



## THE FORGOTTEN CORNERS OF EUROPE AND ASIA THE EX-SOVIET REPUBLICS

rates, more taxes, and cuts to government subsidies and welfare.

The process of liberalization would inevitably create winners and losers. Some benefited from open competition but many more suffered. Among the winners were the new oligarchy established as a result of privatization and the new class of entrepreneurs and black marketeers that had emerged during the Perestroika era. However the majority lost.

Communism however oppressive had provided education, health services, state subsidies, peace and security to millions of people who had no recollection of anything better. The void left was devastating, life expectancy fell, the provision of health care and social services declined, the GDP was halved and poverty increased more than tenfold.

### FINDING THEIR FEET

While the Baltic republics emerged from the ashes of the Soviet Union by building successful market economies and democracies, others appeared reluctant to shed their Soviet skin. Belarus falls into this category. Its leader, former apparatchik Alexander Lukashenka, retains a firm hold on power.

Yevgeny Bendersky in *Eurasia Insight* writes: "While Lukashenka himself was elected to office democratically in the first years of post-1991 political freedoms, he has since done everything possible to not allow real democratic reforms and principles to take root."

"Much can be said about a country where the security apparatus is still called the KGB, as it was during the Soviet days, and where opposition is silenced through physical intimidation," he adds.

Recently Belarusians voted Lukashenka in for a third consecutive term, following a change in the constitution that had only allowed two terms. Described as "the last dictator in Europe" by the former US Bush Administration, Lukashenka has described himself as "having an authoritarian ruling style". He warned that anyone joining an opposition protest would be treated as a "terrorist". "We will wring their necks as one might a duck," he said.

Like Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan call themselves democracies but their leaders continue to retain a firm hold on power. In 2003 in a controversial move Azerbaijan's President Heydar Aliyev appointed his son as the party's sole presidential candidate. Ilham Aliyev is still in power. "This type of regime change can hardly be characterized as democratic and yet Azerbaijan is considered a multi-party democracy," Bendersky writes.

A country that rarely features on the world radar is Moldova. Moldova was also run by a former apparatchik, President Vladimir Voronin, a former baker and Soviet era interior minister, from 2001 until last July when he was forced out of office following violent street protests about allegations of fraud after the April elections. Centre-right opposition parties won in the second election, forging a governing alliance. But political analysts say that the communists still remain a formidable political force.

It will be interesting to see if the new government, headed by Marian Lupu, succeeds in building a real democracy and developing the depressed economy. Rated as the poorest country in Europe, Moldova is notorious for its trafficking of arms, drugs, cigarettes and sex slaves.

Yet at independence, it boasted the fourth most successful economy of the 15 former Soviet republics. According to journalist William Kole, following the dissolution, Moldova's economy shrank about two thirds and by 2001 it had plummeted to second bottom. Moldova's entire national wealth was grabbed by just 5 percent of the population.

Voronin's son Oleg is one of the richest men in Moldova with a fortune that exceeds US\$2 billion, yet the average monthly wage is only \$270, so

the majority of the population relies heavily on the foreign remittances of many nationals working abroad.

According to journalists William Kole and Corneliu Rusnac, officially, 620,000 of Moldova's 4.1 million people work outside the nation. "Unofficially the real number may be twice that. And many are young women working in the sex trade – some willingly, others enticed and then entrapped."

The new leader will need to settle a territorial dispute as Moldova remains split between the separatist, Russian-speaking Trans-Dniester region and the rest of the country. Trans-Dniester, a sliver of land to the east, populated mainly by Russian speakers broke away in 1990 and the two sides fought a secessionist civil war in 1992.

Tensions erupted when the Russians felt threatened by a proposed language policy that made Rumanian the official language of Moldova (as opposed to Russian). They feared the new government would interfere with industry and the life the Russians had made for themselves in the region so separatists took up arms.

Moldova's armed forces suffered several defeats. It took four months and the deaths of an estimated 700 to 1000 people before a ceasefire agreement was reached. Trans-Dniester declared itself independent from Moldova but all Moldova is willing to give is autonomy.

The Russian army stationed in the region is a crucial source of support for the new government of Trans-Dniester. The dispute has now stalled yet its resolution is crucial as the area holds much of Moldova's industry and power stations, which are vital for the development of the economy.

Like Trans-Dniester, other geopolitical black holes created by the dissolution of the Soviet Union are Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two breakaway regions within Georgia also supported by Moscow.

### CIVIL WARS

"If there is one post-Soviet state where real democracy has a chance of limited success, that is Georgia," Bendersky writes. Described as Russia's wild west, Georgia has a long and violent history. The collapse of the Soviet Union quickly led to chaos and ethnic cleansing.

"With more than 100,000 dead and a quarter of a million refugees, no other region of the Soviet Union equalled the Caucasus in demonstrating how bloody and messy the death of an empire can be," writes journalist Robert D Kaplan.

According to Kaplan, author of *Eastward and Tartary; Travels in the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus*, it was Georgia, not Europe or Russia, that was the real historical birthplace of mass-movement socialism, with support not just from intellectuals and workers but from peasants too.

Also, Kaplan writes that it was there that the Soviet empire began to crumble. "It was in the Caucasus not Eastern Europe that anti-Soviet protests got started in unstoppable earnest."

Stalin was born in these mountains.

Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili, better known as Joseph Stalin, studied to become a priest of the Eastern Orthodox Church in one of Georgia's seminaries. According to journalist Jeffrey Tayler, "Stalin drew the multiethnic Soviet Union's administrative boundaries in accordance with a policy of 'divide-and conquer' joining peoples with longstanding enmities into various 'republics' and 'autonomous zones' that would inevitably quarrel among themselves and therefore look to the Kremlin to keep the peace."

And quarrel they did. In the 1990s, when the west watched in horror the devastation caused by the Balkan wars, it ignored similar conflicts in the

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Caucasian regions of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

The trouble started as soon as Communist-era dissident Zviad Gamsakhurdia rose to power in 1990. A few months after his election, Georgia was engulfed in a civil war that destroyed the economy and made internal travel impossible. A year later he was ousted in a bloody coup d'etat instigated by the National Guard and paramilitaries and he fled to Chechnya. Kaplan writes that the civil war was not about ideas but "a battle between rival mafias for territory and for legitimate political control".

In his absence, fighting continued in western Georgia between the troops of the new military council and Gamsakhurdia's supporters but these were soon defeated. Former apparatchik Eduard Shevardnadze was brought from Russia and elected as the new president.

In 1991 Gamsakhurdia had abolished South Ossetia's autonomous status, which triggered the beginning of a war between separatist militias and Georgian forces that claimed the lives of 1000 people and the displacement of many others.

Yeltsin brought a ceasefire in 1992, under which Russia stationed troops in South Ossetia to keep peace. The ceasefire left South Ossetia divided into areas controlled by Georgia and others controlled by the unrecognised government of South Ossetia.

To the west of South Ossetia lies the Republic of Abkhazia on the eastern coast of the Black Sea, annexed by Russia in 1810, but joined to Georgia by Stalin. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Abkhaz separatists, aided by Russia, expelled Georgian troops. This marked the beginning of a conflict that would turn out to be one of the bloodiest in the post-Soviet era, with 15,000 deaths and 250,000 ethnic Georgians displaced.

Many died of starvation while trying to cross the mountains. According to human rights reports, gross human rights violations were committed on both sides and high levels of criminality -looting, pillaging, murders, and hostage-taking as well as other violations of humanitarian law.

This happened in 1992 while the world was preoccupied with Bosnia. Georgian forces suffered many losses. Abkhazia became a de facto independent territory. The conflict escalated in July 2008.

After a decade of corruption, civil wars and declining living standards, Georgians gave the Shevardnadze government a strong vote of no confidence at the end of 2003 following mass non-violent protests. They peacefully forced Shevardnadze out of office in what came to be known as the Rose Revolution.

Initially it looked like the beginning of a new era for Georgia. The new, charismatic, pro-American, 45-year-old leader Mikheil Saakashvili promised change and reforms aimed at reaching the state's full economic, political and social potential.

He implemented what many viewed as a pro-US foreign policy. He was described by former US President George Bush as "a beacon of liberty" and pledged to recover South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Ironically he would lead the country to another war.

Instead of initiating negotiations, in July 2008 after a week of clashes between Georgian troops and separatist forces, Georgia launched an air and ground attack on South Ossetia, gaining control of Tskhinvali, its capital.

Russia said Georgia had violated the 1992 ceasefire agreement and responded with the largest military assault by land and sea since the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. After five days of heavy fighting Georgia lost both, South Ossetia and Abkhazia to Russia, which occupied the Georgian cities of Poti and Gori. At least 2000 Georgians died and some 118,000 others fled their homes. Georgia suffered a humiliating defeat.

Saakashvili had pleaded for help but no country came to his rescue. "All we got so far are just words, statements, moral support and humanitarian aid," he said. No country appeared to be willing to confront Russia.

The war was halted by a European Union (EU) brokered ceasefire and Russia's troops are still stationed there under bilateral agreements with the corresponding governments.

A EU sponsored report says that the war was not justified by international law. The report stated that while Russia's initial actions in fighting back against attacks on its personnel in South Ossetia were justified, its subsequent actions in pushing far into Georgia proper "went far beyond the reasonable limits of defense" and was in violation with international law. Neither was the aggression following the cease fire justified.

"The lessons that emerged from the Russia-Georgia war are clear," writes Jeffrey Taylor. "Russia is back, the West fears Russia as much as it needs it, and those who act on other assumptions are in for a rude, perhaps violent, awakening."

Lately, following street protests, the Georgian opposition has asked for Saakashvili's resignation. The opposition has levied charges against him for corruption and murder. Human rights groups have accused him of excessive use of force in suppressing demonstrations and restricting freedoms of the press, assembly and political representation.

Saakashvili has been trying to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the EU for some time. So far he has not been successful. Membership to these organisations may damage Russia's relations with the West.

Although Georgia has no significant oil and gas reserves of its own, it is part of the important Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline transit route that will supply Western and Central Europe oil (one million barrels of oil per day) from Azerbaijan's Azeri-Chiray-Guneshli oil field allowing the West to reduce its reliance on Middle Eastern oil while bypassing Russia and Iran. Analysts say this has been a key factor for the US support of Georgia.

Georgia and the vast majority of the international community still views South Ossetia and Abkhazia as part of Georgia and the EU report's author said Russia's recognition "must be considered as being not valid in the context of international law and as violations of Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty."

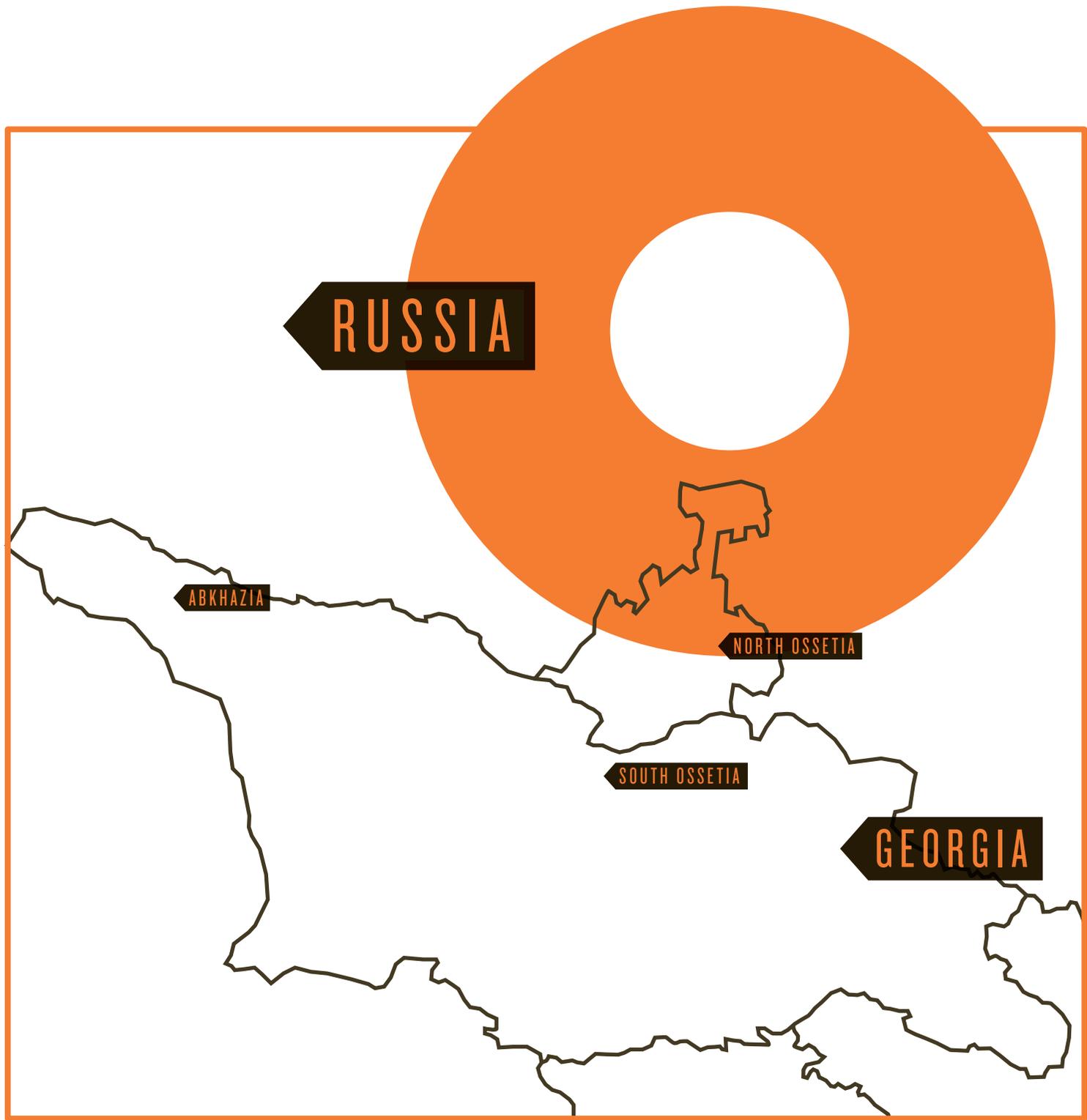
During a visit to Tbilisi last July, US Vice President Joe Biden told Georgian officials that there could be no military solution to the conflict around both regions. The best way to bring Abkhazia and South Ossetia back into the fold, Biden said, was to build a stable prosperous and democratic Georgia that would be more attractive to the two breakaway regions.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia are not the only separatist rebellions in the Caucasus, Azerbaijan and Armenia have been warring over Nagorno-Karabakh for most of the past 20 years. A six- year conflict killed about 30,000 people and displaced one million before a truce was reached in 1994.

Nagorno-Karabakh is an Armenian enclave within Azerbaijan. Its inhabitants are Armenians and want to be part of Armenia. They argued that the leaders of Azerbaijan neglected the province and did not invest in the area while draining its resources for the rest of the country. They also argue that they are routinely discriminated against by the Azerbaijani government.

Fighting sometimes breaks out sporadically. To this day the dispute has not been settled.

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### CENTRAL ASIA

While Central Asia had clearly been inhabited for centuries no nation-state with firm borders had ever existed. There was no Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan or Kyrgyzstan before 1924. The region was brought into the Soviet Union and carved up into five countries.

According to historian Ashley Streat-Bartlett, when the demarcation took place it was done with no regard for the ethnicities involved and without any consultation with the people who inhabited these areas.

Central Asia contains a complex mosaic of ethnicities and, according to Streat-Bartlett, Soviet policies destroyed the problematic ethnic cohesion, the economy and the environment. The borders also split ethnic groups. Today major concentrations of ethnic minorities are spread in more than one country. For example large pockets of ethnic Uzbeks live in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and a concentration of ethnic Kyrgyz live in Uzbekistan.

At independence none of the five republics had any experience of nationhood. Kyrgyzstan was the quickest to embrace democratic reform but Tajikistan was engulfed in a vicious civil war between 1992 and 1993 and reignited in 1996-97.

Carved out of Uzbekistan, 93 percent of the nation is mountainous with little arable land or natural resources. Today it rates as one of the poorest countries in the world. The war delayed all political and economic development, but it is now ruled by a democratic government.

"Only two out of five states have elected a new head-of-state after 1991," writes Yevgeny Bendersky in EurasiaNet. "Two of them, **Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, are headed by the men who were in charge of these republics in Soviet times. Having changed their titles from the first secretary of the Communist Party to prime minister/president was largely the extent of democracy in these states.**" Turkmenistan followed the same pattern until Saparmurat Niyazov died in 2006.

The majority of the republics possess abundant natural resources, including large reserves of fossil fuels. According to the Institute of Afghan Studies, Turkmenistan alone has oil and gas reserves with an estimated value of three trillion dollars. Yet there is widespread poverty.

In fact the problems confronting Central Asia are overwhelming. Among them are high levels of unemployment, exploding birth rates, political instability and drug smuggling. Because of its closeness to Afghanistan, Central Asia serves as transit point through which Afghan heroin makes its way to the European and Russian markets.

According to historian Andrew J Bacevich, Turkmenistan's former president-for-life, Saparmurat Niyazov, was himself reputed to be a major trafficker.

Journalist Ahmed Rashid, who has covered the area for 20 years and is the author of *Jihad*, writes that the Soviet Union still looms large – politically, economically and militarily – over the five countries. Moscow, writes Rashid, has abused Central Asia for generations, installing puppet governments, manipulating its natural resources and treating religious leaders with cruelty and contempt.

The area became a breeding ground for Islamic extremists. The vacuum left by the breakup of the Soviet Union was soon filled with radical groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), The Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) and Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami, run by mysterious men who went to Afghanistan for training, indoctrination, refuge and arms. According to Rashid some of the leaders became confidantes of Bin Laden.

Most political analysts have said that Islamism fueled the vicious war in Tajikistan, and caused terrorist acts in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Central Asian governments have responded to Islamist threats with an

indiscriminate crackdown on any religious practice lacking government consent. Freedom of religion does not exist, but then neither do most other freedoms.

According to Rashid all three movements are different. For instance Hizb ut Tahrir al-Islami advocates a unification of the greater Muslim world under a caliphate that would impose sharia law. Doing this, Hizb ut Tahrir al-Islami insists, will resolve all the problems of the Muslim world, including in Central Asia. Rashid reports that this movement has become increasingly popular in Central Asia.

Human rights groups have accused Uzbek President Islam Karimov of carrying out unchecked repression, intended to target extremists. The government's policies have repressed innocents as well as resulted in an accelerating growth of extremism. Karimov's government hasn't delivered. He seems unwilling to carry out the necessary democratic and economic reforms preferring instead to maintain the status quo through repression and blaming Islamic radicalism for it.

In February 1999, Tashkent, Uzbekistan's capital, suffered a series of car-bomb attacks that left 16 people dead and 100 injured. One of the bombs was detonated in a large square shortly before the arrival of Karimov.

Then the IMU moved to Kyrgyzstan, along the Tajikistan border, and took 13 hostages. After two months of combat operations the militants escaped to Tajikistan. Rebels announced the goal of replacing a secular government with an Islamic state. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan expelled the militants who then retreated to the mountain border areas from where they launched more attacks.

Rashid argues that it is repression and poverty that are the root causes of rebellion in Central Asia: "Whilst poverty and unemployment increase – and economic opportunities decrease – Central Asia's debt-ridden societies are ripe for any organisation or party that offers hope for a better life. Attempting to militarily defeat these Islamic revolutionary movements, then, will not eliminate the true causes. Only development and democratization will."

According to analysts threats emanating from the area are still present today. Wahhabism is still growing, and there is no sign that the war in Afghanistan will end soon.

There is no doubt that the breakup of the Soviet Union caused a shift in geopolitical power. The US built bases in Central Asia, an area traditionally seen as being part of Russia. The Baltic states are now part of NATO and the EU. Ukraine and Georgia are keen to follow their steps.

Frustration by the slow progress of reforms, the EU has recently launched the Eastern Partnership that will give Azerbaijan, Armenia, Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus and Georgia an opportunity to gain from trade benefits which are shared by EU member states, if they work towards harmonizing their laws with EU standards and developing a civil society and rule of law infrastructure. The EU has also promised to ease visa restrictions. According to Reuters, 600 million Euros have been allocated for the project over the next four years.

Russia has eyed these plans with mistrust seeing it as yet another way to intrude into its traditional sphere of influence.

It is yet unclear how the future development of post-Soviet states will unfold in years to come. Only time will tell. But as Gorbachev recently said: "We are seeing ourselves that there is still a lot to be done by us to achieve democracy, and so I say to Americans – you want us to be like you, but I can tell you it took you 200 years to build democracy, yet you want us to do the same in 200 days..." ●