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Russian Politics in Times of Change: Internal and External Factors of Transformation

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The first few months of 2014 brought an unprecedented collapse of the Russian Federation's image on the world stage, the worst since the end of the Cold War. The events in Ukraine and the reaction to them by a significant number of countries in the international community, quickly demoted Russia to that group of countries whose foreign policy provokes harsh condemnation. For the first time in decades, international sanctions have been put in place against Russia, adopted by a large number of the world's largest countries, *de facto* downgrading Russia to the rank of a rogue state; these sanctions are intended to exert pressure on the elite, who are responsible for implementing certain foreign policy decisions. For many experts, the events are associated with a new and sudden sea-change in Russia's foreign policy. However, it appears to us that the current stage of cooling relations with the West is a logical consequence of the way in which the Russian state was constructed in recent years; in fact, a different scenario could hardly have been anticipated. This article presents the author's view of the mechanisms and logic that shaped Russia's foreign policy course, which has evolved through several iterations in the last three years. The below analysis could facilitate a fuller understanding of Russian motives in international relations, and help find opportunities and mechanisms for dialogue between Russia and the West.

Vladimir Putin's new presidential term, which began in 2012, was typified by a significant transformation of Russia's foreign policy, both with respect to neighboring states, and world politics in general. The majority of pundits tend to link this transformation with domestic, social processes in Russia itself, an increasingly active public and a qualitative transformation of the Russian elite. However, we consider that Russia's current foreign policy concept is a complex combination of three factors, which are both foreign and domestic:

- A. The evolution of the political system, which took place as a result of competition between different groups within the Russian elite, over the past 3-5 years. As a result of these processes, Russia's political spectrum has a complex structure, which includes liberal-economic, conservative-political and oligarchic elements. Competition between these groups is a major factor behind the complex character of Russia's current foreign policy.
- B. The Eurasian economic and political integration project which, in the mindset of Russian leaders, is the key to Russian development in the 21st century. Success or failure in implementing the giant steps required to re-integrate post-So-

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viet space is seen as the main indicator of the effectiveness of the Russian political system today, and its foreign-policy strategies.

- C. The international security situation, which features a wide range of uncertainties and threats in the Middle and Far East, as well as Central Asia and Afghanistan.

We consider it important to analyze how much the above factors influence current Russian foreign policy, and then ascertain how much each factor can influence policies. This analysis will offer answers to key issues about the dominant factors in foreign policy decision-making in today's Russia, e.g. whether policy-making is reactive or proactive, and what transformations the next few years will bring.

The Russian Elite

To answer the questions raised, we must first determine the structure of the Russian elite today. This stratum can nominally be divided into two, deeply inter-connected segments. The first is a hierarchy: the distribution of economic and financial influence and interests within a ruling class that took shape during the first presidential terms of President Putin. The second is the values of the members of the elite who occupy the country's political governance system.

The Russian elite, taken in general, are fairly well understood. Between 2000 and 2010, four main groups of influence emerged in Russia. The first included Putin's so-called "inner circle," friends and colleagues from St. Petersburg and the uniformed services. All these individuals, to one degree or another, gained control over the state's largest industrial assets and basic commodities, including the lucrative energy sector. This group of Russia's modern elite has been fairly well studied by experts and analysts, and consists of a complex system of family and clan-type bonds, the result of which is control over key economic sectors, such as energy extraction and heavy industry, which are the mainstay of the state budget. These figures were the first to be targeted on USA and EU sanctions lists.

A large part of the modern political elite is made up of the uniformed services in the Russian state system. This includes representatives of the ministry of defense, the FSB and the Interior Ministry, which maintain strong ties with Putin's inner circle, but which have no direct influence on capital flows. Rather, they offer greater stability for the new system for distributing economic influence and state authority in the country, including political stability. In response, the state guarantees this group broad authorities and opportunities, including inflated spending on these sectors via a multi-layer system of preferences, financial support and other forms of state sponsorship.

It is noteworthy that a large number of bureaucrats and civil servants have experience as officers in the army, navy and special services; this is directly related to the collapse of the USSR and the restructuring of the army and the special services, when approximately 300,000 former officers were re-integrated into civilian roles. According to research by Olga Kryshnanovskaya's Center for the Study of the Elites, by 2003 the por-

tion of former officers who were appointed to federal and regional agencies was almost 35%.¹ This ratio was further boosted during Putin's presidency.

The third group to claim significant economic interests in the country is that of major Russian oligarchs of the "first wave" including the owners of big business, who obtained their companies through privatization in the early 1990's. This group was largely placed under the control of the state using various forms of political pressure. Criminal charges against Yukos and the fate of Mikhail Khodorkovsky clearly demonstrate that the oligarchs who do not accept the limits imposed by new political realities are doomed to vanish, together with their capital. However, despite the fact that most Russian oligarchs are integrated into Russia's current state system, they represent a fairly powerful and independent lobby group, which could strongly influence the authorities in certain areas of domestic and economic policy.

Another noteworthy group represents liberal-economic interests. The rise of this group is associated with President Dmitrii Medvedev's decision to include a young generation of liberal technocrats into the elite. This group includes the economic and financial staff of the cabinet of ministers, the leadership of the Central Bank, certain parts of the Russian scientific elite, including the Russian Academy of Sciences and the leadership of the country's leading universities. However, this subsection of the Russian elite has limited influence over foreign-policy decision-making, and is bound to operate within certain limitations imposed at a higher level. Nevertheless, the role of this group is significant because, paradoxically, the Russian economic model is fundamentally liberal, and therefore must be governed according to such principles. All attempts by the president's administration to introduce elements of a social state into this liberal model, as a rule, meet with resistance from the liberal-economic block, where it is well understood that high social commitments will undermine the performance of the current Russian economy and will slow economic growth. Therefore, Putin and his administration are often forced to heed the recommendations of the government's liberal-economic block.

In our classification, we have omitted members of the political elite in the Russian regions. Without a doubt, amongst regional leaders there are a fairly large number of influential political figures; however there are reasons not to take into consideration their role in determining the country's foreign policy. During the establishment of the Russian state in the 1990's, as the influence of the central authorities dwindled, the predominant model of relations in the construction of political governance in Russia was that of regional, clientelist relations which, as a rule, were an authoritarian symbiosis of regional political authority and business that depended upon it. In many ways, such a model was a result of the Soviet, party-based governance system.² In the absence of an ideological factor and as Moscow's influence over the regions contracted in 1991-1998, relations between the center and the periphery became less well-defined. However, when Presi-

¹ *Ol'ga Kryshstanovskaya*, "Putin's Regime: A Liberal Militocracy," *Pro et Contra* 7:4 (2002): 158-180.

² Sergey Biryukov, "The All-Invasive Clientella," *Svobodnaya Mysl* 7 (2012): 32-33.

dent Yeltsin left power, this trend was reversed. Reinforcing elements of state governance into a single “vertical of power,” Putin essentially deprived the regional elites of any tangible role in guiding Russia’s foreign policy.

Interestingly, the process of excluding the regional elite from the federal political space took relatively little time. As studies by the Sociology Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences have shown, in 2004, as construction of the “vertical of power” began with the cancellation of gubernatorial elections and reinforced control from Moscow over regional processes, politicians in the regions expressed their discontent, citing a growing conflict between the center of the constituent members of the federation.³ By 2006, however, surveys and studies by the same institute show that moods amongst the regional elite had undergone an abrupt change. The absolute majority of regional leaders supported the initiatives of the Kremlin and advocated the need to reinforce the “vertical of power” – they had learned to derive economic and political benefit from the new system of distributing authorities.⁴

We can thus state that, given the focused policies of the federal center, just 2-3 years are needed to change the character and structure of the Russian political elite. This fact is important to bear in mind, in comparison with the re-formatting of the Russian elite that started in 2012. This latter process deserves closer analysis.

Without dwelling in detail on the individual members of different parts of the Russian national elite, we can establish the key fact that during the years that Putin has been in power, this elite has expanded, acquiring its own independent interests and clients in political parties, various levels of trade and commerce, as well as society, and now has become a complex system of contradictions, interests and influence. Within this system, confrontations and conflicts of interests can occasionally arise. As a rule, these are resolved at the level of the single, central figure in the system – the President. Putin’s position as a moderator in the complex system of the elite’s political and economic interests gives him a dual role. On the one hand, the president is able to control processes inside the state, without allowing any single player, or group, to reinforce their position enough to dominate the political playing field. On the other hand, he is forced to duck and weave in decision-making—for both domestic and foreign policy—which can force him to make very difficult choices. In other words, the president is a hostage of the very political system that he has taken many years to create.

The continuing expansion of the elite has led to major fragmentation and division into segments and groups of interests.⁵ At the same time, there is a growing conflict between society and the elite, which was clearly demonstrated in a wave of public interest in the opposition forces in Russian politics, 2011-2012. The result of mass meetings by the opposition, whose leaders, believe the Kremlin, had certain connections with the

³ A.E. Chirikova, “The Vertical of Power in the Assessments of Regional Elites: Dynamics of Change,” *Politicheskie issledovaniya* 6 (2008), p. 101.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁵ “Politburo 2.0 on the Eve of the Reset of Elite Groups,” Report January–February 2013 (Minchenko Consulting, 19 February 2013), available at http://minchenko.ru/netcat_files/File/Politburo_full.pdf (in Russian).

West, was, ultimately, the deciding factor behind the selection of political ideas and values to guide the Russian political leadership. In our opinion the harsh reaction, suppressing the most active members of opposition organizations and political associations, was the first step towards transforming the overarching principle behind Russia's foreign policy course. For the Russian authorities, this signal launched two new processes: the discrediting, in mass consciousness, of the very idea of a liberal opposition, and the "nationalization of the elite."

Pressure exerted by the Russian authorities on the opposition can be explained as an attempt to secure a certain level of social and political stability within the state. This trend was always typical for the Soviet and Russian political systems. Crafting a restricted space for political institutions and parties, in which the system faces no domestic threats, has long been the reality in Russia, including after the collapse of the USSR. Reinforcement of the "vertical of power," despite the falling level of control over the regions, is seen by Moscow as one of the notable achievements since the end of Boris Yeltsin's presidency. The "color revolutions" in a number of post-Soviet republics convinced the Russian ruling class that control over the political process in Russia will guarantee some degree of immunity against social upheaval in society. The absence of genuine political competition and the predictability of elections are perceived as some of the most important elements in the Russian political space. This fact explains the slow development of civil society institutions and low political activity by citizens of today's Russia. It is for this reason that we focus not on Russian society, but on a narrow political stratum that has monopolized the political space in Russia.

The "nationalization of the elite" in this construct is a new element that determines the character of Russian foreign policy and requires more detailed analysis. This form of nationalization refers to a set of laws, adopted by the State Duma in 2012 and 2013, which banned civil servants from holding financial assets or real estate in other countries. This movement was nominally linked to a program to fight corruption, but was actually of uttermost political significance. The Magnitsky affair, worsening relations between the USA, the EU and Russia, highlighted a large number of strategic risks flowing from the deep integration of a large number of Russian civil servants into the economic systems of Europe and America. This fact inspired not only dissatisfaction amongst the population, but, from the viewpoint of Putin's team, made the Russian political class potentially vulnerable if confrontations with the West were to become more acute.

Another reason for this attempt to consolidate the ruling class around the Russian state system was the result of the 2012 presidential elections. It is no secret that Putin's return to power as president provoked negative emotions amongst a large majority of Western politicians and observers. Understanding this, Putin took the steps he could to minimize any possibility to exert pressure on him via the Russian elite, via their economic and financial interests in the West. Considering the views of Putin himself, and the confidence of many figures in his circle that any past or possible future political changes in the post-Soviet space were actually funded, to some degree, by the West, this should be considered as a defensive maneuver.

In addition, in his statement to the Federal Assembly of December 2012, Vladimir Putin particularly underscored the need to return the country's economic elite from offshore zones into Russian jurisdiction.⁶ Thus, a parallel process of nationalization of Russia's economic elite can also be observed. This was triggered by the events surrounding the economic crisis in Cyprus, as well as the sudden deterioration in the health of the Russian state budget. For whatever reason, stimulating a repatriation of Russian capital was seen by the Kremlin as way of minimizing possible geopolitical risks associated with increasing external pressure.

Naturally, such a nationalization of the elite cannot take place overnight. Nevertheless, the trends forming since 2012 overwhelmingly suggest that Russia is preparing to deflect possible challenges emanating from deepening political and economic clashes between itself and the West. Certainly, Russia will be unable to cut its far-reaching bonds with the world economy, or end its role as one of the largest exporters of fossil fuels. The European Union will also remain Russia's leading economic partner, although the process of withdrawing the elite from direct economic contact with the external world is seen within the Kremlin as a sort of insurance policy against direct pressure. It is also worth remembering the example of federal reform and the construction of the "vertical of power" starting in 2004, which included a complete overhaul of the hierarchical subordination of the regions to the central authorities in Moscow. Given a targeted policy, the Kremlin could completely rebuild the political system in the same 2-3 years. In other words, in 2014-2015 we will probably witness the completion of a new reshaping of the Russian elite, resulting in a new Russian foreign policy.

This simplified view of Russia's current foreign policy as a function of the domestic processes in the country portrays the policy as a defense mechanism. The logic behind such a defensive reaction follows the tradition of tension between East and West. The stronger positions of traditionalists/statists within the Russian ruling class, and the nationalization of that group, should reduce the geopolitical risks arising from a deeper confrontation with the West – a confrontation that has clearly deepened since the end of 2012. The culmination of the confrontation between the West and Russia in 2012 could be considered the adoption of the Magnitsky Act by the US Congress and certain European states, as well as laws adopted by the Russian State Duma in retaliation. Generally speaking, this is the moment when work really began to introduce systemic policies to generate a "new" social values' foundation for relations with the West. This was what prompted the Russian political system to gradually prepare for a possible deterioration of political relations with Europe and the USA.

The way that post-Soviet states developed after the collapse of the USSR and during the economic and political disintegration of the early 1990's generated a particular kind of psychological complex amongst powerful circles. This mindset is one of constant fears of external attacks on the sovereignty that evolved in Russia over the past two dec-

⁶ Verbatim record of the Statement of the RF President V. Putin to the Federal Assembly, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 12 December 2012, available at <http://www.rg.ru/2012/12/12/stenogramma-poln.html> (in Russian).

ades. This background was the launch pad for an important process in Russian foreign policy: the rapid adjustment of Russia's system of national values.

Two results of the political transformations that began in Russia in 2012 can be identified. First, the nationalization of the ruling class—with an emphasis on maximum loyalty to the political system—and the victory of a traditionalist, pro-state group, over the liberal wing of the Russian elite. Second, the shaping of a new set of guiding national values. A new system of conservative values was finally established, and began to be actively driven into mass consciousness. It can be defined as “new Russian conservatism.” The main theses of Russian conservatism were formulated by Vladimir Putin in a number of speeches, including an interview given to the American Associated Press, where he called himself a “pragmatic conservatist,”⁷ and a statement to the Federal Assembly in December of 2013. According to Putin, there are

more and more people who support our position of protecting traditional values, which for thousands of years have been the spiritual and moral foundation of civilization, of every people: the values of traditional families, a proper human life, including a religious life, not just a material life, but also spiritual, the values of humanism and diversity in the world. Of course, this is a conservative position. But, using the terms of Nikolai Berdyaev, “the essence of conservatism is not that it hinders movement upwards and forwards, but that it prevents movement downwards and backwards, towards chaos and darkness, a return to primitive existence.”⁸

It is noteworthy that today's version of Russian conservatism remains highly abstract in the interpretations given by Russian leaders. Far too great an emphasis is placed on universal values (equality, justice, the family and spirituality) which in Russia are always considered conservative, although they are inherent to almost any modern ideology. However, in the most general terms, the essence of “new Russian conservatism” can be defined as a combination of patriotism and traditionalism, as well as supporting the unbroken continuity between modern Russia and the historical roots of Russian statehood (the Tsarist Empire and the USSR). This concept also includes the ambition for Russia to regain its status as a leader in the post-Soviet space, and an independent player on the world stage, by the reinforcement of its military/political and economic influence in Eurasia. Thus, Russian conservatism bears very little relation to the concept of conservatism itself. Here, we agree with Vladimir Petukhov, head of the Center for Complex Sociological Studies at the RAN Sociology Institute, when he claims that there are actually very few conservatives in Russia in the usual meaning of the word: “What we see in current Russian politics is a combination of traditionalism and statism; moreover, this takes forms that are typical for the Soviet understanding of the state.”⁹

⁷ Exclusive interview with Vladimir Putin to *Perviy kanal* TV and the *Associated Press*, 4 August 2013, available at <http://www.1tv.ru/news/social/241135>.

⁸ Statement of the RF President V. Putin to the Federal Assembly, 12 December 2013, <http://kremlin.ru/news/19825> (in Russian).

⁹ Verbatim record of the Statement of Vladimir Petukhov at the Round Table “Project to create conservative man for today's Russia; social realities and prospects” (The International

An important peculiarity of the new Russian conservatism is the extraordinary combination of expansionism and isolationism. The dualist division of the world into West and East remains one of the key components of the new ideological doctrine. Meanwhile, the current Russian elite is seeking new ways to demonstrate its intention to prevent the values system of the West penetrating traditionally Eurasian space, and isolate itself from the destructive influence of Western values. At the same time, the promotion of proprietary values and ideological constructs in adjacent states is an integral part of foreign policy.

Another element of the new Russian conservatism is the reinforcement of the ruling elite's special social status. An interesting thesis was offered by Leonid Polyakov, professor of the Applied Political Science Faculty of the Higher School of Economics: Russian conservatism is the tradition of seeking power.¹⁰ In other words, from the Russian viewpoint, this ideology is generally intended to reinforce the political mechanism that guarantees that the existing state governance structure remains in power. This is the source of the very Russian concept of the political "Party of Power" – the force that dominates the political system of the country, the ideology of which is dedicated to maintaining the *status quo* in and around the country's power structures.

This new construct of values and ideology is penetrating mass consciousness, but to drive it deeper, the powerful are taking pains to reformat Russia's domestic information and social space. For example, concrete steps have been taken to strengthen control over the mass media. The RIA-Novosti news agency was reformed, then replaced by the International Information Agency Russia Today, against a backdrop of pressure on a number of independent media outlets. New laws curtail the freedoms of NGOs, public movements and civil society institutions, while also establishing the concept of "foreign agents." Those in power believe that such steps will create an information space capable of injecting previously-approved values and ideological constructs deep into the worldview of the majority of Russians.¹¹

A striking example of the insemination of this new ideological imperative into the consciousness of the politically amorphous majority was the creation, at the end of 2011, of the ONF movement – the Pan-Russian National Front, which brought together several hundred public associations, including the political party United Russia, and was intended to galvanize large swaths of the populace around the ruling elite, personified by Vladimir Putin, in the run-up to the 2012 presidential elections. This strategy was necessary because the ruling elite had largely exhausted its previous ability to mobilize voters: the "administrative leverage" of United Russia. The ONF manifesto states the need to "unite around common values that are the core of our national character and the moral

Foundation for Socio-Economic and Political Studies (The Gorbachev Foundation), 15 May 2014), http://www.gorby.ru/userfiles/02_petuhov_red_.pdf (in Russian).

¹⁰ Leonid Polyakov, "Five paradoxes of Russian conservatism," *Otechestvenniye zapiski* 17:2 (2004), available at www.strana-oz.ru/2004/2/pyat-paradoksov-rossiyskogo-konservatizma (in Russian).

¹¹ "The President Headed on a Course for Conservatism," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 30 December 2013, available at http://www.ng.ru/politics/2013-12-30/3_conservative.html (in Russian).

basis of our life. This is the desire to live by truth and justice, in harmony with our conscience. This means love for our Motherland, this means serving Russia. We are convinced that the bedrock of patriotic values generates the energy for cooperative action.”¹² It is clear from such language, that the ideological platform of new Russian conservatism is now being downloaded into public consciousness in the form of propaganda clichés, and with some success.

To summarize the domestic policy that influences the foreign policy of today’s Russia, we must underscore several key issues. First, the re-formatting of the Russian elite and articulating a new platform of values and ideology are two parallel processes, that kicked off at the end of 2011, as the ruling elite was busy consolidating its hold on power. Russia’s foreign policy doctrine is driven by the fundamental ambition to protect the current political system from external influence. In other words, one of the key motivations of the Russian elite is protection from the actions of agents outside the system, who could diminish the power of the state or otherwise weaken the political system. This phenomenon is not new to recent Russian history; similar trends could be seen in 2004-2007, following the chain of post-Soviet states that experienced political regime change. This most recent iteration includes both ideological and political aspects. Meanwhile, the logic behind Russia’s relations with the outside world has evolved, and it has become more important to consolidate Russian society around the ruling elite. The Ukrainian crisis, contrary to popular opinion, has not fundamentally impacted Russian policies – it has merely accelerated and reinforced trends that were identifiable long before the crisis broke.

The Eurasian Integration Project

The international context, inasmuch as it influences Russian foreign policy, can nominally be divided into two strata. The first is the Russian strategy to achieve the objectives of Eurasian integration. The second stratum consists of processes in world politics, which influence economic and military/political security in the world, and in regions adjacent to Russia.

The project of Eurasian integration has, in recent years, been one of the highest priorities on the Russian foreign-policy agenda. This project should be understood to include not only Russia’s ambition to wield greater political and economic weight in the post-Soviet space; this is an issue of long-term strategic development – in the opinion of the Russian ruling class and Vladimir Putin, this strategy answers the challenge to find a place for Russia and her closest allies in the complex, competitive environment of the multi-polar world of the 21st century. There are a number of reasons why this project should be considered separately from the domestic politics of the day. First, the Russian idea of re-integrating the post-Soviet space has a long history, and has gone through a

¹² “Manifesto of the Pan-Russian National Front,” adopted 12 June 2013, available at <http://onf.ru/structure/documents/manifest> (in Russian).

series of transformations over the past 15 years.¹³ The EEU, the CSTO and the SCO, as well as several other integration structures, and the way in which they function, are all the result of a fairly complex, sometimes failing attempt by Russian politicians to bind political motivation to an economic foundation. Second, Russia's long-term economic development potential is seen by experts as a function of the ability of post-Soviet states to create a common market, becoming an efficient link in a chain of cooperation stretching from the growing East (India and China) to Europe. Third, many post-Soviet states have their own reasons to jump onto the bandwagon: these are not to do with Russia's foreign influence, but rather the home-grown strategies of certain republics in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, which already face the same challenges – domestic, foreign, political and economic.

Nevertheless, by placing great political hopes on successful Eurasian integration, the core actions of Russian foreign policy are aimed at tackling possible barriers to the project. It is from this viewpoint that we should examine the influence of the post-Soviet space on the Kremlin's foreign policy. Moscow sees the Eurasian project as surrounded by harsh competition, which explains the rather jittery, rough-handed response when Russia has suspected—rightly or not—that a foreign or domestic player is attempting to slow down the project.

However, the idea of Eurasian integration across the CIS has no direct competitors. The integration projects that have now been launched and are being implemented (the Customs Union, EurAsEC, SES and CSTO) have constituted such a broad and deep effort, that any alternative cooperative project that could theoretically be initiated by an external player would be unable to compete – at least, in the foreseeable future.

This does not mean the project has no hidden traps and obstacles to negotiate – these all exist, and are significant. The situation in Ukraine fully justified Russia's fear that major economic partners could be drawn, relatively easily, into integration with competing economic powers.

Russia's hurried "gathering of lands" across the post-Soviet space into the basket of such economic and political unions is seen by American policy and analysis circles as grounds for concern, regardless of party or ideological leanings. In April of 2012, *The National Interest* published an article by Jeffrey Mankoff, deputy director of the Washington-based CSIS. In his opinion, the centripetal tendencies sponsored by Russia are dangerous, because they will, most likely, deprive targeted countries of the ability to independently forge foreign policy, instead following Russia on a whole series of critical international issues.¹⁴ In America, this fact has triggered the suspicions of both experts

¹³ For more details on the stages of post-Soviet integration, see Teodor Lucian Moga and Denis Alexeev, "Post-Soviet States Between Russia and the EU: Reviving Geopolitical Competition? A Dual Perspective," *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 13:1 (2013): 41–51, available at <http://connections-qj.org/article/post-soviet-states-between-russia-and-eu-reviving-geopolitical-competition-dual-perspective>.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Mankoff, "What a Eurasian Union Means for Washington," *The National Interest*, 19 April 2012, available at <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/what-eurasian-union-means-washington-6821>.

and officials. State Secretary Hillary Clinton, in a December 2012 speech, declared that the USA would strive to “slow or prevent” Eurasian integration, seeing in this process some elements of a resurrection of the USSR.¹⁵

Such statements by American experts and politicians give Moscow every reason to believe that America will take all opportunities to hinder any integration projects in Eurasia, despite the fact that Americans recognize the major economic dividends of integration between former Soviet republics, underscoring the “colossal advantages” of a common market, with free movement of goods and people. “The restoration of regional specializations, as they existed in the former USSR, will create the opportunity to emphasize the comparative advantages the republic boasts, in the face of international competition.”¹⁶ In such circumstances, the conclusions drawn by the Kremlin can be expressed as follows: America wants to hinder integration in the post-Soviet space, because it wants to deny Russia and her allies the benefits of such association.

As regards the European Union, the Kremlin considers that the activities and capabilities of the EU, as an independent force in the region of the former USSR, are more restricted than those of the USA. It is for this reason that the pressure the EU placed on Ukraine over the signing of the association agreement was seen by Russia as part of the West’s overarching strategy to frustrate Russia’s integration project. If we assume this is Moscow’s line of thinking, Russia’s abrupt reaction and the tendency to accuse the West collectively for all the difficulties on the path to Eurasian integration appear wholly logical. Moscow thinks that Brussels and Washington will concentrate the brunt of their efforts to prevent integration not on countries that have already expressed the desire to deepen integration, but rather on states that are of great interest to Russia, but which are still hesitant to take the plunge (Ukraine, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan).

An important idiosyncrasy of the Russian approach to politics in the post-Soviet space is the paradoxical determination to classify any hindrance to consensus-building with neighboring countries not as foreign-policy errors or miscalculations, but as sabotage by foreign agents – primarily the EU and the USA. This phenomenon has its origins in the post-Soviet psychological complexes of the Russian elite, and a geopolitical bias in viewing most processes unfolding anywhere in the world.

Without any doubt, there are states in the post-Soviet space which have a very negative attitude to the integration projects proposed by Moscow. Leaders and experts in these countries have repeatedly published critical statements targeted at Russian initiatives.¹⁷ However, Moscow is convinced that these republics will not be able to

¹⁵ Charles Clover, “Clinton Vows Thwart New Soviet Union,” *Financial times*, 6 December 2012, available at www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/a5b15b14-3fcf-11e2-9f71-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3C4y5Vkp.

¹⁶ Mankoff, “What a Eurasian Union Means for Washington.”

¹⁷ “The Eurasian Union or Western Privileges (a review of the Georgian press and comments by Georgian experts),” *InoSMI*, 19 April 2012, available at <http://inosmi.ru/caucasus/20120419/190807068.html> (in Russian); “Will the Eurasian Union solve the problems of the post-Soviet republics?,” interview with Professor Fikret Sadykhov, Azerbaijan, *Xinhua News Agency*, 1 December 2011, available at <http://russian.people.com.cn/95181/7662225.html> (in

independently influence integration processes in Eurasia, though they could make their territories and political resources available to support Russia's competitors.

In such a situation, Moscow's priority is to make the prospects of Eurasian integration economically attractive to her neighbors. Such tactics have been used by Moscow with success in the past, with the Customs Union, since 2012. One Kazakhstan publication, *Respublica KZ*, writes: "Russia is forced to create integration structures not only on terms of parity, but based on endless concessions. Russia is already giving Kazakhstan and Belarus more money, in the form of duties, than would be the case if the customs union members would settle accounts with Moscow in terms of real imports. Yet Moscow is ready to go further; for the sake of getting a quick signature on the agreement over the Eurasian economic commission, Russian negotiators swapped their categorical insistence on balanced voting in the SES (the RF has 57 % of the vote) for equal representation of the parties. I.e. one country – one vote. If Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan join the Customs Union, the RF's weight on the Eurasian commission will shrink from 1/3 to 1/5."¹⁸ Russia is also ready to invest heavily in member states; in May of 2014, for example, the decision was made to invest ca. 1.5 billion USD in infrastructure projects in Kyrgyzstan simply to allow the country to become an effective member of the EEU. For comparison: the annual goods trade between Russia and Kyrgyzstan is about 2 billion USD. Experts estimate that the Russian budget will lose around 1.5 billion USD each year to its membership in the single customs space between 2015 and 2017.¹⁹

There can be no doubt that the most important partner, in terms of the economic and political prospects for post-Soviet reintegration, both for the political leadership as a whole and Putin in particular, is Ukraine. It was here that, starting in 2012, we saw the attempts of the EU and Russia to offer alternative strategic paths to seduce Yanukovich's indecisive government to pursue either Eurasian or European integration. For the Kremlin, however, the pivotal moment was the change in political leadership. Here, Russian leaders see the color-revolutions scenario again, that had already taken place at the beginning of the 2000's. Considering the Moscow's phobias, discussed above, with respect to the strategies of America and the EU to squeeze Russia out of its own sphere of critical interests, such an abrupt, even vehement Russian reaction is easy to explain. We believe that Putin decided that, in the Ukrainian issue, the West has crossed a red line, infringing the unwritten consensus between Russia, the USA and the EU: to not use tools of political pressure and forced regime change in competition for influence in the post-Soviet space. We think that it was the violation of this *status quo* that explains the decision to annex Crimea and support the separatist movement in South-East Ukraine.

Russian); David Trilling, "Uzbekistan's Karimov Lashes Out at Putin's Union," *Eurasia Net.org*, 9 December 2011, available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64666>.

¹⁸ Aleksandr Karavaev, "The Vertical of Eurasia," *Respublika KZ*, 15 November 2011, available at <http://www.respublika-kaz.info/news/politics/18610> (in Russian).

¹⁹ Yana Milyukova, Petr Netroba, and Yulia Zabavina, "Russia buys the loyalty of allies issuing credits and forgiving debts," *RBK daily*, 12 August 2014, available at <http://rbcdaily.ru/economy/562949992116488> (in Russian).

The framework of this article does not presuppose an analysis of the events, or an assessment of the actions taken by any party to the conflict. However, the author considers that Russian leaders sincerely believe that interference by force, the annexation of Crimea and support for separatism in South-East Ukraine are the most appropriate defensive moves in reaction to Yanukovich being overthrown and the change in Ukraine's political course with support from the EU and America. They see this as the only possible way to protect the critical national interests of Russia in Eurasia. In this way the motivations behind Russia's foreign-policy strategy, in the context of interests in the post-Soviet space, also have a place in the formula of defense against external sabotage. The defensive tactics deployed are becoming more decisive, and causing more deaths. The Kremlin believes that this loss of human life is justified, as it was the opponent who deliberately raised the stakes in this competitive game. The events of 2008 in Georgia clearly demonstrated that Russia is ready to use military force when its strategic and geopolitical interests are in question. The events in Ukraine are in many ways a repeat of the Georgian scenario, with the key difference that Ukraine occupies geopolitical space that is far more valuable to Russia. Therefore, the decisiveness with which Russia commits to defend her interests will be far greater.

This circle of ideas is completed with the fact that implementing the integration strategy in the post-Soviet space is one of the core priorities in Russian foreign policy. The Eurasian Union, as the Kremlin's national project, is not merely a solution to the challenge of Russia's economic and political development; it is also a means of survival for Russia, as a visible player on the international arena. Such logical constructs as these can be seen to underpin the understanding that Putin and his circle share of the long-term foreign-policy strategy that the Russian Federation should implement.

In our opinion, the weakest link in Russia's Eurasian integration concept is the unwillingness to accept that problems in building relations with neighboring countries actually result from Russia's own diplomatic errors and miscalculations. Moscow persists in trying to find evidence of a geopolitical confrontation with the West. This is why any *rapprochement* between America, Europe and former Soviet republics appears to torment an over-sensitive Kremlin. The situation along Russia's borders offers a defensive motivation for Russian behavior and the desire to seek protection from foreign influence, which Russian leaders see as unfriendly. The behavior of a "besieged fortress" and the tendency for self-isolation, which have incurred economic and political costs for the country in the past, are now once again at the heart of Moscow's foreign policy.

The International Security Situation

An analysis of the factors that dictate Russian foreign policy would be incomplete if we did not also mention the broader international context, which is also important to understand the logic and content of Russian foreign policy. The way Russia sees itself in international relations is noticeably influenced by the general lack of certainty about how international relations are going to develop. The appearance of new threats and challenges due to the highly unstable situation in world security has produced discrepancies in how key world players assess these processes. However, one must recognize that the

international context has a far lesser impact on the nature of Russian foreign policy, and affects only some areas. Primarily, this concerns new global players, such as the BRICS countries, and the modernization of the of the country's defense potential.

Differences in how the nature and degree of current threats in Eurasia are assessed became a noticeable phenomenon as early as June 2008, when the newly-elected Russian president, Dmitry Medvedev, offered European partners a new "Pan-European Security Treaty" which included a rejection of the principles of "Atlanticism" in ensuring stability in Europe. Based on the contents of the document, it appears that Russia proposed suppressing the role of NATO as a main guarantor of the regional security architecture, and introducing new elements that would give non-members of NATO certain rights and guarantees of participation in the decision-making process.²⁰ Predictably, these initiatives were brushed aside by NATO countries and Russia's efforts to weaken American influence on European security issues proved pointless. Subsequent events in Georgia, in August of 2008, exacerbated yet further the disagreements between Russia and her Western partners.

The "reset" of relations between Russia and the USA, launched in 2009, was intended to reduce tensions between the two countries, but the results fell far short of those hoped for. Unfortunately, the large number of disagreements, ranging from the Iranian nuclear program to missile defense in Europe, remained a major disappointment even to the optimists, while plans to usher in an era of closer relations could not be fully implemented. This confirmed the thesis that Russia-USA relations are fundamentally cyclic, and periods of convergence are interspersed with inevitable, and protracted, periods of chilled relations.

The Arab Spring added greater uncertainty to international security; the wave of democracy in the Islamic world crashed to produce expanding circles of extremism and radicalism in Syria and Iraq. The Libyan and Syrian crises clearly showed that in time of political uncertainty, the factor of force in international relations continues to remain a priority. The Arab Spring taught the Russian leadership that they had correctly ascertained the basic elements of the international situation. The change of political elites in Libya, Egypt and a number of other states failed to stimulate a thirst for democracy in the region. Conversely, it detonated a new cycle of conflicts and catalyzed extremist and radicalist movements. It deepened mutual mistrust between Russia and the West, as well escalating debates about how the international community should respond to modern challenges.

Aware of the growing number of conflict hotspots in the world, Moscow considers that the only way to fill the gap in international security is to reinforce multi-polarity. The appearance of alternative centers of gravity that counterbalance the West, such as China, South America, India and Russia itself must, thinks the Kremlin, be a guarantee that political consensus will be sought for a wide range of modern challenges to international security at the UN and other international organizations.

²⁰ Draft *European Security Agreement* (in Russian), available at www.kremlin.ru/news/6152.

Russia's vested interest in supporting a global, multi-polar architecture can also be seen in the way she is bolstering her own military-political might. This was the focus of a campaign that began in 2011 to supersize Russian defense spending to 20 billion rubles by 2020. The state armament program, or GPV 2020, is far-reaching and ambitious, aiming to renew 70-85 % of the army, navy and air force. Some analysts and columnists have warned that the Russian program is too complex to implement, while the deadlines are too tight for the objectives listed.²¹ But even partial success will significantly boost Russia's military potential. Interestingly, the launch of the program was not connected to the worsening of Russia's relations with the West; it was initiated long before the reset was eventually abandoned, and preceded the events in Ukraine. In recent years, Russia has also strived to minimize the dependence of the military on foreign technology. Experts consider that these efforts have borne fruit – sanctions against the Russian military-industrial complex and limits on defense cooperation have had relatively little impact.

However, we believe that Russian policies with respect to key international problems often reflect events within or near Russia. This is the true context for interactions with major centers of gravity across the globe. Nevertheless, Russia's efforts in key international security issues are linked to the desire to reinforce its status of an independent center of influence on international security. The mentality of the Russian elite is still dominated by the complex that Russia must maintain its status of a great power.

* * *

The above analysis of current Russian politics prompts several conclusions. First, the Russian political system has begun another stage in the development of its system of values and ideology. In recent years, political reforms created a set of filters, associated with preserving the particular nature of the Russian political system today. The process of "nationalization" of the elite continues to strengthen this system, diluting bonds with the West that are based on ideology or values. We can state with great confidence that if the current system of power distribution holds in Russia, this political course will also remain in place for an extended period of time. A far-reaching information and propaganda campaign to shape public opinion in Russia has given Vladimir Putin a high popularity rating and massive support for his policies with respect to Ukraine and the West. All this supports the thesis that the escalation of tension in the region is highly likely to persist.

Meanwhile, the new format of political priorities and values is presented by the Russian authorities as a response to unfriendly attempts by Russia's partners to undermine the current system of state power in Russia, impinging on the interests of that system. Yet, Russia is not necessarily turning into a military dictatorship; this is not only far from reality – it would actually be impossible, given the way in which Russian state and society have developed. Russia's actions are consistent with the logic of reinforcing the

²¹ Yuriy Fedorov, "The State Armaments Program-2020: Power and Industry," *Security Index* 19:4(107) (2013), available at <http://www.pircenter.org/media/content/files/12/13880454280.pdf> (in Russian).

country as a full-fledged pole of gravity in the new hierarchy of international relations. The whole process is colored, however, by Russia's idiosyncratic view of the ways and means by which objectives are achieved. Russia continues to believe in *realpolitik* as a foundation of the world order of today and continues to see international relations through the prism of geopolitics, while being simultaneously blinkered by the baggage of Soviet and Russian history.

Russia is actively advocating for its Eurasian integration project, but the obstacles on this path also influence the flavor of Moscow's foreign policy. Decisiveness in the use of force and the uncompromising assertion of national interests at various international fora is becoming a long-standing attribute of Russia's integration strategy. If a mutually-acceptable and sustainable consensus between Russia and her partners cannot be found for interactions pertaining to Eurasia, there is a danger of sliding into a protracted conflict, which could be a source of serious problems both for Russia and her neighbors in Eastern and Western Europe.

The current developmental phase of Russia's new foreign policy and the worsening of relations with the West are not, however, anything fundamentally new. All the same phenomena could be observed in Russia's relations with the West in the late Soviet period. A classic example is the 1999 NATO operation in Yugoslavia, Kosovo, and then Georgia in 2008. Each of the previous crises could be solved with mutual compromises and adjustment of the political course by both parties to the conflict. The difference in the latest conflict is that Russia's range of military and political capabilities has expanded, creating the dangerous illusion that she is capable of effectively withstanding pressure from the West for long periods of time. This particular conflict is also complicated by the larger international situation, peppered with new threats to international security. Greater risks lead the parties back to the logic of "stand-off" of the Cold War, which is counterproductive and dangerous when faced by common threats such as terrorism and extremism, currently snowballing in North Africa and the Middle East.

Will the West and Russia be able to find an acceptable balance of interests in this situation? Some form of political consensus between Europe and Eurasia is probably going to be vital. The experience of the failed "reset" must be taken into account in the quest for a new format for relations between Russia and her partners in the West and the East. There can be no doubt that, in this new conflict, Russia is a far weaker opponent than the consolidated Western bloc that includes the EU and the USA. Therefore, it will be easier and more appropriate for Western partners to propose a comprehensive political program to end the crisis; this would also become a roadmap for Russia and Ukraine. This approach could reduce the level of disagreement. Perhaps a deeper understanding of the logic, idiosyncrasies and driving forces in Russian foreign policy will help find the solution to this puzzle.

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