

“Confronting Putin’s Russia”  
Featuring  
Ambassador Michael A. McFaul  
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Amb. McFaul called the current standoff with Russia more frightening than the late-Cold War period.

- Russian President Putin recently reminded of his nuclear weapons as a way of preventing Ukraine from moving into Western institutions such as the European Union and perhaps even NATO.

Given the gravity of the stakes, and that as recently as the Sochi Olympics Russia was still making appealing overtures to the world, McFaul set out to address the big question, “What happened?”

McFaul put out an analytic construct, saying that various plausible explanations for what happened tend to emphasize either *structural* factors (e.g. shifts in national power) or human *agency* (e.g. the choices leaders make).

- His bottom line up front was that the bulk of the evidence rested with agency, and Putin specifically.

Nonetheless, McFaul led the audience through an examination of various contending explanations.

First, is just old-fashioned balance-of-power realism. Russians were weak after the collapse of the USSR; now they’re back, and asserting themselves, as one should reasonably expect.

- Amb. McFaul was not attracted to the automatic quality of this type of explanation. He suggested that had Russia consolidated democracy and market capitalism over the last couple of decades, Moscow would not be acting the way it is in Ukraine today.
- McFaul elaborated on the geopolitical explanation, offering that Moscow is not aiming to reconstitute a Russian empire or the USSR, but rather a Eurasian Economic Union.
  - This would entail Russian economic dominance of the former Soviet space, within which Ukraine would be crucial.

Second, is that the nosedive in relations is the US fault.

- One variant of this charge is that the US did too much. Provocative actions included expanding NATO eastward, bombing traditional Russian ally Serbia, and invading Iraq.
  - McFaul was not persuaded by this, as many cooperative bilateral undertakings (e.g. a new START treaty, sanctions against Iran, facilitating US troop resupply in Afghanistan) took place after the supposedly aggressive acts had occurred.
- Another variant of the US fault explanation, which McFaul thought was weak, is that the US did too little. In this telling, the US does not signal displeasure by standing up to Moscow as it embarks on assertive behavior, but rather switches to punitive sanctions after the fact.

For McFaul, the best explanation lies with Putin himself as he reassumed the Russian Presidency in 2011. Putin had always oscillated between suspicion of the West and pragmatism. But events of recent years shifted him decisively to the suspicious side.

- Internationally, the Arab Spring and in particular the NATO bombing of Libya convinced Putin that the West had embarked on a CIA-abetted season of regime change.
- Domestically, 2011 parliamentary elections widely viewed as fraudulent brought one hundred thousand protestors into the streets of Moscow.

Both nervous and angry, Putin found the image of a US enemy to be a useful rallying cry.

The last straw in Putin's hardening was the fall of the pro-Russian Ukrainian government in February 2014. A month later Russia annexed Crimea, and shortly thereafter began subverting eastern Ukraine.

The good news in this explanation is that US-Russian confrontation is not destined by structural factors, that the bilateral conflict lacks the ideological tinge of the Cold War, and that *Putinism* as a worldview does not resonate with others internationally.

The bad news is that Putin is now locked-in, and is unlikely to change over the foreseeable future. But this situation will not last forever. The young generation of smart, well informed, wealthy Russians is not well served by estrangement from the West.

- When they come to power someday, the time will be right for US-Russian relations to *reset*.

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