

Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Space: New Priorities for New Challenges?

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Irina Kobrinskaya

Institute of World Economy and International Relations

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Moscow's active and unprecedented direct support of Viktor Yanukovich in the Ukrainian presidential elections highlights recent changes in Russian policy toward the post-Soviet states. This new approach has raised numerous questions and interpretations in Russia and the West. On the surface there is a new straightforward style of intervention diverging from public diplomatic neutrality. When analyzed in a broader international context, it appears that Moscow is re-evaluating its agenda, with more ambitious priorities. Moscow's new policy is more than a stylistic change; it is a response to potential incursions of Western influence into traditionally Russian spheres of influence. As I will argue in this memo, a combination of factors, internal and external, make Russia orient its foreign policy toward courting CIS leaders who are explicitly pro-Russian.

Straightforwardness

The Ukrainian case is not an exception, but confirms the trend. By the end of 2003 during Georgia's Rose Revolution, Moscow was suspicious of, and stubbornly unwilling to engage the country's new leadership. In early spring the Kremlin openly supported Aslan Abashidze, the leader of Adjara, although the support failed to help him. Russian efforts in Abkhazia were also unsuccessful, failing to lead a pro-Russian politician to power.

In part, Russian foreign policy has taken on a new, straightforward character because of the restructuring of the Russian government and shifts of channels of foreign policymaking. This can be largely attributed to further concentration of power in the presidential administration and to diminishing the role of the governmental bodies and the parliament. Strengthening vertical power, at least in foreign policy, has not improved the quality and coordination of the decision making process. This is evidenced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reducing its profile, and the Security Council continuing to seek an appropriate role while functioning under the former Minister of Finance Igor Ivanov. Foreign policy under President Putin has acquired an increasingly managerial and technological character. Apparently, intense open support and straightforwardness are regarded as the most efficient means to accomplish desired international aims.

Russia's foreign policy style also reflects domestic politics and domestic attitudes about politics as a number of analysts have noted in the aftermath of the Beslan tragedy,

when Putin decided to abolish gubernatorial elections in favor of presidential nomination. The disregard of public opinion, neglect of the electorate system and society, observed by commentators with bitterness and surprise, did not elicit any significant opposition to the limitation of democratic freedoms and many critics eventually supported President Putin's decision. "There is no civil society in Russia..." was the sad conclusion of some liberals, having lost their argument in opposition to the Kremlin. Whether the passivity of Russian society is equal to its lack of readiness for, and incompatibility with democratic values and rights remains an open question. However, in the meantime, due to its passivity, the Russian public is amenable to being influenced on foreign policy issues as well. Abkhazia is still an unrecognized territory and Ukraine is buried in negative PR slogans causing an unexpected counter effect: people become irritated by conspicuous pressure. But, it would be unfair to blame only the PR-technologists for such mistakes, after all, President Putin and his advisers visited Ukraine on the eve of both Ukrainian elections.

The results of Ukraine's elections have, in some fashion, discredited the Kremlin's foreign policy, calling Russia's entire strategy into question. One of the conclusions made after the first round of Ukrainian elections was that the country's democratic development is far ahead of Russia's. In these comments, analysts are referring to the freedom and will of the population to express their views despite pressure and propaganda, but not the strength of democratic institutions. If this were not true, the official results of the second election in Ukraine would not have resulted in such a sharp radicalization of society, demonstrating, most importantly, mistrust of the state. Would the results be the same, if Ukrainian society had not been influenced by Moscow? Russia cannot be blamed for intentionally dividing Ukrainian society; its intentions were apparently different, but the Kremlin's actions served as a catalyst.

Consequentially, the opposite result was produced by the extremely personal nature of Russian policy, particularly foreign policy. The previously stable and powerful popularity of Vladimir Putin, one of the most valuable Russian political tools in the CIS, has suffered.

Pro-Russianness

Regardless of technological mistakes, it is obvious that the new Russian foreign policy is based on a certain concept, which seems to be regarded by the Kremlin as vital and urgent. A pro-Russian orientation is the single guarantee of cooperative Russian relations for countries within the CIS. Russia hedges its influence on leaders who have declared a pro-Russian stance, independent of their previous political history without taking into account the last 15 years of experience and the classic political game of electoral promises. The policy between Putin and Belarus's Lukashenko, not to exchange political loyalty for trade and economic concessions, seems to lie in the past.

The concept of pro-Russianness can be explained and interpreted in terms of the historical phase of national development. Russia is recovering as a sovereign state. Much of Russia's position in relations with the EU and NATO in demanding national sovereignty in exchange for security guarantees or economic prosperity can be thus explained. Putin has reiterated many times that his policy is not pro-Western or pro-

American, but pro-Russian. This mood is rather new, fresh, and self-assertive when compared to the previous decade, and welcomed by Russian society. Undoubtedly, this sounds even more acute given the threat of terrorism and issues related to Muslim populations within the Russian Federation. It should be noted that one consequence of a strong pro-Russian rhetoric is a growing sense of nationalism and xenophobia, presenting, as liberals foresee, the biggest potential threat to the state.

Pro-Russianness is witnessing economic recovery and political stabilization. Simultaneously, the Kremlin is demanding additional external confirmation of its new position in the post-Soviet space as a revitalized center of power. Apart from political psychology, this demand is motivated by economic and security factors. The real shift is seen in the focus from economic, typical of the last two or three years, to security matters. According to certain estimates, the decision to allow an additional value added tax to be collected by importers in the Single Economic Space and to let Ukraine re-export gas, will cost Russia more than \$1 billion per year. The decision regarding the gas pipeline, made before the elections in Ukraine, was a step back from the previous economic stature that had demanded fair and civilized transparent agreements. In the fall of 2004 Moscow trumped these decisions by announcing a three month non-registration period for Ukrainians in Russia, (i.e. closing their eyes to shadow labor). This has facilitated hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian citizens making their living and supporting their families while exporting billions of dollars out of Russia.

Pro-Russianness can, to a great extent, be explained by virtual and real concerns. Chief among these is state sovereignty, or evidence of weakness in state power, and secondly, external pressure meant to distance the CIS, particularly in Eastern Europe, from Russia and involve them in Western institutions and orbit.

As these concerns grow, Moscow has chosen a direct rhetoric and adopted tactics to lobby regional leaders who may afford Russia an opportunity to strengthen its stance and come to new terms with the West, whose vision is reminiscent of the zero sum game played in the mid 1990s.

If the assumption that pro-Russianness has become Moscow's new policy toward post-Soviet states is correct, then there are several questions to be answered. Are the concept's premises real and durable? Is Russia capable of realizing this concept, in other words, can it afford it? What does this concept, having been realized, mean for Russia, the CIS, and the West?

The Premises

One of the most fundamental premises of the new policy is the recent global paradigm of expansion, enlargement and integration. It has proven to be a powerful force in structuring the post Cold War world, providing the *raison d'être* and new perspectives for old organizations and institutions. The inclusion of weak and hesitant members into established frameworks, despite the problems it has created, eventually strengthens the stability and manageability of international relations. Even while suspicious of NATO expansion and concerned by the consequences of EU enlargement, Russian leadership has admitted the rationale and effectiveness of these processes. Not ready to share its sovereignty on the one hand, and unwanted by these institutions due to its immense size

and equally large problems, on the other, Russia has chosen to be the core of another integration/enlargement process. Without the Tsar, Soviet Empire, and with the current strengthening of authoritarian tendencies, this process could be a constructive solution for many problems in the post Soviet space. These “ifs,” particularly present trends, make the West strongly suspicious of Moscow’s neo-imperial intentions. The slogan Putin proposed to the CIS in his first presidential term, “Together in Europe,” is no longer repeated.

The United States apparently prefers Georgian membership in NATO, and the European Union has initiated the New Neighborhood policy, though it has been criticized for its lack of incentives. Meanwhile the new member states, Poland and Lithuania, play an active role in formation of an EU Eastern policy and lobby for the integration of Ukraine and Belarus. These events provide the basis for the real nature of Russia’s concerns.

In light of these developments, Moscow nervously weighs its chances in competitive integration and thus uses the most straightforward tactics to place pro-Russian politicians in power. It is hoped that, at least in the short term, pro-Russian leaders can create conditions favorable for Russia. Nonetheless, this brief respite, although highly probable, may prove detrimental to modernization in Russia and the CIS. The only hope in neutralizing negative effects is simultaneous intensification of cooperation with the West, first and foremost with the European Union. But Russia’s relations with the EU have reached a critical point in 2004. If spring arrives and both sides have managed to achieve a difficult compromise, by fall, the differences between the sides will have become even greater. Russian policies in the CIS can be interpreted as a vicious circle, in which diminished understanding with the EU and other European and international, institutions leads to more intense activities in the CIS, causing further problems with the EU.

Another problem caused by Moscow’s policy in the CIS, is a delay in political transformation. By definition, pro-Russianness is oriented toward old elites in the CIS, or their henchmen. This will slow the process of political reform in Russia itself.

The political effects of the new policy are more visible in Central Asia, where Russia significantly strengthened its position in 2004. New agreements are based on common aims and to a greater extent, the concerns of Russia and the Central Asian republics. The most important goal is the struggle against terrorism, which for Central Asia and Russia translates into the threat of separatism. Thus all parties agree to support each other and preserve their sovereignty. Second, the sovereignty, security and political stability of Central Asia is directly connected to the preservation of the regimes currently in power, and the old political elites they represent. Third, all Central Asian republics are frightened by the democracy enforcing scenarios that have occurred in Afghanistan and Iraq. Additional Russian military presence meant to balance U.S. bases in the region may serve as a guarantee against such developments. Finally, the common concern regarding China’s future role in the region is very important. It should be noted, that this last concern is also shared by the United States, which allows it to momentarily ignore the political peculiarities of the Central Asian states, while the same concern is only marginally considered by the European Union.

Conclusion

Five basic factors preconditioned the new Russian policy in the post Soviet space: economic growth in Russia, unprecedentedly high oil prices, Putin's vertical structure building and concentration of power, the threat of terrorism and separatism, and international developments (i.e. the enlargement, integration and globalization processes, the transatlantic crisis, open and mute opposition to U.S. unilateralism and hegemony, and further dissolution of international law). The first two make an enlargement/integration paradigm based on pro-Russianness not only desirable, but also affordable. Whether Russia will be capable of achieving it depends heavily on the world oil market and on the strength of Putin's regime. Even if Russia's integration project fails on the European side of the CIS, Moscow will try to strengthen its position in Central Asia, where it may find a common understanding with Washington. At the same time, the last factor, which indirectly stipulated a new Russian policy in the post Soviet space, provides the West with a shorter list of value-oriented or legal methods that could prevent Russia from taking this course.

The current historical circle is likely to be rather short – counted not by decades, but by presidential terms. For President Putin, modernization still remains a high and difficult to realize priority. Cooperation, with a strong element in support of Russian modernization which the CIS cannot help, can alter the foundation of pro-Russianness. This carries with it the possibility of transforming rivalry into civilized competition with the common goal of a stable, secure and prosperous Eurasia. A prosperous Russia deeply rooted in cooperation with the West will engage different priorities and different mechanisms in Ukraine and other countries of the CIS. The brief period between 9/11 and the Iraq war shows how realistic this option can be. History indicates that the alternative outcome is well known. The United States and Europe have only to answer a simple, though undiplomatic question: is Ukraine's membership in the EU and NATO by 2010 worth the trouble of an autocratic Russia in 2008?