

**CHAPTER 31: REVOLUTION, REBUILDING, AND NEW CHALLENGES: 1985 TO THE
PRESENT**
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Toward the latter 20th Century massive changes struck Eastern Europe. The communist system collapsed in a heap and a new era of democracy (for the most part) and freedom (relatively) swept over the region. Germany was reunited, the Soviet Union collapsed and divided, and the Cold War came to a rather abrupt end. The market economy became the norm, and there was hope that by 1991 that Eastern Europe would join the West bearing the fruits of democracy and individual opportunity.

Freedoms (economic and political) were generally gained. However, there were trade offs. Incredible poverty rates and the collapse of the old Eastern European social welfare systems cannot be overlooked. Crime and instability would reign in some nations which had lost their binding force (communism and its moral codes had long replaced religious culture and its remnants and enlightened intellectualism that one sees in the West), and indeed, some nations with highly diverse populations saw civil war and revolution.

The changes brought to bear concerns of declining populations, massive immigration, questions about Western unity in world affairs (lack communism to fear), and so forth. So the topics of examination are: How did the collapse of the East come about, how were the challenges that followed met, and what faces Europe today?

THE DECLINE OF COMMUNISM IN EASTERN EUROPE

The collapse of the SOVIET UNION and its EASTERN BLOC, though in retrospect showed signs of what would transpire years before, was essentially unexpected. The Soviet Union, after the fall of NIKITA KRUSCHEV never had a leader (long term) that would harken back to the ruthlessness of STALINISM. This may have been due in part to instability at the top (old guard would achieve the top job, but soon die thereafter, thus never having a real legacy). That said, the system still tended to be quite REPRESSIVE even when there were attempts at REFORM going on. And though the Russians were accepting of some reforms in their SATELLITE states, they would not permit any challenge to the Soviet style single party communist party rule.

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Thus, with the arrival of MIKHAIL GORBACHEV as the new Soviet-leader, no one was really prepared for his rhetoric, and his actions. No one believed that the system would crumble, as well as the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union. It ran counter to all what the world had come to understand about the Soviet system (and the same could be said for the Soviets). Gorbachev never sought to end single party rule, or the Soviet empire. Indeed he sought to reform major problems to strengthen it. The problem was, the cure killed the patient.

THE SOVIET UNION TO 1985

When the Soviet tanks rolled into Prague during the summer of 1968, a strong signal had been sent to Eastern Europe and the rest of the world. The Soviets would not tolerate reform that threatened communist party pre-eminence, or ties to the Soviets. This stance did not change with the death of BREZHNEV. It would be the status quo for the next two decades.

The nature of control in the Soviet Union did change after World War II. It turned from terror (purges, collectivization—which was complete) to coercion. Fear of losing career opportunities, limiting the education and futures of your kids, losing your apartment and other such quality of life issues became the hammer, not a show trial as in the past. The standard of living increased (though lagging more and more behind the West), and for those that reached elite status one could gain access to appliances and Western goods unavailable to the masses.

In addition, PATRIOTISM and NATIONALISM were mixed into the societal control element. Russian history, Russia leaders (from long past to the present), Russian power, and Russian accomplishments were all played to show what was, is and could be. The history of outside threats, and the current threats from without and within were played up. All these things helped hold the nation together (as well as pointing out flaws of competing systems – both real and imagined). Change was an enemy, for it would undermine the nation's strength, stability, greatness, and future.

The arts were once again controlled, and only official forms and content were acceptable. Violators were punished, some severely (but usually with BLACKLISTING and INTERNAL EXILE).

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According to the book, there were three things that developed that would undermine the Soviet Regime from within. They were urbanization (with resultant education), an educated elite, and a desire to have a say in society (at least in non-political issues such as environmentalism – though it was political as well).

In reality, the biggest cracks in the Soviet system were the pressures being put on it from without (U.S. arms and economic race) and activities in satellite nations that were testing the limits of Russian power.

SOLIDARITY IN POLAND

In many ways, POLAND would be the Soviet Union's undoing. The nation that has been referred to as the "playground of the gods" (old view of gods screwing with people for entertainment), the land that had been conquered, readjusted, conquered again, and ceased to exist on more than one occasion, to having experienced the worst of the Holocaust and was now the key buffer for the Soviets between it and the lands of GERMANY (can't be trusted even if you run East Germany) would find its people making a stand and not give in no matter how great the price. The SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT is one of the great mass movements in human history – due to its persistence, impact, and what it shows mankind about the power of commitment to a cause against all odds. Indeed, what happened in Poland greatly effected the Soviet future the rise to power of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985.

Poland was never easy to control. Parts of it had been Germany traditionally. Populations had been forced to migrate with the new borders of the nation due to Soviet decisions of control. There were industrial and free market histories that mean that Sovietization efforts of the economy would face struggles. In addition, the population was highly religious (CATHOLIC), thus the determined atheism of Soviet-style communism would face a strong internalized force that would buck against the coercion of the state (that threatened the religious life of the nation). The nation would resist again and again Soviet control (the patriots of the underground – many communist – were slaughtered during World War II due to Soviet efforts, and grudges lasted, as did distrust).

Periodically, the Poles would win victories that others could not due to their persistence. COLLECTIVIZATION failed in the 1950s due to riots and subversion of the process. The church persisted for much the same reason – the populace would not go willingly against the church, even facing the hardest of pressures. Thus,

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Poles found themselves more independent than others in the East Bloc. Some owned property. The church played a vital role in life. The party did not monopolize their daily existence.

Mix in a lousy economy (by Western standards) where a modern, well tooled, well trained industrial sector was mismanaged, and there was great discontent. The people knew life could be better, especially skilled workers and trades, if the government were less controlling of their enterprises.

Then, in quick succession, two figures would rise that would help mobilize the Polish people and put the fork in Soviet control. The first, and most inspiring was POPE JOHN PAUL II, and the other, due to his political stance that would help handcuff the Soviets in their dealings with Poland, was RONALD REAGAN.

Pope John Paul II was a native to Poland. He was a the Roman Catholic Church's Cardinal of CRACOW previously, known by his given name of KAROL WOJTYLA. He was an intellectual, a survivor of the WWII, believed in an activist church, was a humanist that found Communism and its repression unacceptable, and was an inspiration for many in a time of crisis. His presence in light of the events that occurred in Poland, would only strengthen the resolve of the Polish people, and for which he would find support from the White House as well.

Pope John Paul II achieved almost rock star type status when he was elected pope. He was a break with the Italian tradition, one that tended to support the status quo, was overly conservative, and often distant from the masses of the church. His election was seen as a revitalizing force within the church, one of outreach and support for activism within the constructs of church doctrine and theology. His position went from one with vague connection to many believers to that of a public figure whose positions mattered. He was toured and was treated similar to a great head of state, and his efforts led to a resurgent church. Nowhere was this more felt than in Poland.

In August of 1980, 16,000 workers at the Lenin Shipyards in GDANSK (formerly Danzig, East Prussia) did the unthinkable in the workers' paradise—they went on STRIKE. Their form was that of a sit in—stopping work but not vacating the yards so others could not take their places. They were protesting poor wages and living conditions in what was a key facility to the East. Soon, the strike began to spread as other workers went out on SYMPATHY STRIKES in support of their efforts in a

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move they called “SOLIDARITY” (in Polish SOLIDARNOSC). The demands were unheard of for their society – Free Trade Unions (not government or party controlled), Freedom of Speech, Release of Political Prisoners (union agitators and those seeking reform fit this bill) and massive Economic Reforms. The Polish economy ground to a halt and its government began to waver. After 18 days the demands were accepted with the GDANSK AGREEMENT and the course of history soon began to change.

The shipyard workers organized their new union and elected a young electrician as their leader, devout Catholic LECH WALESKA. The new, free union was called “Solidarity” – after the unity that had enabled their victory (and would be needed in the future). The union expanded nationwide, was supported openly by the Catholic Church, and by many in the intelligentsia. By early 1981 there were 9.5 million members (impressive for a nation of 36 million). Support was strong and they had the ability to call nationwide strikes if need be that could cripple the economy and the government.

Waleska understood the power, and understood that his was both a positive and a negative. The threat of power was a much more useful tool than actual action. For if the Soviets felt the current government was losing its grip, there was little doubt their military would subdue the movement. Thus, the Communist Party and its rule would not be challenged. Instead, the efforts would consist mainly of seeking economic and social concessions were needed, but mostly to protect the gains made from that initial strike.

The moderate position, as always, came under attack. More radical members of the union wanted stronger action. Others feared the destined reaction. Unity began to crumble and at that point the government struck back in December, 1981. The leaders of the movement were jailed and martial law was declared. However, it was too late. The movement had grown too far, and the government lacked the power to totally obliterate it.

Thus, the union went underground and many Poles refused to fall in line (they couldn't jail everybody). Solidarity removed the first brick removed from the foundation shoring up the Eastern Bloc, and would serve as an inspiration to others that would follow. It also sent a message to the Soviets of growing trouble ahead.

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GORBACHEV'S REFORMS IN THE SOVIET UNION

Mikhail Gorbachev was a committed communist, a young leader who was not a veteran of the revolutionary period and its consolidation, and was only a boy during World War II. Thus, his outlook, though effected by WWII, was not transformed as it would have been for those that preceded him – the old line of the Communist Party. When he became General Secretary of the party 1985, he was relative young, strong, and capable. What had preceded him was inaction and inability (Brezhnev was near death for years before conking out in 1982, and Yuri Andropov would hold power shortly – using his position as the head other secret police to gain the spot – would even promise reform but would quickly die as well (some wonder if assassinated). Then Konstantin Chernenko would hold power for another year (though he may have been dead for over a month before it was announced – the Soviets could not admit a power vacuum so the body is propped up until a successor rises to the top). Thus, when replacing years of corpses in power, you look pretty dynamic (and he was dynamic as it was, but compared to the past he was earth shattering just by appearing in public and waving his hand).

Gorbachev saw his nation as stagnating in part due to the administrative controls that were in place over society. The bureaucracy was overwhelming. Initiative did not exist. Life was controlled and watched from the smallest of neighborhoods to the highest of offices. The elite (party) was protected and lived relatively well, but the masses were content with doing nothing – for initiative could only bring more trouble to ones life, potentially get one in trouble, and for sure only create added burdens, worries and problems. He knew that to survive in the current world the old formula would not work.

Russia had pressing economic and hence social issues as it was. It had to try and contain any nationalistic spirit in its satellites (like we have saw in Poland) as well, plus it was facing a growing Chinese threat on its Siberian borders. Mix in a U.S. President named Ronald Reagan who was a strong Cold Warrior who believed that if pressured enough economically the communist system would collapse. He realized that he needed to rebuild the U.S. economy and also optimism and confidence following the collapse of the late 60s through the Carter Administration to do this. His efforts opened world trade routes to a degree not seen in the postwar world, strengthened the American hand economically and hence politically with much of the world, enabled an activist foreign policy that challenged Soviet efforts at every corner of the globe (something they had felt free reign at since the

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Vietnam War debacle) and pushed a massive Arms race of build up and modernization.

All were problematic for the Soviets, but the arms race was a huge problem. Their economy and innovation levels were struggling to keep up during a period of American military regression. Reagan was writing a blank check to get things in place, and was willing to show force when needed. The challenge was obvious and Russia had been trying to keep pace. In doing so, Peter was being robbed to pay Paul, and their economy was struggling more and more (the U.S. had economic growth in the non-military sectors as well to help fuel their growth, the Soviets could not match it, and thus the cost to keep up was much harder on the people (who at some point want some butter to go with their guns)).

Gorbachev was a trained lawyer who had worked his way up from the boondocks to become a political star in his party (though he never became too big where he was seen as a threat by those in power, but instead had walked the line well between ambition and acquiescence). He saw enough to know that the Soviets were at a crossroads – the reform or slip back and become a marginal nation with lots of nuclear weapons. Society had to improve to maintain a decent standard of living for the people, and to ensure soviet SUPERPOWER status. He knew that the ARMS RACE could not continue, for the U.S. would surely win while bankrupting his nation. Thus, another route had to be found. One of reform.

As a REFORM minded leader, Gorbachev saw many potential advantages that could come his nations way. It would provide a spark to raise the hopes of the people and spur development. It would help him clean up a overwhelming bureaucracy, and it could be used to reduce tension between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., allowing a reduction in the arms race (which would benefit the masses greatly). Gorbachev did not set out to dismantle the Soviet Union, he set out to save it.

His first reforms were palatable to all and did not threaten the party. He targeted rampant alcoholism and drunkenness that had long held a grip on the nation. It was a popular target and would enable him to ramp up to his next set of targets a little easier (as the reform-minded would believe we can't fix one problem without the other and so on).

Gorbachev started to reform initiatives: Perestroika, Glasnost in 1985 along with Democratization.

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His economic reforms, were limited and called PERESTROIKA. The threefold measures eased some price controls (so profit could be made – key to suppliers) on some goods, granted more independence to some state industries in their operations (could design items to be more appealing to consumers, alter production based upon demand etc.), and allowed for the launch of some small private-cooperatives to provide personal services for profit. These reforms were very limited, but were hoped to be a starting point for bigger things. Gorbachev lacked the power to utterly revamp things, and if he tried he would have not lasted long in power. Thus, the tightrope walk began. But conservative measures such as perestroika would not be enough – for the economy, though initially buoyant due to optimism, soon foundered in the face of overarching central planning.

GLASNOST was much more successful. It was seen as part and parcel to Perestroika when put in place. Essentially meaning “openness”, it allowed for an expansion of speech rights in the public and media. It was hoped these efforts would allow corruption in government and industry to be highlighted and thus provide an ability to get rid of the practitioners (exposure to the light of day for the masses could mean the most connected individual could not hold power long). This effort was highly attractive to the dissatisfied and the intelligentsia. The movement spread from economic issues to societal issues and in many ways Glasnost began to spin beyond the reach and controls of Gorbachev.

DEMOCRATIZATION was also begun during this period. It was initially executed to try and rid the Communist Party of corrupt elements. Votes with more than one vetted candidate were allowed at the lowest levels), and soon spread to a level of Free Elections at the lowest levels (something not seen since 1917). The public, once gaining access to the sugar, demanded more sweets. In 1989 elections to the CONGRESS OF PEOPLES DEPUTIES were free, and the winners weren’t always those who were going to follow the party line. The televised debates of the body (big news in a period of Glasnost) showed disagreement with Gorbachev and the party line, and even the failure of several of his proposals. It was now apparent the power of Gorbachev and the party were no longer absolute. The match was lit. Gorbachev found himself to be a bull rider on a ton of angry and lean hamburger.

The new debate and power of the people via the reforms, especially Glasnost and Democratization allowed long festering grievances and demands to arise. Non-Russians began to clamor for more say, more independence. And though there

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would be some cracking of skulls by the army in minority areas, for the most part the rising tide of anti-government speech was not quelled.

Combined with the route he had taken in foreign policy (withdrawal from AFGHANISTAN, ARMS NEGOTIATIONS and ARMS REDUCTION talks with the U.S.) it was apparent that the Soviet Union was at the crossroads, and the Eastern Bloc knew it.

THE REVOLUTIONS OF 1989

What had started as a plan to save Communism in Russia and the east essentially killed it. Things spun out of control, and rather quickly. Soon, the satellite nations would break loose from their Soviet and communist grips, and then the Soviet nation itself. And I watched it on TV with hope (and a level of fear – for there were questions as to what the hardliners in the Soviet government and military would do when they had reached the point of no return). Combined with the events of China, it was a year of uncertainty and great hope for much of the world.

THE COLLAPSE OF COMMUNISM IN EASTERN EUROPE

As they had begun the initial process, the Poles and Solidarity would be the first to kick open the door, followed soon by other nations. Poland was near collapse economically in 1988. The union was banned, but not destroyed. The hardline government was at a crossroad and returned to negotiations with the union's leaders. The strikes ended with a drop of the union's outlaw status and free elections of a good share (about 30-35%) of parliamentary seats for the next 4 elections. In a great, grassroots protest, the union won most of the seats in play, and refused to vote for uncontested seats (one person runs in the old system, if enough don't vote for you by crossing of your name, you don't win and a new election will be held), giving the union a temporary majority in PARLIAMENT and shaking the power of the government. Lech Walesa avoided chaos, and secured a majority for the union without violence or revolution. The Polish government was baffled at what to do next. The Soviets, with their own problems, watched and waited, deciding if they needed to deal with the issue (had tons of troops in Poland).

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Slowly but surely the power of the Communist party was destroyed in the nation. The secret police was abolished. Government ministers canned. Economic policies were put in place a market economy (with full knowledge it would hurt a ton, but was necessary long term) – all step by step and not at once – this to ensure the Soviets would not panic.

HUNGARY, already the most economically liberal of the Soviet satellites, followed suit, and began to dump its planned economy. With public unruliness rising, the Communist party agreed to free elections in 1990 (agreement made in 1989). The communists already allowed Western investment, and their economy was great by Eastern standards, so they thought they could survive competitive elections. To strengthen their hand they opened their border to AUSTRIA and to allowed massive “tourism” from EAST GERMANY. Most of these “tourists” then moved to Austria and on to West Germany. The East Germans called for a closure of the border, but Hungary refused. The tide of refugees swelled and the East German economy and government began to founder (this was huge, for Russia concerned East Germany the key satellite due to its fear of a unified and resurgent German state). Soon, the government of East Germany opened the Berlin Wall to passage from the West in an effort to slow the flow out of the country. It didn’t work.

CZECHOSLOVAKIA would dump its leaders in a 10 day VELVET REVOLUTION devised in brew pubs and begun in December 1989. Within days VÁCLAV HAVEL, a playwright and leader of the revolution (protest in the streets) was President.

ROMANIA, a most backward and repressive nation, was the only satellite where the leadership did not go easy and violent revolution occurred. NICOLAE CEAUSEȘCU, who was truly nuts (destroyed the economy and capital city to build his own capital reminiscent of 1700s and 1800s Europe) tried to hold on. He had his security troops kill thousands, sparking a violent revolution/coup. He would be captured, tried and executed quickly by a new government (really old hardliners who used him as a sacrificial lamb). Romania was freer to a degree, but still a mess and still authoritarian.

During 1989, the winds of change swept across most of the east, only Albania and Soviet Union held out.

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THE DISINTEGRATION OF THE SOVIET UNION

In light of the allowed contested elections at the lower levels, and the change going on in the East Bloc, the 1990 elections of the U.S.S.R. were watched closely. As expected by the West, the elections were honest enough that the COMMUNIST PARTY was thumped. In the minority S.S.R.s, many were nationalists. LITHUANIA, which is very close to ethnic Polish (and many areas were once Poland and was still strongly Catholic – *Story of Christening at “Museum” in 1986*) elected a tough government that openly sought independence and would not be cowed by the Soviet central government (and had the audacity to declare Lithuania an independent nation (something Russia had long claimed for power in the UNITED NATIONS – but did not like now even though the declaration was purely symbolic). Gorbachev refused to call out the army (not sure why – if he feared open fighting might spin out of control and raise oppression again as its leaders took power in their own hands) and only brought economic sanctions on the republic.

As the chaos grew, Gorbachev lost more and more support. Hardliners in government and the military hated his weakness and the chaos. Reformers hated his lack of commitment to the cause and his baby steps. Gorbachev needed support and he turned to reformers (feared the hardliners, which was very, very smart) and called for contested elections in the nation as part of a new CONSTITUTION. The Congress of Deputies was given added power, and they elected him the nation’s first President.

Gorbachev’s half measures (no election of key power, that of the President was big in the eyes of the nation) soon strengthened the power of BORIS YELTSIN who called for further democratization. Initially he was seen as a buffoon by the West, and few believed he could be a real challenge to Gorbachev. All were wrong. He was elected president of the RUSSIAN FEDERATION’s parliament, and he declared its independence from the Soviet Union (the Russian federation was the key component of the U.S.S.R., without it the union was gutted).

Gorbachev was over a barrel and tried to save the nation to a degree, trying to create a new U.S.S.R. with all the republics more loosely tied in a confederation. Six of the 15 said screw you and the writing was on the wall.

At this point, the hardliners and key military leaders had had enough. Gorbachev was taken hostage while on vacation and military units entered the center of

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Moscow to seize the government. The Deputies were held hostage in their building that was surrounded by tanks. The citizens began to stream to the defense of the government led by Boris Yeltsin who stood on a tank and called on the people to hold their ground and the army not to obey its commanders. A TV revolution was born (the army had been unable to seize the transmitters of the state run television service in Moscow) and things ground to a tense halt. Russian troops refused to go any further, and when less friendly troops from Siberian areas were brought in, they too would not advance. Eventually, the COUP D'ETAT failed when nothing happened and support dwindled for its leaders.

The coup was a deathblow to the Soviet Union, and to Gorbachev's reign. Yeltsin, the hero of the new revolution pushed and achieved the Russian Federation's independence, and every Soviet Republic followed suit. Ironically, on December 25, 1991, the Soviet Union officially ceased to be (a little dagger by Christian elements that nation has so long tried to stamp out).

GERMAN UNIFICATION AND THE END OF THE COLD WAR

With the collapse of the EAST GERMANY's government in 1989, the question arose of what would happen with the two German states. Initially, there was still fear on who the Soviets would react to potential unification. In addition, the East had been so repressive (1 in 6 were spies on neighbors), the government so strong, and the economy so screwed up, and culturally so backward (strongly anti-Semitic due to a lack of effort by the East German government to admit their nation's culpability in the Holocaust), that for many it seemed doubtful that unification, if attempted, could happen.

The new, reform geared communist government that took power in October 1989 wanted to make communism work while creating stronger ties to the west and more freedom for its people. They never had a chance, their efforts collapsed, and unification came quickly.

The issue could not be avoided. 50% of the people had already fled to the West in just a few months. In addition, WEST GERMANY's Chancellor HELMUT KOHL pushed for unification and would not be denied. He knew he would have U.S. support (had long supported Reagan, and now George H.W. Bush in their efforts in

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regard to the Soviet Union and the east, including using patience with the East German issue so as not to create Russian panic and war) and he presented a logical plan to bring out a process to stabilize the East, its economy, and avoid chaos that the international community couldn't argue with. Including was turning all East German marks into West German marks (in private savings accounts) and establishing welfare and pension programs in the East (just as in the West) to protect the citizens from economic chaos. He also helped secure support for an opposition party, the ALLIANCE FOR GERMANY in the East German elections, which won and would thus support unification.

All that was left was a deal with the Soviet Union, which Gorbachev inked in the Summer of 1990. Kohl offered tons of low interest loans to the Soviets to shore up their economy to get the signature, and in October a united Germany was once again in place, and was the most powerful nation in Europe.

In November 1990, the COLD WAR further slipped when the PARIS ACCORD was signed cutting back on the militaries of 22 European nations and the U.S. and U.S.S.R. In essence, by ending the Cold War, WORLD WAR II was over as well (in part due to the Cold War being an extension to it, in part due to the Soviets not signing some key peace treaties to justify their intervention in the East).

Symbolically, the U.S. lowered its nuclear alert status, and both sides reprogrammed their missiles so they did not target each others cities (though they could be programmed back in seconds).

It seemed the European world was headed toward unity, and it would be illustrated by the GULF WAR in 1990 and 1991. U.S. goals were supported in the U.N. and in the Persian Gulf with most of Europe and part of the Arab world signed on. It provided hope for the future, but also doubt. Already, the fears of analysts were coming true – a post Soviet world could be more dangerous than one with it as rogue states, nationalist movements, and extremists once controlled by the Soviets ran wild and also used financial resource to buy weapons and technology (and advice both legally and illegally from the an economically messed up Russia and its private citizens).

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