

The Valdai Club

by George Friedman - November 1, 2022

Last week, Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke at the Valdai Club, a Moscow-based think tank where serious matters are discussed, and where Russian policy is frequently shaped. I was invited to speak there in December 2014, after the Maidan uprising in Ukraine. The Russians believed it was engineered by American intelligence. I argued that that's a hard thing to pull off without widespread dissatisfaction, and that while the CIA can do many things, fueling a revolution, including feeding, watering and supplying tens of thousands of people in a small space without end, isn't one of them. The U.S. could hand out cookies, as the assistant secretary of state for European affairs did for her own strange reason, but the Maidan uprising was mostly an organically grown rebuke of a staunchly pro-Russia president and the massive corruption that surrounded him. I said that if the uprising was the result of a coup, then it had to be the most blatant coup in history. What I meant, in a wryly sarcastic way, was that the United States did absolutely nothing to hide its enthusiastic support. Russian media took it to mean that it was, in fact, the most blatant coup in history. There's a reason I'm not a diplomat.

The Russians believed it was a Western coup, while the Americans saw it as an expression of political independence. I think both sides were sincere. From the U.S. point of view, a democratic uprising was an appropriate outcome. From the Russian point of view, it was a first step toward destabilizing Russia. The Americans dismissed Russian concerns, of course, but the Russians could not dismiss the idea that this was all but an act of aggression. It was at this point in 2014 that the current war was set in motion.

Moscow concluded that Ukraine, under American "control," was a threat. Eight years later, Russia launched a war intended to impose its will on Ukraine, to make clear to the region that Russia was again a great power and to demonstrate American weakness. It is increasingly unlikely that any of this will be achieved.

Nothing is impossible, but it's far-fetched enough for Putin to redefine the terms of war, which is precisely what he tried to do during his speech at the Valdai Club. Importantly, he did not identify the United States as the key enemy; the enemy, to him, is the West writ large, which had succumbed to a corruption – new secular mores, gender fluidity and other cultural bugaboos – that it is now trying to impose on Russia. That corruption is undermining the West, and Russia is merely standing up to it,

according to Putin. (There was also an explicitly religious angle to the speech.) The Russian efforts in Ukraine are therefore not the whole of the war but merely one dimension of a much broader geopolitical and cultural conflict. Being defeated in Ukraine, then, is not the same as being defeated in this larger struggle. Which makes sense if you define the war in Ukraine as a crusade against the arrogance of the West rather than a place you mean to control.

Putin has since released a statement through his spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, offering to negotiate. This follows the logic of his Valdai speech.

Peskov is Putin's spokesman, and he holds that position because he is careful about what he says. The offer is real, but it still seems as though Putin is setting up a tough negotiation, as evidenced by efforts to block shipments of Ukrainian grain. Having completely reframed the war in Ukraine as a campaign against Western imperialism, he isn't going to be easy to negotiate with, but that doesn't mean he won't negotiate at all.

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