

Putin's Moment To Seize

By David Ignatius

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MOSCOW -- Vladimir Putin made headlines last weekend when he blasted the Bush administration for its "almost uncontained hyper-use of force" that has created a world where "no one feels safe." If he had been a Democratic presidential candidate, it would have been a standard stump speech. But coming from a Russian president, his remarks had pundits ruminating about a new Cold War.

I was in the audience in Munich when Putin made his speech, and the tone seemed to me more one of resentment than belligerence. He was proud, prickly, defiant -- a leader with all the Russian chips on his shoulder. You could hear his inner voice: We let you dismantle the Berlin Wall. We folded the Warsaw Pact. We dissolved the Soviet Union -- all on your promises that you wouldn't take advantage of our weakness. And what did we get? Nothing! You surrounded us with NATO weapons.

Putin's comments may be jarring to Americans, but they express a bitterness that's widespread here. His generation of Russians grew up in a country that claimed the status of "superpower," and they don't like being taken for granted. Putin, a former KGB officer with a black belt in judo, has been pugnacious in standing up for his country's interests, and Russians seem to like that. In the latest opinion polls, his popularity is well above 70 percent.

I met with one of Putin's top aides yesterday in a building that once housed the headquarters of the Soviet Communist Party. "We want to work together with you," he explained. "But please open your eyes. We will never accept that the sole power in the world will be the U.S."

Russia is back. That's the real lesson I take from Putin's blunt comments. A country that was near collapse after the fall of Soviet communism has regained enough confidence and stability to take a verbal shot at its old rival. "We are emerging from nothing," the Putin aide told me. To explain the Putin phenomenon, the Kremlin's chief ideologue, Vladislav Surkov, recently compared him to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, another president who brought his country back from economic disaster and restored its pride. Like FDR, Putin is using "presidential power to the maximum degree for the sake of overcoming the crisis," Surkov said.

Visiting here for the first time since 1990, I am struck by how everything in Russia is different, and everything is the same. Driving in from the airport, you see the familiar monument marking the farthest German advance in World War II -- a testament to the Red Army's fierce resistance to foreign invasion. And next to it is the Mega Mall with its huge Ikea showroom -- a foreign invasion that, in the end, proved unstoppable.

In Red Square, the somber stones of Lenin's tomb are a reminder of Soviet power. But across the way, in what used to be the drab GUM department store, are glittering displays of the latest fashions from Vuitton and Dior.

What hasn't changed is Russia's neurotic relationship with the West. Russian friends tell me the country feels unloved and unappreciated -- a political doormat that Western powers think they can walk on at will. That's the frustration that surfaced in Putin's speech in Munich.

By Russian standards, this is something of a golden age. Putin recently touted some of the country's achievements: Russian average incomes increased 10 percent in 2006 over the previous year; the economy grew by about 6.7 percent; inflation was in single digits for the first time in many years. Russia's currency reserves rose to \$303 billion, the third-largest in the world, and its "stabilization fund" of energy profits was nearly \$100 billion. All this in a nation that in 1998, on the eve of Putin's presidency, was essentially bankrupt.

The new Russia has a moment of opportunity. America, far from the "unipolar" superpower Putin describes, is weakened by the Iraq war and is badly in need of allies. If Putin is wise, he can play a pivotal role in resolving the Iranian nuclear crisis -- and thereby restore some of Russia's lost diplomatic clout. Or he can keep complaining that nobody appreciates his country -- and let his old rival struggle a while longer in the Iraq quagmire.

Was Putin's Munich manifesto an "invitation to dialogue," as one of his aides told me? Or was it a warning shot from a newly confident Russia that is rather enjoying America's troubles? If Putin wants to play a role in stabilizing the post-Iraq world, he is pushing on an open door. But does he have the vision and political will to seize the moment?

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