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Is Russia Back to the Game?

ABSTRACT

Russia is believed to be back on the world stage. President Vladimir Putin's policy based on the idea of conservatism, an assertiveness towards the West and the desperation to become an important global player has successfully lifted Russia's significance in the international scene. To regain the status of a superpower Russia has developed a strategy of counterweighing politically the West and particularly the United States.

Russia's ambitions to keep the post-Soviet space in its zone of influence made Russia face the consequences of the global economic and financial crisis, which hit Russian economy in 2008 and 2009, and then the European and the American sanctions imposed on Russia after annexation the Crimea and intervention in the Eastern Ukraine.

The goal of this paper is to answer a few questions – whether the anti-Western shift has allowed Putin to gain an effective impact on the international politics? Has Russia indeed regained the ability to reshape the international order, or it remained at least a regional power with global ambitions?

Keywords:

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1. PUTIN'S VIEW ON WORLD ORDER

During the 43. Munich Security Conference in 2007 president Vladimir Putin presented a clear and comprehensive vision of world order. Stating that the United States sought to construct a unipolar world he accused Washington of a desire to play the hegemonic role. "The unipolar world that had been proposed after the Cold War did not take place", the Russian leader said. "However, one might embellish this term, in the end it refers to one type of situation, namely one center of authority, one center of force, one center of decision-making. It is a world in which there is one master, one sovereign. And in the end this is pernicious not only for all those within this system, but also for the sovereign itself because it destroys itself from within. Moreover, this certainly has nothing in common with democracy. Because, as you know, democracy is the power of the majority in light of the interests and opinions of the minority" (*Speech*, 2007). Furthermore, president Putin blamed the U.S for provoking a new nuclear arms race, expanding NATO in the Eastern Europe and more generally destabilizing international security, not to mention that the U.S. was ignoring the United Nations and relying on the unilateral use of force.

As a matter of fact, such a vision has been nothing new in Russian way of political thinking. The turning point was however so called Primakov's doctrine presented in 1996 during the 51st session of the UN General Assembly (Primakov, 2004, pp. 140–141). Yevgeny Primakov, the then Minister of Foreign Relations, was an author of the Russian doctrine of multilateralism, whereas Vladimir Putin is only a follower of these ideas. Primakov's basic assumption was that Russia being weak should use all of its old (Soviet) contacts and partners facing contradictory interests with the U.S to reshape the international order into more multilateral. Not surprisingly, among natural allies he pointed i.a. Iran, Iraq, Arab countries and China. Generally, Primakov was calling for abandoning the pro-Western strategy and focusing more on its own, egoistic interests. He was strongly convinced that only in this way Russia would manage to prevent U.S. from marginalizing it in international politics and would make Washington perceive Moscow as a partner. He pointed as well that the West was obliged to recognize Russia's special role in the post-Soviet sphere and its unique responsibility for security there.

Regarding the Russian shift in world politics the fundamental speech was delivered by Vladimir Putin to the assembly of the Valdai Club in Sochi in 2014. President noted then that contemporary geopolitical institutions, systems and law mechanisms have become weak, distorted and ineffective against a rising tide of violence, instability and brutality in many parts of the world, in particular in parts

of the Middle East and in Ukraine. As a result, he proposed to establish the New Rules, and within this world of New Rules, Putin placed Russia decisively on a path in which the country will emphasize pursuing its own development, selectively adopting those modern global trends that would enhance the country's progress and strengthen its society by emphasizing traditional values that have stood the country well in times of crisis. Russia will look back into its history, forward into a likely future and around it to find and draw upon those resources and forces that will ensure and enhance its progress. Putin explicitly rejected the idea of Russia becoming an empire again and envisages the country as being a partner willing to work with others on the basis of mutual interest and respect (Putin, 2014).

A year later he developed his vision and expressed it during the 70th session of the United Nations General Assembly (Putin, 2015). In essence, he blamed the West for exporting revolutions, which have resulted in creating areas of anarchy filled with extremists and terrorists like ISIS in Iraq and Syria. In his view it was not Russia but the West dominated by the Cold War-era mentality and the ongoing ambition to conquer new geopolitical areas. This expansion has been continuing to Russia's disadvantage not only in the political perspective but also in military field by new installations close to Russian borders. He stressed that the post-Soviet states were forced to face a false choice between joining the West and carrying on with the East. Sooner or later – as he mentioned – this logic of confrontation was bound to spark off a major geopolitical crisis. And in this way what happened in Ukraine was in fact inspired by the West. In other words people's widespread frustration with the government was used for instigating a *coup d'état* from abroad.

This vision of world politics became a part of an official foreign policy doctrine approved in December 2016 (*Foreign Policy*, 2016). According to it world is currently going through fundamental changes related to the emergence of a multipolar international system. The structure of international relations is becoming increasingly complex. Globalization has led to the formation of new centers of economic and political power. Global power and development potential is becoming decentralized, and is shifting towards the Asia-Pacific region, eroding the global economic and political dominance of the traditional western powers. In such new international circumstances tensions are rising due to disparities in global development, the widening prosperity gap between states and growing competition for resources, access to markets and control over transport arteries (*Foreign Policy*, 2016).

The attempts made by the Western powers to maintain their positions in the world, including by imposing their point of view on global processes and conducting a policy to contain alternative centers of power, leads to a greater instability in

international relations and growing turbulence on the global and regional levels. The struggle for dominance in shaping the key principles of the future international system has become a key trend at the current stage of international development (*Foreign Policy*, 2016).

2. ROOTS OF ANTI-WESTERN STRATEGY

An anti-Western stance is not new in Russian politics and seems to be one of the most obvious and convenient instruments in its diplomacy. After collapse of the Soviet Union it was clear that Russians felt deeply disappointed with the West, which – according to them – had betrayed Russia by breaking an unwritten promise made to Mikhail Gorbachev by then US Secretary of State James Baker that the US would not extend NATO membership to former Warsaw Pact nations. What is more, Russians felt humiliated by an open marginalization in international politics and perceiving Russia as a junior-partner in relations with the U.S. In fact, from 1991 Russians could only protest against three waves of NATO's eastern enlargement: in 1999 (Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic), 2004 (Slovakia and the Baltic States), and 2007 (Bulgaria and Romania). They also saw their United Nations Security Council veto failing to prevent NATO's military action in Serbia (1999) and the U.S.-UK invasion of Iraq (2003).

Consequently, Russia was only able to follow the order constituted by the West. Such a strategy was taken by Russia's first president, Boris Yeltsin, who tried to fully integrate the country with the West. The liberal westernizers in post-Soviet Russia argued for the "natural" affinity with the West based on shared values like democracy, human rights, and a free market. President Boris Yeltsin and his foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev pursuing policy of strategic partnership and integration with the West were inspired by the Western promises of support both political and financial. The reality was however different. Western investments remained scarce, and Russian voice was ostensibly ignored in international politics (Tsygankov, 2014, p. 26). Simultaneously, the dramatic economic decline and gripping the bulk of Russian economy by a small group of oligarch resulted in a vast criticism of president and the reformists. As a matter of fact all of these circumstances have opened the window for statists and those who believed in the need to restore Russian power and prestige in international politics.

Therefore, from the very beginning Vladimir Putin put forward the ideology of pragmatism and self-concentration. The new ideology was a combination of westernism and pro-state attitude, what meant Russian cooperation with the U.S

after the terrorist attacks in 2001 (Tsygankov, 2014, p. 135). In the programmatic first article as a president “Russia at the Turn of the Millennium”, that he addressed to his electorate in 1999 the future president emphasized patriotism, a strong state, and social solidarity as his key values. Nevertheless unlike Gorbachev or Kozyrev, Putin was not eager to replicate Western social democratic or liberal values on Russian soil, and he made it clear that Russia would never become the “another U.S”, rather he saw his country as a modern great power capable of adapting to a changing world under state leadership (Putin, 2000, pp. 209–219).

In fact, Putin’s anti-Americanism contained substantial elements of calculation. He realized that some pillars of power should be strengthened because the domestic situation was liquid and macroeconomic factors were deteriorating. Presumably these obstacles could influence social disapproval of the government and president Putin himself. In these circumstances the distinction between domestic and foreign policy evaporated. Attacking Washington was no longer part of managing the United States, but became an extension of domestic politics by other means. In adopting anti-Americanism as a tool to regain lost – during his Prime Minister term – mass support, Putin was acting in the tradition of previous rulers, such as Tsar Nicholas I, Lenin, and Stalin, who exploited the idea of a Russia besieged by enemies abroad and traitors within (Lo, 2015, p. 15).

A combined domestic and foreign policy was also apparent in the distancing of the Putin elite from Western-led norms, and the reversion to “traditional values”. The conservative ideology has become the ideological foundation of the Kremlin’s new political strategy. Its main objective is to stabilize the regime by consolidating Russian society around this project, diverting people’s attention from economic crisis and complicated domestic stance, as well. The Kremlin has also used this argument to justify Russian great power aspirations, implying the right to shape the world order, to legitimize its confrontation with the ‘degenerate’ West, and to facilitate its search for allies (Rodkiewicz, 2015, p. 5). Such a strategy has brought quick benefits by neutralizing the public’s discontent with the Kremlin’s policy and redirecting its frustration against the West (Rodkiewicz, 2015, p. 6).

3. CHALLENGING THE WEST

Russia’s assertiveness towards the West has been growing for years. It was initiated not by attacking Ukraine in 2014, neither the war with Georgia in 2008, but was set up much earlier, in the mid-1990, by Yevgeny Primakov, the author of a doctrine of multilateralism in Russian diplomacy. Whereas until 2008 Russia was trying

to rebuild its potential, first of all by consuming oil and gas incomes, since 2012 Putin has anticipated a cold reception for the West. He already returned to the post of a head of state and took the lesson from the mass street protests of 2011/2012 (Dannreuther, 2011). After the electoral fraud that sparked massive social protests Putin radicalized his politics, because he was convinced that the riots – in Russia in 2011/2012 and ‘colored revolutions’ in post-Soviet republics – Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005) – were inspired by the U.S. to topple his power or to weaken Russian influence in the near abroad. While undertaken under the banner and in the name of democracy and moderate nationalism, these “revolutions” essentially were a reshuffling of the balance of power among the ruling oligarchical clans and elites under the disguise of broader social protest, ultimately reproducing the “pre-revolutionary” conditions and sources of instability (Stepanova, 2016, pp. 23–35).

Consequently, Putin’s fundamental conclusion was “the more assertive towards the West Russia is, the stronger position in international politics it captures”. So, the new strategy meant challenging the U.S especially in the regions, where Americans created a political vacuum. Such a vacuum appeared first and foremost in Syria after social riots sparked in 2011. Although the Middle East has never been a priority in Russian diplomacy, conflict in Syria has created an opportunity to make international society notice Russia’s role far from a marginalized one, weaken American impact in the region, and make the U.S bargain with Russia, as well. Above all, the Kremlin is interested in recognizing its important role in shaping a world order, achieving compensation in Ukraine and generally pulling back the West from the post-Soviet republics (Trenin, 2015). Not surprisingly then, Putin refused to simply help the U.S. oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from the post. By the way, the lesson of Libya, where Moscow’s abstention at the UN Security Council in 2011 had allowed a NATO-led humanitarian intervention, which resulted in a regime change and a loss of Russian interests in the country, was also learned.

In Syria Russia is cooperating basically with Iranians, who share with Russians an interest in maintaining Bashar Assad regime and weakening the American involvement in the region. Undoubtedly, it does not mean that Putin is ready to defend Bashar Assad for any price. He is going to support the regime as long as it will be in Russian interests. Apart from Iranians, who carry out the land operation along with Assad’s troops, to act more successful Russia needed to deal with Turkey, interested in keeping Kurds at bay. For Russia Turkey is definitely a crucial partner as it is an essential player in the region and at the same time of crucial importance for the West. This calculation brought Russia to rapproche-

ment with Turkey after the fatal shootdown of Russian Sukhoi Su-24 in 2015. A prolonging crisis in bilateral contacts was by far not beneficial for Putin and Erdogan, particularly due to a complex situation in northern Syria and Iraq. It is worth mentioning however that Turkey seems to be a risky partner for Moscow, because Ankara may anyway challenge the Russian interests and influence in the post-Soviet zone, first of all in the Caucasus, then even in Ukraine, particularly in the Crimea. What is more, Turkey not only once was fighting with Russia – in the past during the Balkan wars over the control of the Black Sea and much recently by supporting anti-Russian movements in the post-Soviet republics, not to mention that they compete in the same natural gas market.

Russia has so far achieved its objectives at remarkably low cost. Firstly, Moscow came back to the tiny group of key political players in world. Since then any peace treaty in Syria might not be negotiated without Russia, especially if Moscow has effectively shown its capacity to opt for autonomous, unilateral action when the stakes are high for itself and in areas where it has some comparative strengths and competitive competence. Secondly, the Kremlin strongly improved its international image as a power regaining its prestigious international status. Thirdly, Putin has successfully marginalized the U.S. impact on the developments in Syria and thereby strengthened its position in compelling the United States in particular to talk to Russia more “as an equal”, and moving the Ukraine/Crimea issues, relatively speaking, into the background.

The political crisis that erupted in Ukraine in early 2014 has ended the era of cooperation in Russian-Western relations and opened a new period of heightened rivalry, even confrontation (Trenin, 2014, p. 10). The crisis is rooted in Russia’s and UE competition for the future geoeconomic orientation of Ukraine. For Russia it meant a next step of the West expansion in the Eastern Europe and in fact crossing once again the red line of spheres of influences. Russia was namely interested in making Ukraine integrate with the Eurasian Economic Union rather than signing an Association Agreement with EU.

Russia decided to start an open diplomatic war with Ukraine and even initiate separatist movement in the Eastern Ukraine for a few reasons. First of all, to cut the process of bounding Ukraine with the UE and more widely with the West, what would end up with reducing the control over the near abroad. Secondly, Putin had to prove that has been successfully rebuilding a new Russian “empire”, in which Ukraine has been playing a crucial role. Thus, since the very beginning Russia had to realize two tasks – first of all to take the opportunity of regaining the Crimean Peninsula, what would be very welcomed among Russians as a proof of reunifying the Russian power. Then, the Kremlin has to keep destabilization in Ukraine just

to convince the Ukrainian society that the new government is not able to rule effectively and – how Putin was mentioning many times – its status is illegal. Indeed, Russia succeeded in destabilizing Ukraine and making international negotiations ineffective. Nevertheless, Moscow paid also high costs of such aggressive policy – imposed sanctions by the European Union and the United States being regularly prolonged – European at least to the mid-2017 and American till 2018. Successive waves of sanctions combined with efforts to isolate Russia politically immediately caused a deep plunge of the Russian stock market, a massive capital flight out of Russia, and a further weakening of the ruble. As a result just in 2017 Russia may slightly leave the recession and move to years of stagnation.

In a long-term perspective the goal of the Kremlin is to keep the conflict in Ukraine unsolved or at least frozen. Simultaneously very important is to make the West bored with the conflict due to the complexity of this long-lasting conflict and imperceptibly return to the policy of “business as usual”. It would also likely bring to lift sanctions and break Russia’s isolation. Finally, combining it with more promising changes in the international atmosphere it would allow Russia to implement the scenario of Finlandisation of Ukraine and keep it *de facto* in its sphere of interests (Kirchick, 2014).

4. A WIND OF CHANGE?

From Putin’s perspective the victory of Donald Trump in presidential elections in US was very promising. The Democratic Party candidate Hilary Clinton would have been the worst scenario for Moscow, because of being more experienced, with widespread contacts and one of the few Western politicians making Putin not comfortable while discussions. Furthermore, she stayed behind not only the so called Russian-American reset, but – in Putin’s opinion – she was inspiring the social protests in Moscow and Sankt Petersburg after parliamentary elections in Russia in 2011.

It is not surprising that for the Kremlin Donald Trump is giving more political alternatives. There are many common features of leaders. Putin and Trump are both strong personalities, perceived as machos, straightforward in contacts with public and what is crucial – having an image of pragmatics. Trump’s slogan “Make America great again” seems to fallow Putin’s calls to restore Russian power. Russians are expecting from the U.S under Donald Trump generally weakening the Western institutions like NATO or EU by reducing its engagement in European security and even withdrawing American troops from the Eastern flank. They

also hope for limiting contacts with the European Union, which is believed to be a tough trade partner for the U.S. So far, Putin has been stressing that D. Trump is a pragmatic leader, who is thinking in a rational and pragmatic way. Such an attitude would give Russians a hope for a rapproach between both countries based on pragmatic interests.

Russians are quite optimistic because of the nominations in the new administration. They welcomed Rex W. Tillerson as a new Secretary of State, who is well known in Russia where as a boss of Exxon Mobile he has had close business ties. Not only him, but also Gen. Michael T. Flynn, President-elect Donald J. Trump's choice for national security adviser has cooperated closely with the Russian counterparts (Rosenberg, 2017). However the most impressive nomination is for the post of security adviser. Henry Kissinger is a legendary American diplomat, well known as an architect of American opening to China and brilliant negotiator in the Middle East, first of all however as a father of the Realpolitik. For Russians crucial is what Kissinger stated openly, namely that rapprochement with Russia would be a proper step allowing the U.S to face a growing power of China. Hence Russia and the U.S. might cooperate in interest of stability in world (Ferguson, 2016).

5. IN LIEU OF CONCLUSIONS

Russian foreign policy has experienced numerous fluctuations over the past two decades. The main change is however a successful attempt to go back to the international game. Undoubtedly because of the Syrian and Ukrainian campaigns Russia made the West treat Moscow as a serious partner.

There are however many challenges that Russia is facing. The key one is the lack of modernization, what is making the fast economic development impossible. Consequently, instead of improving in global economic race Russia stays among the minor states far behind the top 10. Nothing allows to claim that in the close future Russia would catch up with the most developed countries. Extracting and exporting oil and gas is a guarantee – providing the high prices in the international markets – of stable and growing financial incomes, but on the other hand of a long-lasting dependence on the foreign markets.

Putin is aware of being dependent on the European oil and gas demand. Remembering that the bulk of Russian GDP is based on oil and gas export, Russia cannot isolate itself from the West. What is more, the West is the main trade partner for Russia, as well. The EU countries constitute half of its foreign trade, not to mention that the West is the most reliable partner for Russia, because it is ready

to bargain with Moscow in opposite to China which openly is perceiving Russia as a junior partner and is ready to demonstrate it.

Thus, Russia is devoted to be embarked in the West despite of all political crises, “a new cold war” or escalations rhetoric. Nevertheless keeping in mind the successful campaigns that helped Donald Trump win elections and a growing experience in cyber sphere, the Western countries should expect that Russia will continue the strategy of challenging the West, however without crossing the line of a direct confrontation.

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