indictment of today's Russia. He writes: "Yet many leading libertarians have been very soft on Putin's elimination of political freedoms and ruination of his country, excusing Russia because of NATO expansion and Western support for the overthrow of Ukraine's Moscow-backed Yanukovich government. Some conservatives have even argued that Putin is an ally in supporting traditional 'family values' because of his public opposition to homosexuality and gay marriage."

One has to ask: what "political freedoms"? Western neocons complain that Russia's elections are rigged, although the evidence for this is sketchy, at best—aside from which it's undeniable that Putin, for all his faults, is immensely popular in Russia. That's why he's still in power. The Yeltsin government that preceded Putin's ascension was far worse in terms of corruption: the country was literally plundered by ex-Communist apparatchniks who "bid" on formerly nationalized industries without any competing bids being allowed. This led to the rise of the hated oligarchs, who propped up a drunken Yeltsin while he sold his country down the river—and for a pittance! It was looting, plain and simple. Putin's popularity is based, in part, on the fact that he reined these crooks in. No, he didn't inaugurate laissez-faire capitalism—but then again, neither has any country in the world, including our own.

Utley claims "Ron Paul defends Putin," with a link pointing to [a smear piece](#)^[2] in the *National Journal* that starts out: "It used to be that blaming America for crisis abroad was largely the

province of liberals. That folk wisdom appears to be changing—just ask Ron Paul.” The article goes on to rail against the fact that the Russian propaganda apparatus picked up on Paul’s remarks, as if that alone was proof of Paul’s perfidy. But if we look at what Paul actually said, it turns out he was absolutely correct:

Just days after the tragic crash of a Malaysian Airlines flight over eastern Ukraine, Western politicians and media joined together to gain the maximum propaganda value from the disaster. It had to be Russia; it had to be Putin... President Obama held a press conference to claim—even before an investigation—that it was pro-Russian rebels in the region who were responsible. His ambassador to the U.N., Samantha Power, did the same at the U.N. Security Council—just one day after the crash.

Every word of this is true: the U.S. government and media didn’t wait two seconds before concluding the separatists and their Russian sponsors were behind the downing of the plane. Minutes after the incident Twitter was ablaze with anti-Russian propaganda: yet another example of the evil Putin’s perfidy!

The international investigation launched shortly after the crash still hasn’t reached a definitive conclusion, and one isn’t due until August. And even if—or rather when—the investigation cites the separatists as the culprits, it’s clear they didn’t intend to target a civilian airliner, which for some reason was flying over a war zone avoided by other airlines. In any case, Paul’s point remains valid: the rush to judgment was unseemly and indicative of a troubling trend—the Russophobia that is driving our policy toward the Kremlin.

Utley makes the argument that Russia is in danger of becoming a “failed state.” Yet Russia is nowhere near becoming anything like, say, Somalia, a classic failed state. And its current economic troubles aren’t only a result of its statist economic policies, although they do play a major role: the economic sanctions recently imposed by the Obama administration, with full support from congressional conservatives, are a major blow, precisely as intended by our new Cold Warriors. Utley never mentions the sanctions; indeed, his piece gives the pro-sanctions crowd moral if not explicit political support.

What kind of libertarian supports such sanctions? I’ll tell you what kind: over at the Cato Institute, we see a piece by Christopher Preble opining that “the [goal of the sanctions](#)^[3] should be a negotiated settlement to the Ukrainian crisis that favors western interests. Economic pressure raised the costs of Russia’s revanchism in Ukraine and might deter Putin from trying to foment trouble elsewhere along Russia’s border.”

In other words, the sanctions are a good thing: for the first time ever, the Cato Institute is endorsing what Daniel Drezner [calls](#)^[4] the “weaponization of finance” in order to pursue Washington’s foreign-policy agenda. This didn’t even happen during the run-up to the invasion of Iraq! Which tells us that the Russophobia that has swept through Georgetown’s cocktail parties has breached the towers of what used to be the premier libertarian think tank, and Cold War II is in full swing. When Washington has regime-change on its mind, the pressure on anti-interventionists in the nation’s capital can be tremendous.

If we want to prevent Russia from becoming a failed state, imposing draconian economic sanctions is counterintuitive. Thanks to the Obama administration's open hostility to the Kremlin, the joint U.S.-Russian program charged with tracing and securing "loose nukes" has come to a halt. Does anyone think Washington's current anti-Russian hysterics are going to bring it back?

Russia is very far from being a "dictatorship," as Utley avers. It's easier for a new or "third" party to get on the ballot in Russia than it is in the United States. True, the major media are pro-government, but most of the media is in formally private hands. And our own media is concentrated in just a few hands—and doesn't exactly have a great track record when it comes to challenging the narratives spun by government officials.

Utley is right that Putin won't be thrown out—but not because Russia is a dictatorship. It's because he's enormously popular, not because opposition parties are banned (they aren't) or because his enemies are all in prison (they aren't). Is Russia a Jeffersonian republic? Nope. But then again, neither are we.

American hostility to Russia is based on two things: 1) Putin's scathing and largely accurate critique of U.S. intervention in the Middle East and Eastern Europe and his refusal to countenance NATO expansion, and 2) Putin's offer of sanctuary to America's number one political dissident, Edward Snowden. Of course, the neocons were ready for regime change when Putin denounced the U.S. assault on Iraq, but it wasn't until Snowden's hegira that the U.S. government got fully on board the regime-change train.

The current wave of Russophobia is the most dangerous phenomenon since the wave of war hysteria that greeted the 9/11 terrorist attacks. We are in danger of creating a "Weimar Russia"—wracked by economic ruination, resentful of the West, and seething with ancient ethnic hatreds. So you think Putin is bad? You haven't seen anything yet—just wait until you see his successors. The ultra-nationalists waiting in the wings are truly scary: the irony is that the scenario of a "revanchist, revisionist" Russia will turn out to have been a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The Versailles Treaty, with its draconian terms designed to humiliate and impoverish a defeated Germany, ushered in Hitler and the National Socialists. Russia, defeated in the first Cold War, is being treated in a similar fashion. We have been down this road before—so why haven't we learned the right lessons? If even the heroic Jon Utley, publisher of the nation's leading anti-interventionist magazine—and a great friend to Antiwar.com^[5]—hasn't learned the right lesson, then I tremble at the future we have before us.

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