

Russia's Chairmanship of International Organizations

THE QUESTIONABLE PURSUIT OF SOFT POWER IN MULTILATERAL SETTINGS

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Chairmanship in international organizations is one institutional form of soft power major states use to establish common policy frameworks and enhance their leadership potential. The agendas of chairing governments usually reflect policy spheres in which they have major traction and can thus lead by example.

Many countries have used their rotating presidencies in international organizations in this fashion. For instance, Germany and Poland used their presidencies in the European Union to promote more intensive policies toward Eastern Europe, while Hungary took advantage of its EU presidency to promote the Danube regional project.

For Russia, this topic is currently salient due to its chairmanship of the G20 and hosting of the G20's forthcoming summit in St. Petersburg in September 2013. This memo assesses Russia's efforts to utilize its multiple chairmanships in regional and global organizations for the sake of fostering its own international agenda.

Russia in Regional Organizations

In regional organizations, Russia's stated priorities are largely inconsistent with or irrelevant to its actual policies or the priorities of other key region-shapers. Russia's chairmanship of APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation), culminating in the Vladivostok summit of September 2012, was focused on the following priorities: liberalization of trade and investment; regional economic integration; food security; transportation and logistics, including facilitation of border-crossing procedures; and innovative technologies, research, and education. Human security was also mentioned as one of Russia's interests. Huge investments in upgrading the host city's infrastructure signalled Russia's interest in the Asia-Pacific region, although these were ultimately mismanaged and did not extend far beyond political symbolism. In general, Russia's declared priorities remained rather abstract and largely detached from its domestic agenda in the Far East, essentially focused on stimulating investment in Russia's eastern regions and managing the effects of Chinese migration.

Russia's chairmanship in BSEC (Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation) from July to December 2011 was marked by a long list of priorities that included institutional effectiveness, transportation infrastructure, tourism, energy, ecosystems and bioprotection, coordination between law-enforcement agencies in security issues, food security, and mass communication. In connection with Russia's chairmanship, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov emphasized that Russia was opposed to the politicization of regional agendas, which basically amounted to a refusal to discuss troublesome security issues in the region, above all the consequences of the August 2008 war with Georgia. On the one hand, Moscow longs to depoliticize the BSEC agenda; on the other hand, it advances a purely political demand for equality in relations with the EU, which only strengthens a false feeling of self-sufficiency and an underestimation of multilateral regional diplomacy.

Russia's chairmanship agenda in the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) from July 2012 to June 2013 consisted of four points. The first concerned modernization and innovation, which was transposed from the Russia-EU agenda but not properly coordinated with the policies of all local actors. This is particularly the case with energy policy, in which the priorities of Russia's closest neighbors, the three Baltic states, are not necessarily in line with Russia's interests (they include energy efficiency, regional LNG terminals and interconnections, sustainable energy plans, liberalization of energy markets, and use of renewable energy).

Second, Russia included in its chairmanship agenda the concept of state-private partnerships, which has been largely discredited within Russia itself by the large-scale corruption involved in the construction of Olympic infrastructure in Sochi. Russia can hardly be a flagship country in this respect.

Third, the elevation to the top of Russia's Baltic agenda of tolerance as an antidote to extremism and radicalism looks hypocritical against a backdrop of growing intolerance within Russia and an overly broad interpretation of extremism easily adaptable to the Kremlin's own political interests. For that matter, promoting religious and ethnic tolerance would probably have greater significance in more conflict-ridden regions like the Caucasus or Central Asia, where Moscow prefers to keep a low profile.

Fourth, the inclusion of visa facilitation in the regional agenda for the Baltic Sea region is out of place. Moscow's goal might be to project the good experience of Russia's visa facilitation agreement with Poland, but the CBSS has no policy prerogatives in this domain, as it is an element of the wider EU-Russia relationship.

As a chair of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council from 2007 to 2009, Russia pledged to promote sustainable development, including environmental protection (fostering biodiversity) and the protection of small ethnic groups; healthcare; education; trade liberalization, transborder cooperation and facilitation of customs regulation; energy-saving technologies; and cooperation in emergency management. In this list, perhaps the most vulnerable element is Russia's declared care for indigenous peoples. The indigenous groups that live in Russia's north are constantly appealing to the central government – with little effect to date – for legal protection of their traditional environs and way of life from large-scale ecologically detrimental extractive projects.

Russia and Global Organizations

Many in Russia, as elsewhere, see global organizations as elements of the nascent global governance infrastructure. It is through this prism that Russia's engagement with the G8 and G20 should be analyzed.

As chair and host country of the G8 in 2006, Russia chose to promote three priority areas. First, it elevated energy to the very top of its agenda, a problematic move due to the divisive nature of the issue. Russia's efforts were unable to bridge gaps between producing, transporting, and consuming countries, a fact that was illustrated by its subsequent series of gas conflicts with Ukraine. These conflicts raised serious questions about Russia's trustworthiness among EU member states.

Second, Russia pledged to focus on education, an area in which its global positioning is decidedly inferior. The Russian government has become increasingly upset about the low international ratings of Russian universities, the migration of professional cadres to foreign universities, and other symptoms of an educational system in crisis. The functioning of transnational educational projects, considered one of Russia's landmarks in this sphere, has been hindered by the low effectiveness of Russian educational institutions, and a controversial higher education reform has provoked negative reactions among professional educators and part of the ruling elite itself. The rather narrow agenda item of migrant integration through education is important, but its social effects are surpassed within Russia by growing nationalism and xenophobia.

The third Russian priority as chair of the G8 was healthcare, another area where the domestic record is wanting, from declining life expectancy to the underfinancing of medical institutions. Moreover, medicine is a sphere that illustrates Russia's critical dependence on Western technology and know-how.

The G20 is currently the focus of Russian diplomatic attention due to the September 2013 summit in St. Petersburg. The G20 plays a key, if mixed, role in Russia's promotion of its approach to international politics. On the one hand, as liberal think tank INSOR has noted, the Kremlin perceives Russia's chairmanship in the G20 (like the G8) to be instrumental for redressing Russia's relations with the West, which have drastically deteriorated since Putin's resumption of the presidency in May 2012. On the other hand, Russia considers its G20 chairmanship to represent the interests of the BRICS states, driving Moscow toward a policy of balancing and de-centering the West, rather than cooperation with it. This is particularly the case with regard to politically sensitive issues like Syria and North Korea.

Russia's G20 agenda has the following priorities. First are issues of investment, employment, food security, and human capital development. This is an excessively large basket involving numerous activities in both core economies and financially unstable regions. The overall progress and success of policies in this basket will be hard to measure.

Second, Russia has declared the building of trust and transparency to be among its priorities. When it comes to practice, however, this area is lacking in success stories. In the Cyprus debt crisis, Russia and the EU failed to find a common approach and demonstrate the benefits of collective action across institutional divides. Global sporting

events are mentioned as one of the specific areas for which accountability and the eradication of corruption require international efforts, yet there are no signs that Russia is willing to go global in terms of controlling, for example, the management of the Sochi Olympics, which have become associated with large-scale profligacy and weak financial discipline.

Third, Russia has prioritized governance effectiveness, including anti-protectionist measures and sustainable development. In particular, the good practices of German businesses in Russia were discussed at meetings of the B20 (business associations of G20 states) prior to the St. Petersburg summit. However, the recently released 2012 Progress Report on the Four EU-Russian Common Spaces has noted how Russian sanitary and phytosanitary measures remain “non-transparent, discriminatory, disproportionate and not in line with international standards and norms.” In 2012, these included new restrictions in the veterinary sector, including a refusal “to withdraw the establishment listing requirement for a number of commodities...contrary to its WTO commitments.” The report also noted that Russia “threatens to impose restrictions on nursery products...without a scientific justification” and resists “EU-supported attempts to further reinforce the sustainability of fisheries” in Antarctica.

Conclusion

In theory, Russia might use its chairmanship in international organizations for the sake of further socializing itself internationally in two ways – by demonstrating leadership on the basis of its own domestic example and by publicly accepting commitments in key spheres and in coordination with major partners. Such an outcome would fall outside *realpolitik*-based models of international relations like spheres of influence and the balance of power.

Yet Russia appears to be failing on both counts. Russia’s presidencies in regional and global organizations matter more for its public relations than for its international socialization. In the Baltic and Black Sea regions, Russia is not eager to engage in full-fledged cooperation with the EU, but it also lacks a policy of its own comparable to those of Brussels (for example the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region or the Black Sea Synergy effort). Russia wishes to portray its turn from Europe to the Asia-Pacific region as the emergence of a new policy substantially different from its relations with EU neighbors, yet in practice Russia’s APEC agenda does not drastically differ from the agenda of trans-border cooperation Moscow pursues in the EU-Russia common neighborhood.

Russia also faces serious challenges when it comes to global organizations. In spite of the overwhelmingly economic agenda of its G20 chairmanship, the key problem looming large here is political: how to strike a balance between securing a decent place for Russia within the framework of Western-led institutions and prioritizing an alternative strategy of forging relations with BRICS states. As the G8 summit in Northern Ireland in June 2013 made clear, politically Russia is placing itself beyond the group of leading Western democracies, especially in the Syria debate.

In the end, Russia is neither a committed region-builder nor a strong contributor to global policy issues like conflict resolution, climate change, environmental protection, sustainable development, good governance, and developmental assistance. Even if Russia raises some important global issues in organizations like the G20, one can question its agenda-setting resources and leadership capabilities due to its own lack of success stories in a plethora of fields – from fighting corruption to effective regulation of the labor market. All this reduces the institutional possibilities for multilateral diplomacy and Russia’s soft power appeal both regionally and globally.

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