I have been asked to begin our discussion of Russia. I thought I might do so by putting before you a proposition that I think has a lot to do with the European project that we’ve heard so much about during the course of the day and it also has a lot to do with the right answer to the question of whether there is a meaningful place for the Russian Federation in that project. The proposition is this: that there is an organic connection between any country’s internal policies and its political structures and its external behavior. That might be called the realpolitik rationale for refuting the notion that the internal affairs of a country are only its own business. They are also the business of the international community.

The EU member states have in common, of course, a set of values and norms and institutions of governance that we have heard referred to frequently during the course of the day, and the same can be said of those countries whose citizens belong to the Trilateral Commission. Quite a few of you here today, as full members of the Trilateral Commission, were when the Commission was founded 30 years ago inmates in Stalin's prison house of nations. Yet, the largest of the post-Soviet states, which is to say Russia, is represented not by a delegation here today, but by a distinguished individual, sitting here on my left, an invited guest. He is a champion of what might be called EU, and indeed Trilateralist, values, yet he is neither a member of the Commission nor any longer a member of the Russian Parliament. I would suggest that is triply unfortunate. It’s unfortunate for Russia, it’s unfortunate for Europe and it’s unfortunate for us. What’s unfortunate for Grigory Yavlinsky, he will say for himself in a few minutes.

But my point is that Russia is a paradoxical case. It was in a very real sense not only present at the creation of the New Europe, and I use that phrase advisedly, but it was also instrumental in creating the conditions for the New Europe. Which is to say the miracle of what’s happened in Central Europe over the past 15 years would not have happened, certainly would not have happened in that timeframe were it not for what had happened in Russia. And yet while Russia has come a long way in the right direction in many respects in those 15 years, it has also taken some steps in very much the wrong direction, and particularly in the last several years when the Kremlin has cracked down on free radio and television, rolled back at least some aspects of Glasnost, which is to say the policy of being honest about both the past and the present. The Kremlin has also used, to the point of abuse, executive power, including at the expense of an independent judiciary. And it seems to be in the process of creating an incipient or virtual one-party state.

I would suggest that there are four reasons for these worrisome trends.

The first is institutional. The only structures of the old Soviet state that survived largely intact the collapse of the Soviet state were and remain the power ministries and the security services. The second reason is related to the first and is personal to the present president of Russia. Vladimir Putin is very much an alumnus of those security institutions that remain so intact and of him, like most of us, it can be said that he is who he was. His own instincts and the people on whom he relies reinforce each other, and they also thrive in Russia’s current political culture.
That brings me to the third factor. It is too simple to call what is happening in Russia today a return to dictatorship. I say that because Vladimir Putin’s policies are popular. He is a personification as well as beneficiary of what has been called “illiberal democracy.” Moreover, he has in a very real sense both an electoral and a parliamentary mandate for illiberal democracy. That unfortunate condition is not embedded somehow in Russia’s genes or in its stars. Rather, it is rooted largely in recent historical experience. Prime Minister Belka this morning referred to the reform fatigue from which the Polish people have suffered to some extent in recent years. That syndrome is much more advanced in Russia. In Russia today, the word reform as well as words like privatization, liberalization and democracy might as well have four letters in the Russian language.

The fourth and final factor which I think needs to be borne in mind is that Russia is and will for the foreseeable future remain out of area for the European Union—which is to say beyond its gravitational pull. Prime Minister Belka talked of how the prospect of EU membership focused, fostered and accelerated the process of internal reform here in Poland. The Copenhagen criteria for membership in the European Union worked in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and the Baltic States, and they are now working in Bulgaria, Romania and, crucially, in Turkey. But they are not working in Russia. Those criteria, those norms, are admission requirements for a club that Russia neither feels eligible for nor necessarily wants to join. One result of that is that western leaders have relatively limited leverage, even if they should choose to use to the maximum the leverage they have when they meet with President Putin in EU-Russia summit or at G8 meetings like the one coming up in Sea Island [June 8-10].

So we have a new version of an old question. What’s going on in Russia? Why is it happening? And then there is the Lenin corollary, “What is to be done?”

We are going to continue this discussion with observations from two geographical perspectives from opposite ends of the Eurasian landmass that Russia so dominates. From the northwest corner, we have Max Jakobson, a Finn who has studied his country’s large neighbor for a very long time. From the northeast corner, Koji Watanabe will bring to bear what he has learned not only from the vantage point of Tokyo, but also from that of the Japanese Embassy in Moscow. Then we will have a response from Grigory Yavlinsky, who has fought the good fight for liberal democratic values from inside the Russian political system, a fight that is far from over, not least because he is still very much in the fray.

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