



By: **Carl Bildt**

The USSR's squalid legacy



Many gasped when Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov landed in Anchorage, Alaska, for the Trump-Putin summit **wearing** a sweater with the letters CCCP – the Cyrillic acronym for the Soviet Union.

Obviously, this was no accident. But what was Lavrov hoping to convey?

His intended message, presumably, was that today's Russia is as great and powerful as the USSR once was; that Vladimir Putin has restored his country's status as a superpower deserving of global respect.

Nostalgia for the Cold War era – when the Soviet Union and the United States were the world's only two superpowers – has consumed the Kremlin ever since the Soviet empire crumbled.

Lavrov himself is very much a creature of the past. Though he is fluent in the language of multilateral diplomacy (owing to a previous posting at the United Nations in New York), his penchant for bullying has distinct Soviet roots. He seems sincere in his belief that things were better when the USSR existed.

His frequent **trips** to Pyongyang (North Korea) in recent years cannot have been enjoyable.

When a **summit** with the US president on what was once Russian territory presented itself, he made sure to pack his old sweater.

Yeltsin raised the Russian flag, not the Soviet one

The message will not have been well received in countries that were once locked behind the Iron Curtain.

The Russian foreign minister has confirmed the worst **fears** of Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians about Putin's true endgame, as well as causing disquiet across the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia.

These countries remember the Soviet Union

not as a splendid empire, but as a prison.

In fact, it was discontent among non-Russians that finally triggered the USSR's collapse.

Boris Yeltsin raised the Russian flag, not the Soviet one

As political repression eased following Mikhail Gorbachev's attempts to reform the decaying Soviet system in the 1980s, it became impossible to reconcile these nationalities' aspirations with the Kremlin-centric system. The Soviet Union had to end for its peoples to be free.

The same was true for Russia. Boris Yeltsin **raised** the Russian flag, not the Soviet one, because he envisioned a future in which his country had shed the burdens of empire.

He wanted a Russia ruled by Russians, and that goal could not be pursued within a complex, expensive array of imperial structures.

The Soviet Union was the past, whereas Russia, Ukraine, and all the other Soviet republics pursuing independence were the future.

Agreement to respect the old borders

It was not an unreasonable vision. Following the Soviet Union's collapse, there was an immediate agreement to respect the old borders between the former republics, to prevent new conflicts.

When Russia responded with extreme brutality to Chechnya's effort to declare independence, the rest of the world respect the Kremlin's claim that the breakaway enclave lies within Russian borders.

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After this, there was no reason why Russia and Ukraine – and all of the Soviet Union's other formerly captive nations – could not live in harmony.

Of course, there was always going to be some competition, perhaps even intense rivalry; but these dynamics could have been healthy.

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Imperial nostalgia

But it didn't turn out that way. Imperial nostalgia started to creep back into the Kremlin.

Threatened by democratic developments in multiple former Soviet states, Putin's regime grew increasingly authoritarian.

Over time, a more democratic, liberalizing Ukraine came to be seen not as a partner, but as a danger to Russia's decidedly illiberal, anti-democratic regime.



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Putin started to describe Ukraine as “anti-

Russia,” even though the Ukrainians never represented any such position. They simply wanted Ukraine to be Ukraine.

It is no surprise that Lavrov's sweater would be taken as a threat in any country where Soviet satellite regimes were once installed. But it should also be seen as a threat to Russia itself.

If the Kremlin continues to be motivated by imperial nostalgia, Russia will never be able to be Russia. Destroying and attempting to occupy Ukraine will burden it for generations.

The Kremlin's last-gasp imperial project might be sustained if China sees Russia as a useful **satellite** (it does have raw materials and energy, as well as a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, but not much more).

But it will have foregone a future as a relatively peaceful, prosperous modern nation-state – a goal that was well within its means to achieve.

The Soviet Union was a massive failure. It emerged in 1922 promising a bright new future for mankind, but when it collapsed seven decades later, Western countries had to fly in emergency humanitarian assistance.

In the USSR's heyday, Nikita Khrushchev boasted that it would “bury” the West; in fact, it was digging its own grave.

We should all thank Lavrov for reminding us of this squalid legacy. The nostalgia he channeled in Alaska is a threat to many, including ordinary Russians.

Carl Bildt is a former prime minister and foreign minister of Sweden.