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Presented by

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THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK: THE RISING TIDE OF NATIONALISM IN RUSSIA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR UKRAINE AND THE WEST

(The abridged version of the lecture)

Ms. Freeland initiated the lecture by stating that Russian nationalism was on the rise. She listed the questions, which would be discussed in the lecture:
1. The rise of Russian nationalism and its roots.
2. What Russia intends to do now that nationalist rhetoric has been stepped up.
3. The implications of this development for Ukraine
4. The significance of the rise of nationalism in Russia for the West.

Western observers have preconceptions about new post-communist Russia. In the summer of 1991, the brave democratic Russian leaders stood in front of the White House and faced down the communist plotters. That is how the birth of a new post-communist Russia is remembered. Things have changed however, and it is necessary to understand the gap between the preconceptions about Russia and the way Russia is in 1995.

The Rise of Russian Nationalism and Its Roots
To get an introduction to the Russian political scene, Freeland quoted Georgii Satarov, democratic advisor and one of the most liberal aides to Russian President Boris Yeltsin, who predicted that in 1996 there would be a right wing fascist dictatorship in Russia. Political developments seem to be moving in this direction.

We can look back to the very vociferous reaction by all of the Russian leadership, particularly of Russian President Boris Yeltsin, to the NATO air strikes in Bosnia. At that time Yeltsin opposed the NATO air strikes, which many observers at the West saw as a helpful step, breaking the stalemate in the former Yugoslavia. Yet, for Mr. Yeltsin, this was a threat that might re-ignite the Cold War. Over the past six months, a rising tide of anti-Western rhetoric, anti-NATO rhetoric, and a return to talk of the great Russian state are in evidence.

One of the groups which has adopted this nationalist rhetoric is the new business class. In 1991 the West had very complacent assumptions, believing that because communism in the Soviet Union had collapsed, inevitably Russia would become a democracy. Capitalism would flourish, and these two systems would support one another. Today, we are seeing a contradictory development. Capitalism has flourished, but Russia's new capitalist entrepreneurs are fiercely anti-Western and fiercely anti-democratic. For example, Mikhail Khodorkovskii, the founder and the President of Menatep, one of Russia's top ten banks, and one of the captains of a new industry. In discussing the International Monetary Fund, which this year alone has given Russia a six billion dollar loan, Mr. Khodorkovskii explained to reporters that the IMF was engaged in a secret plot to undermine Russia. The IMF was acting in such a way to destroy Russian industry, so as to prevent Russia from being a competitor to the West.

The mounting wave of nationalism is no longer something we hear from flamboyant maverick politicians, such as Vladimir Zhirinovsky. It is something that we hear from the men who wear Armani suits and who look to us as though they could be working on Bay Street or on Wall Street.

Another example that is not discussed often enough is the war in Chechnia, which has been going on for a year now. Boris Yeltsin's Russia has pursued a war that has killed 30,000 Russian citizens. This fact demonstrates Russia's determination to defend its national value, its territory at great cost, and it also shows Russia's attitude to the West.

This is clear when we think about Gorbachev's effort to crush the Baltic Independence Movement in 1991. Only a few people died, and the Western reaction was vociferous. Soviet troops immediately withdrew, and Gorbachev disassociated himself from the action. This year, tens of thousands of people have died. In spite of Western criticism, the Russians have not stopped. That is one measure of how the political climate has changed.

Although from a Western perspective this shift in Russian politics is a sad one, we should not be surprised by it. It is, as historian Richard Pipes has pointed out, a great break from the Russian past. Since the founding of the Imperial Russian state, Russia for at least three centuries has been a constantly expanding country. The only break in that inexorable expansion occurred between the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the Second World War. But Stalin made up for that loss of territory by gobbling up quite a lot more after the end of the war.
The revolutions in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a traumatic break from what had been the dominant trend in Russian history. Russians are traumatized by this. If we look to the history of other European post-colonial states, we see that there the giving up of an empire took a very long time. Even today France still insists on nuclear testing, Britain feels that it cannot join the European Union because of the unique qualities of Britishness, and are countries, which have not entirely overcome their imperial legacy. How much more difficult must that process be for Russia, which has only begun to deal with the issue.

Russia's difficulty in coping with the loss of empire is compounded by the fact that without an empire Russia really lacks an identity. Its identity has been defined in terms of a great and imperial power. The final problem, which has made this historical shift especially painful for the Russian leadership, is the humiliation of the post-imperial situation. Particularly unpleasant for Russian elites is the fact that their former colonies consider themselves to be superior to Russia. No one in Poland, or in Hungary, or in the Baltic republics, or even Ukraine, looks up to Russia anymore - and that is especially galling.

Given the inevitability of a resurgence of Russian nationalism we could expect a hardening of the rhetoric. The situation in Russia has become difficult because of the volatile political climate against which the nationalist wave is being played out.

**The Political Climate in Russia**

Russia at present, in theory, faces two elections, which could completely change the leadership of the country. On December 17, 1995, parliamentary elections are supposed to be held, and in June of next year, presidential elections are supposed to be held. For the Russian government, and also for the nouveau riche Russians, like the banker referred to earlier, these elections are a particularly terrifying thing, because they happened at a time when most Russians are deeply furious at their current government. It is a mistake to draw parallels between the political climate in Russia today and our own political climate. In Russia people are angry about a transformation, which has completely changed their lives. For many, it wiped out all of their savings, destroyed their job security, and over the past years lowered the living standards of most Russians. Concurrently, they have seen a very small group of people become wealthy beyond our own western imagination. There is a new Mercedes 600 produced this year, and more of those cars have been sold in Moscow than anywhere else in the world.

For the current government, elections in this situation are not a welcome prospect. There are some efforts to postpone the parliamentary and presidential elections, although, they are months away. People are raising legal challenges to the elections, with efforts to have the Constitutional Court declare the election law invalid. If the Constitutional Court does rule in favour, the elections will not take place. If the Court rules for the elections, and communists and nationalists, the opposition to the current government, do very well, then, as a possible outcome, the Constitutional Court could rule ten days after the elections, that the election law was invalid, and it sadly would be necessary to dissolve the Parliament. That might seem extraordinary, but exactly that scenario was played out in Kazakhstan this year and has been studied by the current government.
There are two political options in Russia today. One is that the current government, by postponing elections, will assume a more nationalist agenda, in this way partly justifying its decision to postpone democracy. The other option is that Russian democracy will indeed develop in a healthy fashion: people will elect communists and nationalists. The communists and nationalists they are likely to elect are not people westerners will be comfortable seeing in charge at the Kremlin.

Communist and Nationalist Opposition Leaders

The speaker described a meeting with Vladimir Zhirinovsky, the nationalist leader, in connection with an editorial visit to Moscow. Zhirinovsky was predictably unstable when he was interviewed. One of the things that he said when asked about the conflict in Bosnia, was that it was absolutely outrageous that this conflict had occurred, and it was the fault of French and Italian hoteliers, who had provoked the war in Bosnia in order to kill the Yugoslav tourist industry, and the economic consequences of this policy were apparent, because no one goes to Yugoslavia on holidays anymore. So, on the basis of this example, Mr. Zhirinovsky proceeded to rant against the evil heartless western capitalists who do not care about tens of thousands of Bosnians, as long a their hotels on the Riviera are full. There is a new less maniacal group of nationalists on the block, The Congress of Russian Communities, (Kongress russkikh obshchin, KRO). The deputy leader of this organization is General Alexander Lebed. He was the commander of Russian Forces in the Dniester Republic, and achieved national prominence in that position, because he defended the rights of people known as Russians (ironically, the majority of them are ethnically Ukrainian) to break away from Moldova. Lebed is more reasonable than Zhirinovsky. But his big campaign line deals with "defending the rights of 25 million ethnic Russians, who live outside Russian borders". He stated, that perhaps the elections were invalid, because 25 million Russians living outside of Russia, are not allowed to vote - legally an absurd statement. 11 million Russians live in Ukraine, and they voted in the Ukrainian elections, but politicians like General Lebed, argue, that they should have franchise in Russia as well.

Finally, there is Genadii Tsyganov, who is the leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF). In the eyes of western journalists, diplomats, and businessmen, he is the most reasonable of the figures in the new red-brown block. In many ways Tsyganov, who has begun to hold meetings with the American Chamber of Commerce in Moscow and talk to The Financial Times, who states that he likes capitalism, is the most dangerous, because his party represents Soviet Russian nationalism. He really considers the dissolution of the Soviet Union to have been illegal. One of his campaign promises, is that the treaties dissolving the Soviet Union will be revoked. If they do control the majority in parliament, it would make the status of former Soviet republics like Ukraine and the Baltics, questionable.

To give a full spectrum of the opposition, one should mention one popular liberal democrat in the opposition, Grigorii Yavlinsky, head of the Yabloko Block. After talking to this parade of communist nationalists, one can become very depressed about the fate of Russia. Talking to Mr. Yavlinsky is a breath of fresh air. He is a real liberal, he believes in the market economy, he believes in defending democratic values. He also believes in re-constituting the Soviet Union and thinks that Ukraine should again be joined in a political union with Russia. For Yavlinsky, that is very personal issue, because he himself is from the Ukrainian city of Lviv.
The Expression of Rising Nationalism

Among observers of Russia, the communists and nationalists are expected to either take over government personally, or demonstrate such popularity at the polls, that the Yeltsin administration will adopt their political agenda. The question is: what will they actually do?

At one extreme there is the Zhirinovsky nightmare. Vladimir Volfovich contends, that Russian soldiers will be washing their boots in the Indian Ocean, in the Baltic, and in the Black sea. It is an aggressive Russian nationalism, which wishes to reclaim the territories lost in 1991 by force. In the speaker's opinion, this is not going to happen.

Osman Imaiev, the commander of the Chechen Military Resistance, in describing what he saw as the current Russian foreign policy stated: "Russia is like a rapist, which really wants to violate the victims that surround him, but he just can't get it up." In the speaker's opinion, that reflected the present situation. Russia does have a great ideological desire to be strong, but in practice, it does not have the power to do it. Chechnia was the small, quick, victorious war for the Russian government, and, it is not surprising, that the Russian government chose Chechnia as a Russian equivalent of the Falklands, a way of winning a quick victory and earning a lot of domestic popularity. The Chechens are widely hated in Russia. Russians are widely prejudiced and Chechens are seen by many as a group of genetic criminals. There is not a lot of objection among Russians to the idea of bringing these "criminals" to heel.

Even in the situation of this political climate, even given the fact that the Red Army is a huge machine that terrified all of the Western world, and that there are only one million Chechens, the Russian Army has performed horribly in Chechnia. It is still not in control of the situation as is clear from news reports.

On the ground this has become even more evident. What is surprising for the speaker is the fear of Russian soldiers in Chechnia. The Russian soldiers met were eighteen- or nineteen-year-old conscripts who wanted desperately to go home and were so scared of the country they were in that they preferred to eat tinned army rations sent from Russia rather than go to the market. They were afraid of being shot or kidnapped if they ventured outside their barracks. The Russian Army in Chechnia is also incredibly corrupt. Gasoline is cheaper in Chechnia than anywhere else in the world and is also very easy to get, because soldiers deliver gas to Chechens for sale every day.

The Chechen war has shown that although Russian elites are happy to talk the nationalist talk, they are unhappy to pay the price in terms of lives of the their sons. This point was driven home to the speaker in a conversation with Boris Yeltsin's press secretary and his wife. The press secretary's wife said that Yeltsin should resign as soon as possible. Their son was seventeen years old, and next year he may be drafted into the army. She thought that under Yeltsin's government he would have to fight in the war, something she did not want. For this reasons, in the short term the Zhirinovsky scenario is not a danger. It is likely that Russia will be much more aggressive in small ways. Russia will pressure weaker states in political, military, and economic ways. It has applied such pressure to a country like Georgia, where through support for the Abkhaz separatists, Russia has forced the Georgian
government to agree to whatever terms Moscow dictated. It maintains military bases in Georgia.

The big Russian companies, and especially Gazprom, the Russian monopoly gas producer, which was incidentally once run by the current Russian Prime Minister, is using its economic muscle to force neighboring countries to tow the line. Gazprom is doing this with Belarus, with Ukraine, and with Moldova. Its goals are not always political, but often economic. What Gazprom says is: "We will not supply you with gas, unless you give us control of some of your strategic industries." But it is wrong to see this as a purely economic move; it is very much tied in with Russian foreign policy, an indirect way of establishing control.

The Russian government will be playing on the sentiments of ethnic Russians living outside Russia. Russia is going to do its best, and has already done quite a bit in this regard, to create fifth columns in the countries who are its neighbors. These are particularly the Baltic republics, but also Ukraine, and Kazakhstan. General Lebed’s argument that ethnic Russians should be allowed to vote in Russian elections is a hint of the extent to which Russia is going to claim these people as members of the Russian state. If one claims those Russians as citizens of Russia, the logical corollary is to claim the lands on which they live as parts of Russian territory - something, which will be dangerous for countries with Russian minorities.

The final practical step which we are going to see, pursued more forcefully than ever, is the effort to discredit the legal foundation of the break up of the Soviet Union. If the communist-nationalist coalition has a majority in Parliament after elections, and if they have more than sixty-six percent of the Parliament, they may overturn the presidential veto. The speaker noted the possibility of their attempt to overrule the December 8th, 1991, agreement between Yeltsin, Kravchuk and Shushkevich, which marked the end of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States).

These are dangerous scenarios. In view of the prospect that Russia is going to be pursuing this sort of foreign policy, we have to begin considering what its repercussions might be for Russia’s immediate neighbors and for the West.

**Russian Nationalism and Ukraine**

At this time of resurgent Russian nationalism, Ukraine has become very important. Lenin knew this, and said during the 1917 revolution that it was absolutely crucial for the Bolsheviks to capture Ukraine, because "without Ukraine, Russia will lose its head." In a recent article in Foreign Affairs, Brzezhinsky is quoted of having said that "Ukraine is really the litmus test for Russian nationalism," and "as long as Ukraine remains independent, Russian nationalism is containable from the Western perspective." Once Russia begins encroaching on Ukraine, Russian nationalism becomes a dangerous force for the West.

Ukraine is so important because it is the keystone for Russia, which seeks a European presence. If Russia wants to be a big geo-political actor in the Central European region, it needs Ukraine either to be a part of Russia, or acting in lockstep with Russia. With Ukraine running a very independent foreign policy, Russia falls out of that picture.
Ukraine is also serves as an example of how Russia could behave. Ukraine is to Russia, in some ways what Canada is to the United States. It is a country that is quite similar ethnically, economically, and in many respects has a similar history. Policies which Ukraine advocates are policies which are not impossible in Russia. So, it is possible to make a case, that if, for example, democracy is possible in Ukraine, democracy is possible in Russia too. Ukraine has had two consecutive presidential elections, and the first elected president, Leonid Kravchuk was replaced by another elected president, Leonid Kuchma. If that can happen in Ukraine, then it is possible to argue strongly that there is no innate unique Russian cultural tradition, which makes democracy impossible in Russia.

It is possible to say the same thing about minority rights. At a popular level, Ukrainians have heard a lot of bad things about Ukraine's historic treatment of its minorities. If you talk to the Jewish community, it does not have many positive things to say about what life was like in Ukraine in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. But Ukraine now has the most liberal policy towards its minorities of any country in Eastern Europe, not to mention the former Soviet Union. If that is possible in Ukraine, a country with a similarly poor history of honoring minority rights, then it should be possible in Russia as well. In practice, the tactic of saying to the Russians, look, the Ukrainians are doing this, why do you not do it too. This is very effective, and it is being used a lot. The negotiations of the IMF with Russia and Ukraine this spring are instructive. Negotiations were happening simultaneously, but this spring they were stalled with Russia, yet were progressing rather smoothly with Ukraine. At a key point in the negotiations the IMF economists went to the Russians and said: "We are having a hard time reaching the deal, but we just want to let you know, that the Ukrainians will be signing an agreement on Friday." Magically, the Russians decided that they would sign an agreement on Thursday. It was just a little bit too humiliating for the Ukrainians to get their IMF deal before the Russians. It is a tactic, which works.

Ukraine is right now in a particularly precarious position vis-a-vis Russia. Even though it has been an independent country for four years now, Russians still fail to grasp this fact.

The speaker mentioned that she had personally witnessed the extent to which Russians assume that Ukraine is part of Russia. When she first started working in Russia, she was aware that Ukrainians were not uniformly fond of Russia, and assumed, that the attitude might be the same in Russia. So, when she was asked where she learned her Russian, she mentioned that her mother is Ukrainian. The reaction, was: "It is wonderful to have a Russian working here." To be Ukrainian, in Russian eyes means to be Russian, and that is true even of the most sophisticated, most democratic, most liberal politicians and intellectuals. It is particularly true, because so many political and business leaders are Ukrainian, or from Ukraine, or have close ties with Ukraine. Gennadii Tsyganov's wife is an Ukrainian from Kharkiv; Grigorii Yavlinsky was born and raised in Ukraine; Boris Fedorov, another leading politician, is from Odesa, and so on. For many of them it is simply hard to see Ukraine as a separate country. There could be negative Russian reaction when the moment comes and Russians are forced to confront the fact that Ukraine is independent, when they must admit that this is not some historical aberration, that Ukraine will not go down the path of Belarus and in the couple of years realize its folly and come back to the Russian fold.
Western Policy Towards Russia

Given the rise of Russian nationalism and the threat that it poses to Ukraine, the question is: what should western policy be towards Russia? Should it revert to a hard-line towards Russia, or take a much softer, more conciliatory stance?

The most common argument for taking a conciliatory stance that by pushing Russia we will be playing into the hands of the nationalist hard-liners. This is an argument that the current Russian government uses with tremendous political skill. Most discussions, as American diplomats recount them, between the United States and Russia are somewhat along these lines: Boris Yeltsin, or whoever, speaks to the American official, and says: "We are sorry that we have to be opposed to the NATO expansion, or that we have violated the CFE treaty, or that we have to pursue the war in Chechnia, but we have no choice; we have a huge army of nationalistic disgruntled voters behind us, and unless we appease them with these nationalist policies, they are going to vote for Zhirinovsky." Yeltsin’s administration is much better than Zhirinovsky’s.

The other argument for a soft and conciliatory line towards Russia is simply that the West is happy for the Cold War to be over, not purely because of the ideological triumph of democracy and capitalism, but because it was very expensive and exhausting. And there is an argument in western capitals that we simply do not want to become entangled again in a conflict with Russia.

Arguments Against Conciliatory Policy

It is a mistake to think that western policy can influence the internal course of Russian politics. The rise of Russian nationalism is happening independently of western policy. In the speaker’s opinion, the strongest argument for this view is the Russian attitude towards the IMF, which has done the most concrete financial work to help the Russians, but it is at the same time, one of the focuses of anti-western sentiment.

Another argument against a conciliatory policy claims are that it is a mistake to dismiss Russian diplomacy and to dismiss Boris Yeltsin. When the Russian government argues with the West that they are forced to pursue a particular policy, like the war in Chechnia, because of the demands of hard-line nationalists, it represents an effort to manipulate westerners. Russia has the right to pursue its own foreign policy, but the West should attempt to see through the rhetoric.

The final argument against a conciliatory line is the evidence that it does not seem to work, at least not as it has been practiced so far. There have been a lot of arguments about how westerners must not push too hard their opposition to the war in Chechnia, because this would strengthen the nationalists. The West did not push very hard, and the war in Chechnia continues to this day. The limiting factor today is not western public opinion, or the opposition of western leadership, but the exhaustion of Russian soldiers.

"Tough Love" Policy
The policy towards Russia ought to be one of "tough love", yet one that differs from the Cold War rhetoric. Russia no longer represents an ideology, which is hostile to the West. The West should say clearly that there is room in the world of western democracies for a very influential and powerful Russia, but that place comes with strings attached. A parallel can be drawn to the post-war experience of Germany. After the defeat of a leader who was hostile to all that the West represented, Germany changed and adopted western political and economic values. After that happened, room was found for them in the West's political establishment.

There should be a clear western position that elections must take place. That might be controversial due to the probable victory of nationalists and communists in the elections. But the danger of the policies they will pursue is outweighed by the threat to democracy. We have no guarantee that a dictatorial or authoritarian ruler will be a good guy. We have no guarantee that democratically elected leaders will be good either, but at least we have the guarantee that by holding a second round of elections, Russia is strengthening the democratic rules of the game and making it much more likely that freely elected communists and nationalists would be forced to give way to another freely elected group in four or five years time. Finally, the West ought to make very clear to the Russians that the countries, which are now independent states, must be treated as truly independent. The West must respond to infringements, not with disapproval, but with very powerful and punitive measures.

**Concluding Remarks**

In conclusion, the approaching elections are a key moment in the development of the entire former communist world. The iron curtain has collapsed. The Soviet communist regime will not be rebuilt. But it is not clear what will be built. Now is the time for the West to influence events with our policy towards Russia and Ukraine. We should pay attention to what is going on.