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Europe Whole and Free

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Following his April 16 quasi-annexation of the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russian President Vladimir Putin last week rolled an additional 700 soldiers into Abkhazia. Since April 16, western leaders have met Putin's gambit with uncharacteristically prompt, stiff and united condemnations. Characteristically, Russia's checkist-in-chief promptly told them into which part of their anatomies they should stuff their statements—yes, really. The west must now act to show Putin—and Dmitry Medvedev, his handpicked successor—that it is serious about Georgia's territorial integrity, nay more, about the concept of Europe whole and free.

In 1946, speaking of the 1930s when Britain, France and oblivious America chose to ignore the growing threat of Nazi Germany, former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill said, "Last time, I saw it all coming, and I cried aloud to my own fellow-countrymen and to the world, but no one paid any attention."

Then, at Yalta and Potsdam and during the brief twilight between hot and cold war, no one paid any attention to the growing threat of Stalinist Russia. So, Churchill continued, "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain [had] descended across the continent."

Stalin and his henchmen constructed the most formidable, inhuman barrier in history. For more than four decades, it restrained people; the human spirit flickered but it never died. Then, on a sunny August day in 1989, 900 East Germans rekindled the human spirit, crashing through the newly opened Hungarian border with Austria. Within months, their compatriots hammered the Berlin Wall to rubble.

The guard towers of tyranny fell; jack-booted bullies and attack dogs faded away. Ordinary people trashed the naïveté and perfidy of Yalta. In the words of US President George H.W. Bush, spoken just a few weeks before those heady days, Europe was set to become "whole and free."

Democracy spread eastward with remarkable celerity. Equally remarkable, however, was the speed with which Putin restored tsardom to Russia after 1999.

Unsurprisingly, the countries that chose freedom joined—or want to join—freedom's flagship institutions, the European Union and NATO. This is the institutionalization of freedom, not a sinister plot to redraw lines on the map.

From the watchtowers of the gulag, however, the approach of democratic institutions appears more threatening.

Freedom and tsardom were bound to clash—heated rhetoric, energy blackmail, a stillborn treaty and now a late forties-style land-grab, complete with puppet governments and soldiers. The west can manage the clash, indeed win it, but it must face the facts.

It is not NATO's military the Kremlin fears; it is NATO's ideas. Putin does not fear a NATO attack spearheaded by four Georgian brigades; he fears election observers! Churchill's 1941 words are as apt today as then.

"You see these dictators on their pedestals, surrounded by the bayonets of their soldiers and the truncheons of their police. Yet in their hearts, there is unspoken—unspeakable!—fear. They are afraid of words and thoughts! Words spoken abroad, thoughts stirring at home, all the more powerful because they are forbidden. These terrify them. A little mouse—a little tiny mouse!—of thought appears in the room, and even the mightiest potentates are thrown into panic."

This is the only context in which Moscow's oft-repeated fear makes any sense. "The emergence of a powerful military bloc at our borders," Putin told NATO leaders at their April Summit in Bucharest, "will be seen as a direct threat to Russia's security." Why do Russian leaders never articulate just what threat they fear? Because, as Churchill said, their real fear is "unspeakable!" Just substitute the word "ideological" for Putin's word "military" to understand.

Consequently, NATO's potential further enlargement is about redrawing lines on the map—not NATO drawing lines to encircle Russia, but Russia drawing lines to insulate itself.

Make no mistake—Putin's Abkhazia *anschluss* has everything to do with Moscow's desperation to preserve the last vestige of its perceived sphere of influence. "We will do everything possible to prevent the accession of Ukraine and Georgia to NATO," Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on April 8.

In Russian perception, NATO integrated ten states that Moscow once controlled through the Warsaw Pact or ruled as if part of the Soviet Union—because it could. Then the west stripped Kosovo from Serbia and recognized its independence—because it could. Now, Russia makes trouble in Abkhazia and South Ossetia—because it can.

Lavrov's May 3 invocation of a sphere of influence could not have been clearer. Georgia's "inability to negotiate" with Russia about the current situation is the direct result of "plans to pull Georgia into NATO... Those capitals that are pulling Georgia into the North Atlantic Alliance" should not create "artificial problems in this very sensitive region."

Appeasing Russia will invite more of the same. Anytime, anywhere Moscow perceives a positive correlation of forces, it will bully. That is the logic of a Russian sphere of influence.

Meanwhile, the steady torrent of western words in the face of Russian escalation in the Georgian territories is starting to look like appeasement.

Only timely western action can preserve Europe whole and free.

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