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February 9, 2004

OP-ED COLUMNIST

## Putin's 'Creeping Coup'

By WILLIAM SAFIRE

**M**UNICH — This city is no longer the venue of appeasement.

At an annual security conference here on the eve of NATO's seven-state expansion, Moscow's neo-imperialist defense minister threatened to back out of an agreement limiting the size of his armed forces on Russia's European front.

Sergei Ivanov's bluff was immediately called by U.S. Senator John McCain. The Arizonan had accused Putin's regime of a "creeping coup" against democracy within Russia, as well as a campaign to intimidate and reassert control over states — from the Baltics to Belarus, Georgia and Ukraine — that our victory in the cold war had liberated from Soviet rule.

This Russia-NATO confrontation has been brewing for a year. While France and Germany split with the rest of Europe and the U.S. over the war in Iraq, Putin took advantage of the world's distraction to crack down on internal dissent and to undermine the independence of his neighbors.

The first public inkling of U.S. concern with Putin's irredentism came in Secretary Colin Powell's trip last month to attend the inauguration of Georgia's new elected leader, signaling strong support for that nation's independence. This was accompanied by a Powell article in Izvestia uncommonly critical of Moscow's repression of the media.

Western reaction to Russia's new aggressiveness was further expressed last week in Riga, Latvia. The Baltics' surge

toward independence in 1989 was the first sign of the impending crack-up of the Soviet Union. The West's coming inclusion of those three states in NATO redresses a horrific Hitler-Stalin wrong, but is galling to Moscow, which has been fostering resentment among Russian ethnics implanted there since Stalin's time.

In Latvia's capital, the Baltic states gathered with Scandinavian nations to focus European human-rights attention on internal democratic opposition to outright tyrants like Aleksandr Lukashenko of Belarus and the former K.G.B. crowd that runs Moldova. Though Ukraine gave up its nukes and has 1,700 troops in Iraq, it has an autocratic ruler in Leonid Kuchma, reportedly rigging its fall elections. McCain led a Congressional delegation to this Riga meeting on his way to Munich and heard the anguished story of a dissident Belarus leader whose husband is one of the "disappeared."

At the 40th Wehrkunde Conference in Munich, Ivanov unloaded on the West. The pressure point he chose was the Conventional Forces in Europe (C.F.E.) treaty, negotiated a decade ago, initialed but never signed. In 1996, as NATO prepared to admit Eastern Europe, it set up a formal relationship with Russia, assuring it that no nukes and no "substantial combat forces" would be placed close to its border. Three years later, Russia made the "Istanbul commitments" to pull its troops out of Georgia and Moldova, which it still has not done.

"We assumed those commitments in a definite military and political environment," Ivanov warned, "with the admission of the invitees to NATO, this environment will drastically change." Of the C.F.E. treaty, he asked: "Might it be another 'relic of the cold war,' as the ABM treaty has been labeled some time ago" before it was "shelved to the dustbin"? He made Putin's threat plainer: "The adapted C.F.E. treaty may well end up as the ABM treaty was fated to."

Looking hard at McCain, Ivanov said, "One of the major priorities of the Russian foreign policy is our relationship with our closest neighbors . . . relations with the Commonwealth of Independent States are in no way a hallmark of Russian-brand 'neo-imperialism,' as some try to depict it, but an imperative for security. . . ."

McCain is no Neville Chamberlain. "Under President Putin," he responded, "Russia has refused to comply with the terms of the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe. Russian troops occupy parts of Georgia and Moldova . . . Russian agents are working to bring Ukraine further into Moscow's orbit. Russian support sustains Europe's last dictatorship in Belarus. And Moscow has . . . enforced its stranglehold on energy supplies into Latvia in order to squeeze the democratic government in Riga."

Speaking with the freedom of a senator, McCain said "undemocratic behavior and threats to the sovereignty and liberty

of her neighbors will not profit Russia . . . but will exclude her from the company of Western democracies."

As its role becomes global, NATO must not lose its original purpose: to contain the Russian bear.

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