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OP-ED

Cold War all over again?

By Daniel Lukomsky

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Reading the latest headlines transports me into my childhood, which was spent in a country that no longer exists. I grew up in St. Petersburg, then in the USSR, in the mid '70s and '80s. The Cold War was in full swing. The news stories that involve Russia now are almost identical to the ones from that era. Media are reporting that Russian military planes are conducting training missions dangerously close to other aircraft and that Russian troops are conducting an invasion of a neighboring country while trying to convince Russian citizens otherwise. It seems like we went full circle and history is repeating itself. The Cold War is back. Since Russian President Vladimir Putin seems to be using the classic textbook on conducting the Cold War (covert operations; state one thing and do another; spin, spin and spin all events until all grains of truth disappear), maybe we need to re-read that textbook as well, to make sure our strategy is appropriate.

The biggest difference now seems to be that the Russian propaganda machine has been successful in influencing the Russian public. I remember when no one would take Soviet newspapers and television programs seriously — if anything, one would assume that the media are lying and spinning the facts. Now, the Russian public fully trusts its leader, Mr. Putin, and is almost fully supportive of his actions. News reports from almost all sources that do not agree with the official line are dismissed as lies and attempts by the U.S. State Department to shed bad light on the beloved, almost mystical leader. A very small sliver of opposition is branded as an enemy of the state, and their point of view does not make it to any widely read newspaper or TV station. Opposition radio station Echo of Moscow has been struggling to keep its independence under new owners Gazprom Media, Russia's largest media group, while western media is being pushed out of the country.

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This does feel like Russia has traveled back in time — we have a leader who cannot be critiqued or questioned, free media is nowhere to be seen, and Russia is surrounded by imperialist enemies who are all eager to cause harm to the motherland. Deja vu, indeed.

Dealing with your Cold War enemy should be based on the assumption that one thing will be said and another thing will be done. Mr. Putin's actions speak louder than his speeches and more sincerely than his propaganda machine. He is on the quest to divide and conquer, to bring chaos and destruction to his immediate neighbors, so that he can project his influence and revive his imperialistic dreams. His actions in Moldova, Georgia and now Ukraine underline that goal. We are far from the "trust, but verify" stage — Mr. Putin cannot be trusted to do what he says.

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Some things have changed, however, and they need to be noted. Russia's financial state is tied to its oil and gas revenues. Russia's budget is tied to the prices of oil and gas; with the current decrease in prices, Russian economists will have to re-work that budget. Another thing that is different is the very well paid security forces, army and bureaucrats who provide a very strong support for Mr. Putin and will go far to advance and protect his agenda.

The U.S. should do more in assisting Ukraine in this not-really-covert invasion. Ukraine's military is ill equipped to deal with Russian tanks and armored machinery — we should offer assistance with equipment and training. This is the least we can do for the county that we promised security, in the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances of 1994, when Ukraine gave up its nuclear weapons. This is what U.S. and other democratic countries should do to support another democratic state against hostile invasions by its neighbor.

It seems like most of the European Union countries, the U.S., Canada, Japan and Australia are in agreement on what is happening in Ukraine. Let's call it like we see it: We have an invasion and a revival of the Cold War. We need to act and plan accordingly.

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