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U.S. - Russia relations were lost from the start

by [Fareed Zakaria](#)

President Trump's [news conference](#) Monday in Helsinki was the most embarrassing performance by an American president I can think of. And his preposterous [efforts to talk his way out](#) of his troubles made him seem even more absurd. But what has been obscured by this disastrous and humiliating display is the other strain in Trump's Russia narrative. As he recently [tweeted](#), "Our relationship with Russia has NEVER been worse thanks to many years of U.S. foolishness and stupidity." This notion is now firmly lodged in Trump's mind and informs his view of Russia and Putin. And it is an issue worth taking seriously.

The idea that Washington "lost" Russia has been around since the mid-1990s. I know because I was one of the people who made that case. In a [New York Times Magazine](#) article in 1998, I argued that "central to any transformation of the post-Cold-War world was the transformation of Russia. As with Germany and Japan in 1945, an enduring peace required that Moscow be integrated into the Western world. Otherwise a politically and economically troubled great power . . . would remain bitter and resentful about the post-Cold-War order."

This never happened, I argued, because Washington was not ambitious enough in the aid it offered. Nor was it understanding enough of Russia's security concerns — in the Balkans, for example, where the United States launched military interventions that [ran roughshod](#) over Russian sensibilities.

I continue to believe Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton missed an opportunity to attempt a fundamental reset with Russia. But it has also become clear that there were many powerful reasons U.S.-Russian relations might have been destined to deteriorate.

Russia in the early 1990s was in a period of unusual weakness. It had lost not just its Soviet-era sphere of influence but also its 300-year-old czarist empire. Its economy was in free fall; its society was collapsing. In this context, it watched as the United States expanded NATO, intervened against Russia's allies in the Balkans and criticized its efforts to stop Chechnya from seceding.

From America's vantage point, locking in the security of the newly liberated countries of Eastern Europe was an urgent matter. Washington worried that war in Yugoslavia was destabilizing Europe and producing a humanitarian nightmare. And the United States could not condone Russia's brutal wars in [Chechnya](#), in which tens of thousands of civilians were killed and much of the region was destroyed. The United States and Russia were simply on opposite sides of these issues.

In addition, by the late 1990s, Russia was moving away from a democratic path. Even under President Boris Yeltsin, the bypassing of democratic institutions and rule by presidential decree became common. Democratic forces in the country were always weak. Scholar [Daniel Treisman](#) has shown that by the mid-'90s, the combined tally for all liberal democratic reformers in Russia's Duma elections never went above 20 percent. The "extreme opposition" forces, by contrast — communist, hypernationalist — received on average about 35 percent. And once Putin came to power, the move toward illiberal democracy and then outright authoritarianism became unstoppable. Putin has never faced a serious liberal opposition.

An authoritarian Russia had even more areas of contention with the United States. It panicked over the "color revolutions," in which countries such as Georgia and Ukraine became more democratic. It looked with consternation at the establishment of democracy in Iraq. These forces, by contrast, were being cheered on by the United States. And to Putin, President George W. Bush's "freedom agenda" might have seemed designed to dislodge his regime.

Perhaps most crucially, by the mid-2000s, steadily rising oil prices had resulted in a [doubling](#) of Russia's per capita gross domestic product, and cash was flowing into the Kremlin's coffers. A newly enriched Russia looked at its region with a much more assertive and ambitious gaze. And Putin, sitting atop the "vertical of power" he had created, began a serious effort to restore Russian influence and undermine the West and its democratic values. What has followed — the interventions in Georgia and Ukraine, the alliance with President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, the cyberattacks against Western countries — has all been in service of that strategy.

So yes, the West might have missed an opportunity to transform Russia in the early '90s. We will never know whether it would have been successful. But what we do know is that there were darker forces growing in Russia from the beginning, that those forces took over the country almost two decades ago and that Russia has chosen to become the principal foe of America and the American-created world order.

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