

Who Is Starting the New Cold War?

By [Yuri Reshetnikov](#)

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There has been much talk over the past year or so in the world media about the real prospect of a new Cold War taking shape between Russia and the West. Policy-makers in Russia and in the West have dejected the idea as being exaggerated. Yet the issue flared up again at the recent G-8 summit in Germany earlier this month and it has persisted ever since.

Anatole Kaletsky writing in the Times of London at the time of the latest G-8 summit had some interesting observations about the prevailing mood at this annual gathering of the 8 most industrialized countries in the world.

“Casting Russia as the enemy suits everyone at this year’s summit,” he noted in his article. “It distracts attention from President Bush’s contempt for Europeans on climate change and his geopolitical blunders. It helps Angela Merkel and Tony Blair to disguise the failure of their Atlanticist diplomacy while allowing Nicolas Sarkozy to sound tough, without being anti-American. It gives all the European leaders at the summit a chance to “show solidarity” with the EU’s newly admitted Eastern members without making any concessions on the discriminatory economic and labor policies that will keep these countries firmly in their place for decades ahead?”

Enjoying an unprecedented popularity in his own country, Russian President Vladimir Putin, who is leaving his post next year, appears only to benefit domestically from Western criticism of his policies. He is now widely viewed at home as the first political leader in a long time who can stand up for Russia’s interests against what the Times described as “an inherently hostile world”. And despite Putin’s generally distorted image in the West, he comes off as a true Russian patriot in his home country, which is what counts for a leader who has made his political ambitions known beyond his current presidential post.

Anatole Kaletsky in his article tried to look at the West through Russian eyes as it is perceived in this country. “Despite all the past sentimental rhetoric of Western politicians describing Russia as a friend and “strategic partner”, US and European behavior has consistently treated Russia more as an enemy than an ally,” he points out. “Russia has been told it could never join NATO or the EU and Mr. Putin’s invitation to G8 summits is scant consolation for the denial of WTO membership and the continuation of US trade sanctions dating back to the Cold War.” Also, “why shouldn’t the Russians worry about Western armies and missiles on their borders, when these contribute to a process of territorial encroachment similar to what Napoleon and Hitler failed to achieve by cruder means?” The conclusion Anatole Kaletsky makes is this: “If we are going to treat the Russians as enemies, let us at least try to see the world from their point of view.”

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