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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. PITA: Welcome to Intersections, the podcast where two experts explore and explain the important policy issues of the day. We are part of the Brookings Podcast Network and I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

So with us today are the authors of two new books on Russia. It's President Vladimir Putin and they lay out the foundations and history of the political worldview of Russia as a way of addressing the problem of the U.S. and Western incomprehension of this country.

We have Angela Stent, the director of the Center for Eurasian Russian and East European Studies at Georgetown, and also a nonresident senior fellow here at Brookings. She is the author of "Putin's World: Russia Against the West and With the Rest." Thanks for being here Angela.

MS. STENT: Delighted to be on the show.

MS. PITA: And also here is Keir Giles, a senior consulting fellow of the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, otherwise known as Chatham House. You also direct the research and publications program of the Conflict Studies Research Center. He is the author of "Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West." Keir, welcome.

MR. GILES: Hello.

MS. PITA: So one of the common themes of both of your books is the cultural and psychological continuity to the Russian worldview that regardless of the transformative upheavals of the Bolshevik Revolution or the collapse of the Soviet Union, these things didn't really change the way that Russians think about themselves, their leaders, and how the Russian leaders see the West and Russia's role in the world.

I want to ask you to start us off by talking about this continuity throughout Russian history. Angela, would you like to kick us off?

MS. STENT: I certainly will. When I was a graduate student studying

Russian history, I almost came to the conclusion that nothing ever changes in Russian history whether it's under the czars, the Soviets or now of course the post-Soviets.

So part of this has to do with where Russia is located in this Eurasian heartland with very few natural borders. I mean, it has to do with Russian history where Russia's history has always been absorbing the territories next door to sort of increase its own security.

So it's a self-concept of Russia often as a victim of foreign aggression, although if you talk to Russia's neighbors, they would see it differently and say that they were the victims of Russian aggression. It's the self-conception of Russia as a unique Eurasian civilization that is different from and superior to that of the West and that's built on things like communal activities as opposed to the individual.

And it's a view of Russian exceptionalism which now under President Putin at least really only applies to people who are Russian or speak Russian and who live around the world not necessarily only in Russia. It's not like American exceptionalism which is supposed to apply to everyone. But for those people, again, this unique civilization.

MR. GILES: Well, Angela has laid out very clearly some of the key features of a distinctive Russian approach to Russia's place in the world. How it sees itself, how it sees relations between countries and indeed between the state and individuals within those countries.

But I would like to pick up on what you said about the changes at the beginning and end of the communist era. You used an interesting phrase. You said transformative upheavals. And this is one of the key lessons that I think comes out of the research in depth that went into "Moscow Rules" in particular and a number of other studies of Russia beforehand -- that at these events, there was plenty of upheaval but not a lot of transformation. It may have looked as though we had a complete change to the social order, but in fact, at the beginning of the Soviet era you saw persistent features of Russian life and indeed Russian external policy that were preserved throughout the communist

period and reemerged to the surprise of the rest of Europe at the end of communism.

And then of course the 25 years after the end of the Cold War were an anomalous period in Russian history which led many people to think that things had changed. But yet, the basic drivers of Russian foreign policy and Russian domestic policy remain the same.

There is this continuity that you can trace back in the way that Russia responds to external stimuli and indeed to internal developments in its own country, not just back through the 20th century, but much further back into imperial history. Those same themes come through strongly and emerge again today.

MS. PITA: This question of identify, of Russia's identity, whether it's Europe or it's Asian or it's both, it's something unique to itself. It has cycled back and forth throughout history about whether it wanted to be part of Europe, Peter the Great looking to the West, but then it is different. It's not truly part of Europe in many ways. Can you talk a little bit about how it's vacillated back and forth

MS. STENT: Yes. I mean, Russians have been at best reluctant Europeans and Peter the Great who people remember as the great westernizing czar, he said we need Europe for a few years and then we will turn our back on it.

What he wanted to learn from Europe was an economic model. He admired European economic efficiency and he wanted Russia to become a more modern country economically. But he never really wanted Russia to become politically like the European countries were and the monarchies in that day.

And then you've always had for the past few centuries at least, differences between westernizers that are a small minority of educated Russians who wanted to look West, wanted to become more European. And I would say the majority of Russians that looked askance at Europe and was never interested really in its values.

And even though some of the early Bolsheviks, if we are going to talk about the communist revolution, they had lived in the West and they understood the West better.

They still, the minute they overthrew the czars, the way that they introduced what was, after all an ideology and a doctrine derived from a German, Karl Marx, when they introduced that to Russia, they adapted it very much to Russian conditions and it didn't look very much like what its original European inventors had imagined.

MR. GILES: It's true. The shift in attitudes to Europe are one of those stable and predictable cycles that Russia goes through time and time again over history. But of course, because this is Russia, it's not necessarily a cycle between hating and fearing and envying and wanting to emulate Europe because it can be all of those things at the same time.

There is a very strange confusion in the Russian mindset which is one of the reasons why they look for a distinctive definition for Russia itself calling it Eurasian.

But whenever it has been convenient to do so, Russia has sought to either join Europe or become like Europe and this is what lies behind the persistent efforts that you see throughout Russian history to declare or prove that Russia is in fact a European country, whether its stated flat out by Catherine the Great or expanded at length by Vladimir Putin giving a history lesson on Russia which is basically unrecognizable outside Russia itself trying to show how close it is to Europe. But the basic key factor is if Russia really were a European country, they wouldn't need to prove it.

MS. PITA: Right. Even within Putin's own various years of the administration, when he first came in, in the early 2008's and 2009's I believe there was some discussion about should Russia be part of NATO and how what would change or if there should be a new security arrangement. Can you talk about this in his own particular cycle as leader?

MS. STENT: Right. So, I mean, Putin's European experiences that he spent five years as a mid-ranking KGB case officer in East Germany and he speaks German. And so in that sense, I think he feels there is something in him that at least understands Europe, in that case, Eastern Europe.

And when he did first come into office in the year 2000, the conversations he had with Western officials were in the direction of Russia wanting to join the West. He talked to both President Clinton and President Bush about could Russia join NATO and they said well, you know, you have to apply first.

And in fact, you know, in the beginning of the George W. Bush administration, there was a discussion about whether some kind of offer should be made to Russia to join NATO but that never went anywhere.

Putin I think has never said that Russia wanted to join the European Union, although some Russians early on said it did, but Russia's relationship now with the European Union is very difficult. But at the beginning, he looked as if he was interested in joining the West.

But I think it became very apparent quite soon that what he would really have meant by that is if Russia had joined an organization like NATO that that organization could not dictate to Russia its own terms and would not, I think, have given Russia what it wanted which is essentially a recognition for instance that it has a sphere of influence in its neighborhood.

MR. GILES: That's absolutely right. Whenever you see Russia talking about joining institutions or having closer relationships with them, it is never on the terms that those institutions imagine. They don't think of Russia joining NATO as, for example Luxembourg would be, one among many. Instead, joining it as an equal with the organization as a whole and one that can dictate its terms which is a very different definition of the word equality than the one that is applied in for example the EU and NATO.

But you pinned down that conversation about whether Russia could join NATO or the West more broadly too, 2008, 2009. It's one of those instances where those discussions come to public attention at a specific point and in fact, they echo back much further in time. Simply to a time when not many people were paying attention.

The conversations about Russia's relationship with the West once it had

emerged from the Soviet Union started really from the very first days of independence and there were every quick realizations that yes, it might in theory be nice to join NATO, it might in theory be desirable to join the Western community of nations but this was a fundamentally unsuitable relationship because NATO, the West in general, was not prepared to meet Russia halfway.

Russia wanted to impose its own terms on the relationship which would have been fundamentally unacceptable in economic and moral and social and political terms to the West as a whole. And this is one of the factors that feeds into this repetitive cycle of disappointment in the relationship on both sides fueled by this lack of institutional memory and lack of recognition that the problems are deep seated and do not for example arise for the first time when President Putin makes an unusually forthright speech at the Munich Security Conference.

MS. PITA: Yes, there's very different concepts about who gets to have sovereignty, and in Europe it's based on well, everybody gets sovereignty and for Russia its more are you big enough and powerful enough to demand sovereignty. Can you talk a little bit about that?

MS. STENT: Yes. So I think in both of our books we talk about the fact that Putin has this concept of absolute sovereignty and I have heard him say at these annual gatherings that I attend where he speaks, several times that there are only three or four truly sovereign countries in the world, Russia, China, India, not really the United States. Why?

We're not fully sovereign because we have allies and at least until now, we have to sort of listen to our allies and interact with them. So for Russia, and again, it's not just Putin, it goes back many centuries. It's the idea of absolute sovereignty, of nobody else being able to tell you what you have to do.

And the other side of that is, is that smaller countries only have limited sovereignty. So if Russia is absolutely sovereign, Ukraine clearly in the Russian view isn't absolutely sovereign. It has limited sovereignty.

We know that in the communist era there was such a thing as a doctrine of limited sovereignty which had to do with the Soviet Union's relationship with Eastern Europe. But I think it's a fundamental tenet, it's the larger the country and the more sovereign the better and alliances in this view really aren't very good because they restrict your freedom of maneuver.

MR. GILES: And all of this has very serious implications for security in Europe in particular. Because it goes to the roots of the conflict of understanding between Russia and the West, the status of the frontline states which Russia sees should have the sovereignty in the sense of choices of foreign and security policy limited in order not to pose a challenge to Russia.

That even extends to economic policy because if countries join the EU with its transparency and rule of law and open markets, then that poses a fundamental challenge to the Russian way of making money and is inimical to the Russian leadership.

Meanwhile, at the same time, the West thinks that these countries should be independent and free and sovereign to the extent that they can determine their own policies and decide for example, whether they wish to join an association agreement with the EU which for Russia was a trigger for seizing Crimea and starting a war against Ukraine.

MS. PITA: Talking about Russia's relationship with this, what they call the "near abroad" states, Angela, can you talk a little bit about the different experiences that these littoral countries had as the Soviet Union fell apart and how that informs their relationships today?

MS. STENT: Sure. You know, so we have a paradox here. On the one hand, some countries like Ukraine, like Georgia and a number of others wanted to be independent of Russia and were very happy when the Soviet Union collapsed. Other countries like the central Asian countries didn't really want independence from Russia and they had independence thrust upon them.

But what we have seen now in nearly 30 years is that even though there are

obviously great tensions and hostility between say Russia and Ukraine, Russia and Georgia, there is a common pattern in the way that the domestic systems of all of the post-Soviet countries, if we exclude the Baltic States of course, but all of the rest of the post-Soviet countries have developed and that really is a legacy of both the communist period, and I suppose the czarist imperial rule too.

So in all of these countries domestically resemble each other and Russia more than they do say Europe, Western Europe or any other country. And that is you have countries that are run by a small clique of people where those people in power own most of the assets in the country. There is no rule of law discernible. There is a great deal of corruption and there are also links still between Russia oligarchs and political figures and intelligence people and those in the other post-Soviet countries.

So on the one hand, there can be antagonism towards Russia, these countries are striving to be independent, but their domestic systems still make them quite vulnerable to Russian influence.

MR. GILES: And if you look at the other side of those relationships, if you trace them back to their hub which is Moscow, you see a syndrome which I think is not only post-Soviet but also more broad. It is a post-imperial syndrome of the kind that other post imperial powers have gone through and got over.

The problem is that a generation or a generation and a half after the end of empire and this was an end of empire postponed, other European powers lost theirs in the years following the Second World War, Russia has continued right up until 1991. Russia has not gone through the same adjustment of mindset and attitudes to its former imperial dominions that had for example Britain, France, Portugal, each of which had a specific traumatic event which changed both public opinion and government policy and enforced the recognition that actually you were no longer a great power which could project into your former domains.

Russia has not gone through that shock because all of its military

campaigns to date have been successful and have resolved challenges in their favor with very little costs or consequences. So, I think we have yet to see the kind of event that would trigger a reassessment of Russia's role particularly with regard to the near abroad.

MS. PITA: You talked about just the public disbelief that when Gorbachev agreed to the breakup of the U.S.S.R. that no one could believe that this had happened willingly. And so this feeds into a lot of the conspiracy theory thinking amongst a lot of the Russian people. Can you talk a little bit about that angle?

MR. GILES: Well, we do have to be a little bit cautious especially when looking at current portrayals of the end of the Cold War because I think this is one of the episodes in history which has been subjected to reinvention more than once since the end of the Soviet empire.

And so if you look at the current descriptions of what happened at the end of the Cold War in Russia, in some cases they pay very little relation to what was actually really happening at the time. And I'm referring not just to the attitudes toward what the West was doing, now with the narrative as to the West was exploiting and trampling Russia at all costs. It was stripping it bare and was enforcing a very silent treaty on it.

But whereas anybody that was in Moscow at the time will remember the floods of humanitarian aid that were coming in because Russia was unable to feed itself without Western help. All of that has been erased from the historical record just as effectively as, for example, Lend-Lease during the Second World War.

So what young Russians today see when they look at the history of that period is as far away from the reality as for example during Soviet times what was being taught about the history of the Second World War. It's a syndrome which is severely challenging when we are looking for any kind of meaningful dialogue with Russians in general about the history of their country.

MS. STENT: If I can add something to that, a few years ago I taught at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, a class on U.S.-Russian relations. This is

an educational establishment directly under the control of the Foreign Ministry.

Not one of my students, most of whom had been born either after the Soviet Union collapsed or shortly before, not one of them believed that the Soviet Union had collapsed because of its own internal contradictions and its own weaknesses. They all believed that the United States and particularly its intelligence services, with a little help from the British, were responsible for the collapse of the Soviet Union.

And so what I find very discouraging is, you know, we often talk about the hope in the younger generation. But at least among these educated young Russians, people who wanted to work in the government or in business and things like that, to have at that young age a complete misunderstanding of what happened.

There has been no attempt to work through the past, to do what the Germans did after the end of World War II, which is to really understand what had led to Hitler and then seek to overcome it, and it took a long time. There has been very little attempt to do that in Russia. There's some NGO's who in fact have been valiantly trying to do that.

But the further away we get from the Soviet collapse, the more the story changes and there is really no incentive anymore in Putin's Russia to approach history honestly.

MR. GILES: Absolutely. I think there was briefly an attempt to consider Russians history in its entirety and without the propaganda but then Russians didn't like what they saw. And so instead of confronting issues in national identity, they have decided to ignore them and retreat into the comfortable mythologies.

MS. PITA: This is probably a good point to bring up, the question about how Russians get their information. The central government has of course been consolidating a lot of the traditional media, the TV, the newspapers. What does internet access look like in Russia? And I understand that there is also a new bill, that sovereign internet bill they're calling it that's wending its way through the Duma. Can you talk about

how that's working?

MR. GILES: What does internet access look like in Russia? It depends to whom. To the security services it looks like a severe threat to national security and it always has done. This is a country that has always seen unfettered access to information, whether it is information coming from overseas or sharing of information between ordinary Russians, as a serious problem. Because this allows the spread of ideas and opinions and even facts which are not approved of by the Russian government.

Again, this echoes back throughout history. This is a country which repeatedly throughout its history has completely banned the import or possession of foreign books because they are so dangerous.

Now back in the mists of time, I wrote an undergraduate essay in Russian which was entitled in Russian, "Does Information Technology Pose a Critical Security Threat to the U.S.S.R." Information technology at this time meaning faxes, photocopiers. I don't remember the full text of the essay but obviously it was brilliantly argued and it was in perfect Russian (laughter) but the main thrust was yes, of course it is because it is exactly the same challenge that they've always been fighting.

Turns out in the end, the KGB agreed with me and in the mid-90's when Russia was actively considering whether or not to actually adopt the internet, the FSB or the FSB and all of the security agencies that were in charge of information security argued strongly against it. They said no, don't touch it. This is really bad for Russia.

They lost that argument. They have now won it and they have now enforced on internet service providers and internet companies a vision of information security which for a long time was resisted because it's basically incompatible with how the internet works. The ISP's were saying no you cannot restrict the free flow of information across national borders because you will break the internet. To which President Putin and the security services have said no, you will do it. Go ahead and break it.

And that is the roots of the internet sovereignty bill that is making its way

through the legislative process now. A way of internalizing the internet and making sure that there is no communication with the outside world because Russia construes that as a threat.

MS. STENT: And I would say that if you only watch television to get your news in Russia, you would have a very distorted view of the world. You would think it's a very dangerous place, the United States is about to unleash a nuclear war on Russia and you would really have this severely distorted understanding of the world.

Now obviously younger people don't just watch television. There's one alternative radio station, the Echo of Moscow that people can listen to. I'm not quite sure, I think the demographics there however are older, and they do use the internet.

But even those of them that use the internet, there is also a lot of material as we know on the internet that is false and so you can get all kinds of conspiracy theories also on the internet before it begins to be controlled.

MR. GILES: There was a lot of hope that because young people were using the internet, therefore it would be easier to communicate with them. Unfortunately, you can be in your own bubble on the internet to the extent that Russians will talk to Russians. They may not have that much interaction with the outside world.

Russia has put in place a series of soft filters trying to restrict access to information from outside, even before the current radical measures to cut it off all together. The result of that is that Russians may be in a self-contained information space even though they are sharing notionally the same communications and social media platforms that their Western counterparts have.

MS. PITA: So Russia is not nationally trying to re-invent the China model of internet? So it's planning on keeping some of the same assets and the way the internet works? Or is it going to like the complete China model of all their own social media and all their own platforms for everything?

MR. GILES: Actually it's slightly more complex than that. There has been a drive to replicate social media platforms within Russia itself but it is not generally necessary.

Now Russia is thinking not in terms of a firewall where you keep out information of which you disapprove, it's considering instead completely disconnecting itself from the internet so that no information at all comes in and out.

And as always, with Russia there are a number of different perfectly good reasons why they want to do this. It is not only information security, making sure that the information that reaches your own citizens is only that that is approved by the state.

It is also empowering Russia to undertake information warfare against other countries without suffering fallout. And in this context it is specifically the means that they have been probing for and aggressively researching of achieving information dominance by cutting off target populations from the internet. Targeting subsidy infrastructure, space, physical communications infrastructure on land, mapping out fiber optic connections in the United States for example, to see how you can restrict people's access to information.

Now that causes fallout. So what do you do? You make sure that you can isolate yourself from the effects before you actually need to hit the switch.

MS. PITA: Wow. What would this do with Russia's economy? They're already so dependent on their natural gas and oil resource. Angela, you have written about how a lot of Putin's advisors have been trying to get him to diversify the economy a little bit more for a long time over the years and that just hasn't happened.

If you cut off the internet access with the rest of the world is that going to further isolate their economy? How does this play together?

MR. GILES: Yes, it will have a massive economic impact in Russia and of course on the rest of the world as well. Because let's not forget, so many of the financial transactions that go on second by second throughout the day depend on those reliable communications. Once you cut them you will have unpredictable effects throughout the global economy.

But again, you have to see this in a broader context which is Russia isolating itself from the effect of protracted conflict. Preparing for conflict in the West and

ensuring that it can withstand it. It has had now just over a decade of an intense program of rearmament and transformation of reorganization of its military which is underway long before the West actually noticed.

We have to see that in the same context as societal mobilization and this preparation for ensuring information security and protecting our economy against not just the fallout of wanton acts against the internet but also against the effects of conflict and sanctions and any further punitive measures that the West might wish to undertake.

Russia has been conflict-proofing its economy in a broad way since long before we actually noticed we were in conflict with them at all.

MS. PITA: I think I'm going to jump ahead to the questions about the recommendations that you both made for -- whether its U.S. or Western -- policymakers. I think one of the things I took away from both of your books, especially from yours, Keir, was just this very grim and pessimistic view of what potential there is for working with Russia on these issues. So, let's go to the recommendations part about how does one begin to cope with this and what steps does the West take?

MS. STENT: Well, I think the first thing you have to do is you have to understand that this is what Russia is like and accept what it is and not think that it is going to change. So, you have to give up any thought that say through closer economic ties with Russia which I think we believed early on in the 1990's that that would somehow have a beneficial effect on political relations which it hasn't.

And I think you have to also understand that Russia is not going to stop doing things like trying to interfere in our elections. We know that they were interfering in the midterm elections until the day before. We've had stories about that in the press and then in fact we countered that here.

So, you have to accept that and I think what is not a good idea is to try resets and I think, you know, every certain U.S. government that has come into office since the Soviet collapse has thought that there is some magic way of finding a better way and if

only we could find that then we can interact better with Russia. There is always this optimism.

Well, we know at least on the basis of the last 30 years, we won't go back further that that, that all of these resets end in disappointment. By the way the Russians would sort of say the same thing. So, there is a limit to what you can do.

First of all, we have to have better defenses, certainly in terms of social media and what Russia did and has done. We have to have better ways of responding to that. The same is true obviously in the cyber sphere. We have to have better defenses.

We have to also accept however, that if we are not prepared for instance in the case of Ukraine to respond militarily because that would be -- get into a direct conflict with the Russians, we then have to rethink what it is that we are trying to do and what we can in fact achieve with Russia's neighbors, with a country like Ukraine of which Russia occupies part of that. And so we have to rethink that.

And I think in the U.S. we don't have very clear idea of what kind of policy towards Russia we want. We have a sanctions policy and I think we can argue about how effective that is. And now we appear to have a policy where we are very skeptical about the future of arms control agreement.

So I think the best we can do now is, I think we do have to continue to work with Russia on areas that are of mutual interest to us. And I do actually think, you know, nuclear arms and arms control is an issue where we have to at least try to maintain some kind of balance and talk about strategic stability there.

Our militaries are coordinating in Syria, the chiefs of general staff meet, there are very few channels of communication open but I think we have to focus on those issues where we do have mutual interests and then try and at least talk to the Russians. But I think we should have no illusions that we are going to see any results soon.

And I think the other thing is you can be realistic, you can be flexible and then I think we always have to remember that the Kremlin doesn't speak for all of the

Russian population and to the extent that that is possible, although it's becoming more difficult, maintaining some kind of channels of communication open to Russian civil society. But this is going to be a challenge that extends really beyond Putin's term in office.

MR. GILES: All of this is absolutely correct. Strong defenses and coherent policy towards Russia and to its neighbors and keeping open the channels of communication with Russia and seeking those very few opportunities that do exist for working together on mutual challenges are all critically important.

But the underlying factor that will make all of those work sensibly is abandoning this practice of allowing optimism to triumph over evidence and experience which we have seen time and again, cycle after cycle in the post-Cold War era.

So, you said that it sounded a bit grim and pessimistic. If you finished my book feeling grim and pessimistic, then my work is done. Because one of our senior colleagues tells me that my professional métier is as the crusher of hope. I quite enjoy that because the persistent experience that we have seen is when you allow yourself to give way to hope that change will be for the better in Russia, that society is developing in the right direction, that Russia actually does want to be our friend after all and it's all a misunderstanding. Then you lead not only to disappointment as Angela said but also to deeper and deeper crisis at each iteration of the relationship.

MS. PITA: It seems like a rather dangerous disconnect amongst U.S. policy. Angela, you wrote that there is really three different Russia policies. There is the White House's view of Russia, there is the rest of the executive branch, and then there is Congress.

And, Keir, you actually, you dedicated your book -- I'm going to find this dedication and read it because it really entertained me so very, very much. "This book is dedicated to all those career U.S. government officials who are working hard to build and deliver a sensible policy on Russia while hoping that President Trump doesn't notice." Which is just, so wonderful black humor.

Can you talk a little bit about the dangers of this disconnect, these different policies amongst the U.S. and sort of how do we deal with that?

MS. STENT: Well, I mean, the danger of the disconnect is you have a president who has made it clear right from the beginning, and we can speculate why, that he wanted a better relationship with Russia, that only he can make a deal with the Russians, that he understands Putin and Putin understands him. And therefore he has been very forward-looking.

And we saw last year after he met or the first time with Kim Jong Un and that appeared to him to be successful, he immediately insisted on having a summit with President Putin even though his colleagues, the officials in charge of this didn't really want it. And then we know what happened at that meeting which was that he essentially said that he had no reason to doubt President Putin's denial of Russian election interference, completely disagreeing with his intelligence services who said the exact opposite thing.

And so the danger of that is then, that the Russians look at Trump -- even thought I think they probably have buyer's remorse because they didn't quite get what they thought they would get by helping him win, if we believe they did, because he hasn't been able to deliver, because of the domestic inquiries into this country.

But the Russians still I think hope and President Putin never criticizes Trump personally seen though he criticizes the U.S. and he blames the American people for not letting Trump do his job properly. So they're still hoping that they will get something out of this, although I'm not sure that they will.

And then on the other hand, you have the people, the senior advisors who work on Russia, some of whom are really excellent and understand the country very well who have been pursuing a harder policy, a tough-minded policy toward Russia but ultimately can of course can be overruled by the president himself.

And I will say one other thing about U.S. policy toward Russia. We also need to work with our allies, with our European allies on all of these issues. And I was at the

Munich Security Conference a few weeks ago and the disconnect between for instance what the U.S. vice president told the Europeans about all these things and what the Congress did, about NATO and about what their goals were was there to be seen.

And I think in some ways the impact on our allies is worse, the impact of this division between the president himself and the rest of the administration, the executive branch and the Congress is worse than any impact it has on Russia. Because the more the Russians look and see the NATO countries squabbling amongst themselves and the United States President saying he doesn't really understand why we need NATO anymore, it emboldens the Russians to do whatever they want to do.

MR. GILES: I have to be cautious when answering questions like this. I should point out that that dedication along with much of the rest of the book was written over a year ago before the current trend became apparent of foreigners who comment adversely on current political developments in the United States suffering consequences, ranging from tense conversations with CBP when they try to come up, back into the country, on up to far more serious measures.

So I am going to duck the question largely but let me focus on the good news. Which is that the effect on the allies that Angela was just referring to is not as austere as you might imagine because a lot of the allies are judging by actions rather than tweets which is actually something being specifically asked to do by the forward representatives of the United States whether it is in diplomacy, in the armed forces: pay attention to what we do, not what is being said.

Now yesterday, here in D.C. there was gathering of council members of the Nordic Defense Cooperation Initiative, NORDEFECO, which it was heartening to see that nobody was referring to White House declaratory policy when they were making their assessments of the United States' role in providing for and guaranteeing Nordic security.

So there is practical evidence of the fact that what is tweeted is not actually governing assessments of what United States might actually do.

MS. PITA: Angela, I think for a final question I want to come back to something you just mentioned in your previous response about what the Russian viewpoint of the U.S. and Russian characterization of the West, that it will continue even post-Putin.

Is there any possible speculation about what that is going to look like? About what is expected at the end of his last term?

MS. STENT: Well, first of all, we don't know whether he is going to step back from the Kremlin, leave the Kremlin in 2024. And I know plenty of Russians who think that he won't and that he will be there until the very end. So there may be an arranged succession, a managed succession like there was from the Yeltsin to Putin and then in the interlude with Medvedev, but we really don't know that.

But I think what we have to understand is people tend to personalize Russia and Putin for understandable reasons because it is a personalist system, and he is the most powerful individual in Russia, although he is certainly not all powerful. I mean, there are also restraints on what he does.

But it looks to me as if even let's say he were to leave office in 2024, in the immediate post-Putin period, you would still have a very similar system even though the individual himself is gone. The way that the country functions. Now it's possible that as time goes on you would have a newer generation of people who want something different.

But you just have to remember that in any managed transition away from Putin to another leader, that will only work out if not only President Putin but the people who support him that their sort of possession of assets and their liberty and everything is guaranteed. In other words, they wouldn't let him go without that. And if that's the case, then I think it becomes more of a challenge to change the system.

MR. GILES: This is a problem that we grapple with constantly and it comes back to the theme I chatter on about incessantly, the combatting optimism. We have to fight quite hard against the assumption that all of the problems in the Russia relationship are embodied in one man and that if President Putin were to magically disappear this afternoon,

that everything would suddenly be better.

I think there is no evidence for that whatsoever. I agree entirely with Angela. This system will continue for a period after Putin disappears for all sorts of perfectly good reasons. I would also suggest that just because Putin goes does not mean that things are going to get better in the long term either. Because President Putin is far from the worst leader that Russia could have or has had.

We are, despite the current drift towards authoritarianism, which a lot of people are quite rightly upset about, we are still in a position and a period of unrepresented liberalism in Russian history. There has never been anything like this before when Russians, if they mind their own business and go about their daily lives without interfering with the state, are free from fear of being randomly imprisoned and murdered.

MS. STENT: That's the standard you have to use to judge it by.

MS. PITA: Right. Yes. Well, I'm -- this is a bad thing. I'm always inclined to try and find some tiny shred of silver lining to hang on to.

MR. GILES: Don't work in our job then.

MS. PITA: Don't, yeah. No. Well, for more of really amazing insights and background of the history of Russia and the relationship that Russia has with the rest of the world, again I want to recommend Angela Stent's book, "Putin's World: Russia Against the West and With the Rest" and Keir Giles' book, "Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West." Really very valued insights for everyone. Keir and Angela, thank you very much for being here today.

MR. GILES: Thank you.

MS. STENT: Thank you.

MS. PITA: All right. Thanks for listening. You can find more episodes of Intersections and the rest of the Brookings Podcast Network on Apple or Google podcasts, on Spotify, Castbox, Stitcher or your other favorite podcast app. And don't forget to follow us on Twitter @policypodcasts for news and updates.

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