Putin’s Russia: The Road to Dictatorship and War

On April 2, David Satter gave a REEEC Distinguished Lecture entitled “Putin’s Russia: The Road to Dictatorship and War.” David Satter is a graduate of both the University of Chicago and Oxford University, and he has extensive knowledge of Russia. Between 1976 and 1982, he served as the Moscow correspondent of the Financial Times of London. Presently, he serves as a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and is also a fellow at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. His books include Age of Delirium: The Decline and Fall of the Soviet Union, Darkness at Dawn: The Rise of the Russian Criminal State, and It Was a Long Time Ago and It Never Happened Anyway: Russia and the Communist Past.

Mr. Satter’s lecture provided a critical examination of Putin’s government. He began with a discussion of the recent murder of Boris Nemtsov, a member of the opposition, which took place in Moscow. He emphasized the suspicious nature of the murder in that it occurred in an area of the city which is constantly under heavy surveillance. Thus, it is questionable how the culprits could have gotten away. In addition, he mentioned that five days passed before any arrests were made.

Next, he turned to a discussion of Putin’s recent declaration that he is prepared to use Russia’s nuclear arsenal to defend the annexation of Crimea. Mr. Satter stated that this statement runs counter to Russian military doctrine, which states that nuclear weapons can be employed only when Russia is threatened. Therefore, Mr. Satter believes that Russia is “behaving aggressively” and demonstrating “unpredictable behavior.” Putin’s behavior could have enormous consequences for the wider European community. As Mr. Satter mentioned, if Russia attacks the Baltics, NATO will be faced with a challenging decision. It will either have to engage with Russia militarily or admit that it is unable to defend its members.

Given these troubling developments, Mr. Satter next discussed the reasons that caused this situation to transpire and how Putin obtained such tremendous power. It essentially began with the fall of communism in Russia. He stated that the United States and Russia are “natural allies” and have “the same interests.” However, a “criminal regime” gained power in Russia, and this government is unable to work cooperatively with the West. This regime grew out of the privatization process in the 1990s, and the selling of Russian enterprises. He described that there was no legal basis for this process which led to both bribery and “criminal intimidation.” While the population received vouchers, they did not really understand the investment process, and many ultimately sold them. As a result, a wealthy class of oligarchs emerged in Russia who gathered a tremendous amount of the national industry. This led to a major decline in the Russian GDP, and it generated a “moral and physiological crisis.” He discussed how under communism people had a sense of comfort, but during the tumultuous privatization process, people proved unable to “adapt.” As a result, people increasingly turned against the Yeltsin government, and his approval rating sunk exceptionally low.

Amidst this bleak condition in Russian society, apartments were bombed in 1999. This led to
the Second Chechen War. Mr. Satter emphasized that Putin proved able to capitalize on this war, and he emerged as “a national hero,” and soon became the new Russian president. However, Mr. Satter explained that an unexploded bomb was found outside of Moscow. This bomb was soon linked directly to the Russian FSB. In response, the government stated that it was a fake, and that they were simply performing a “vigilance test.” Mr. Satter questioned this statement because there was no need to test the Russian people given the panic and fear generated by the bombings.

Mr. Satter explained that the Russian people are now beginning to see that Putin is an illegitimate president. He discussed some of the ways in which Putin is displaying dictatorial power. For example, the Putin government controls elections and intimidates voters. Putin’s party United Russia has done exceptionally well because Putin has been able to “manipulate elections.”

From a legal perspective, there is an absence of true justice as the executive has control over the legislative, and the Russian people are unable to challenge the system through the legal process. Mr. Satter explained that people tolerated this situation before because their standard of living had increased following the Yeltsin presidency. However, with the 2008 economic crisis, things began to change in Russia. The people are understanding that Putin will not “surrender power.” Despite demonstrations which were initiated by the Russian population, they possessed no “common program.” But, the revolt that took place in Ukraine proved potentially dangerous to Putin’s government, and it “scared the Russian leadership.” As Mr. Satter stated, this led to Russia’s annexation of the Crimea because Putin seeks to “distract people,” and initiate a war not based upon factual information. Putin stated that Russians are being mistreated in Ukraine and therefore, he “plays on ethnic tensions.”

Mr. Satter then concluded his lecture by indicating that this situation could result in a nuclear conflict.

I found this lecture to be very informative, and I learned a great deal about Putin which I had previously been unaware of. David Satter’s talk really emphasized how dangerous Putin’s power could be, and how fragile the situation is in Ukraine. I wonder how long the Russian people will tolerate living under Putin now that their economic security is beginning to erode. Overall, it seems to me that the Russian future is very unpredictable.

Ryan Eavenson is a MA student in Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies. He is particularly interested in communist development in Eastern Europe. His additional interests include Imperial and Soviet Russian history, Czech history, and Russian and Czech language. He received a AB in History/Russian and East European Studies from Lafayette College in 2010. After graduation, he hopes to find employment focusing on international affairs and then continue his education.