

Putting Russia first

Politics is not psychiatry. So why is Bill Clinton behaving like Dr. Freud when it comes to Russia? Consider this week's North Atlantic Treaty Organization summit in Brussels, followed by the president's forays to Prague, Moscow and Minsk. Then read "P4P," which is NATO-speak for "Partnership for Peace"—a document almost as tortured as Clinton's health care plan. It all comes down to a simple maxim: "Don't rile the Russians."

What looks like big-time diplomacy is really an attempt at psychotherapy. The patient is Russia and the buzzword is *Zhirinovskiy*. Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the ultranationalist leader of the cynically mislabeled Liberal Democrats, seems to come right out of a Moscow psychiatric ward—except that his party won almost a quarter of the vote in Russia's December elections.

His idea of good-neighborly relations is to burn nuclear waste along the border of Lithuania (which has just applied for NATO membership) and then to blow the fumes across with giant fans "until they all die or fall to their knees." Because he does not like to be compared to Hitler ("he was but an uneducated corporal, I was an officer who holds two university degrees"), Zhirinovskiy espouses "National Socialism minus Hitlerism."

Clearly, this neo-Nazi is bad news. But he is not an excuse for a "Russia first" foreign policy that confuses diplomacy with psychiatry. Here is the Clinton administration's prescription, as uttered by Secretary of State Warren Christopher: "Helping democracy prevail in Russia remains the wisest and least expensive investment that we can make in American security."

False premises. True enough. But the policy's unspoken premises go more or less like this: "Russia is like a borderline psychotic. A false move will trigger the worst: paranoia and chauvinism, neofascism at home and neo-imperialism abroad. Ergo we must soothe and reassure the Russians so Boris Yeltsin and his friends will prevail."

There are four things wrong with this approach. First, policy as psychiatry is an insult to the Russians, casting them in the role not of partners but of mental patients. Second, it grievously overestimates the doctor's power. The United States and the West cannot "heal" Russia from the outside; this trick worked in Germany and Japan only because it was backed by the loaded guns of the occupiers.

Third, accepting the notion of Russia as a borderline

nut case hands Moscow a veto over Western policy. Wisdom then boils down to the paralyzing injunction: "We must not provoke the bear"—even if he were to lay his paw on vital Western interests.

Finally, where—if not out in the cold—does this leave Eastern Europe? Acting on the cues so lavishly provided by Washington, Boris Yeltsin has been playing the Zhirinovskiy card like the Cincinnati Kid. As Clinton was packing his bags for Brussels, Yeltsin muttered darkly that NATO's eastward expansion would provoke a "negative reaction in Russian society" as well as the "military destabilization" of this "key region."

The Kremlin Kid need not worry. Clinton has already

conceded the game by telling the East Europeans to "buzz off," as the Polish foreign minister put it. In Brussels, NATO will throw Eastern Europe a bone—the Partnership for Peace, a set of bilateral treaties under which "interested states" can slowly, slowly approach the inner sanctum of membership. Yet there will be no timetable, and Russia can get in line, too.

In the meantime, those "interested states" will have the right to consult NATO when they feel threatened. By whom? A hint: The name of the country has six letters and starts with an R. But if that country *does* threaten its neighbors again, NATO is not likely to be more valiant than it is today. If we must not "provoke" the patient

when he is weak, why would we dare to do so when he begins to throw his weight around again?

Partnership for Peace is not a policy but an attempt to buy time. It is a fair-weather project that propitiates the Russians without protecting the East Europeans, and it fails to address the most critical danger in the European security landscape: What if Yeltsin decides to deal with the Zhirinovskiy in the way of Shakespeare's Henry IV, who would "busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels"?

The danger is that Western appeasement will merely encourage Russian neo-imperialism. Yes, the West should learn from the past and not treat the Russian democrats with the harshness once accorded Weimar Germany. But there is a second lesson: Imagine how much better Europe would have fared in the 1930s if Hitler's Germany had faced a cohesive Western alliance.

To borrow from Lenin: Reassurance is good, reinsurance is better. ■



'The Kremlin need not worry. Clinton has already conceded the game.'