SPECIAL**REPORT**
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Avoiding a New 'Cold War'

The Future of EU-Russia Relations in the Context of the Ukraine Crisis

DAHRENDORF FORUM
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Russia's Foreign Policy towards the Post-Soviet Space Since 2000

Alexey Gromyko

Russia's foreign policy towards the post-Soviet space since 2000 has seen manifold approaches and been exposed to numerous internal and external factors. The key goal has been to preserve as much of the integrity of the space as possible in order to provide Russia with a stable and friendly neighbourhood. The strategic approach to this region emerged only in the second half of the last decade. In the course of time, the post-Soviet space, not just rhetorically but in essence, has emerged as a top priority for Moscow in the international arena.

In the 1990s the implementation of this task was neither consistent, nor pursued in a systemic way. In fact, Russia's approaches towards the region were chaotic and mostly tactical, in many ways a function of subjective factors. The main achievement was the institutionalisation of relations within the post-Soviet space through the signing of basic agreements and treaties. The framework made up by these relations was developed, but in the absence of comprehensive policies it was influenced more by circumstances rather than by any meaningful strategy. It was as though the idea of free market forces was implanted in the post-Soviet political domain, prioritising 'self-regulation', while marginalising the role of the state and strategy. Conceptually there was no clear vision of what Russia expected from the region or of whether the CIS should be considered as merely a convenient mechanism of the Soviet Union's 'political divorce'.

Moreover, there was a widespread view at that time in the Kremlin, inherited from Leninist revolutionary tactics, which argued that 'at first we should separate before we can reunite'. Many politicians of the old guard were under the impression that the other republics of the former Soviet Union, except Baltic states, sooner or later would return to the fold of Russia. As a result of such thinking and expectations of history moving on auto-pilot, private or semi-state economic actors became the main foreign policy players with sometimes corrosive consequences for bilateral relations.

Until the beginning of the 2000s the Russian political leadership was either paying more attention to seemingly more important issues in international relations in the Far Abroad or was busy with internal problems related to Russia's development. As a result, centrifugal forces in the CIS space were gaining momentum and the region itself became looser and more porous. Several initial attempts to launch substantial integration projects in the post-Soviet space, apart from the CIS, failed or gave birth to weak organisations.

At the start of the new century, the rationale of economic primacy was introduced in relations between Russia and other post-Soviet states. Economic diplomacy was supposed to phase out uncertainty, clientelism, and the potential for free riding by Russian partners when price-setting mechanisms for Russian natural resources were open to arbitrary use in accordance with a current state of political bilateral affairs – usually for the benefit of Russia's neighbours' political elites without symmetric reciprocity. This type of behaviour remained marginal if certain natural resources had clear values on international markets and their costs were regulated by transparent rules, but for example in the case of natural gas, the political factor could play a significant role. In the absence of a consistent foreign policy strategy in Moscow towards the post-Soviet space in the 1990s, apart from the illusion that different parts of this space were bound to come together again, those resource benefits did not usually serve Russia's national interests.

Consequently in the 2000s market mechanisms were to replace political contingency or expedience but, this time, under Russian state supervision. The results of the new approach were ambiguous. While the state was rational in trying to use its economic leverage in international relations, the lack of a comprehensive strategy in the Near Abroad still impaired Moscow's attempts to conduct an effective foreign policy in the region. This began to change when the traditional, but for a long time hollow, priority of the Near Abroad as the first and most important 'circle' of the Russia's foreign policy started to fill with genuine content.

Simultaneously, by the mid 2000s illusions of Russia joining traditional Euro-Atlantic organisations, like NATO or the EU, evaporated. The disastrous neoconservative period in US foreign policy convinced Russia that the Western part of the Far Abroad was not only a source of investments and technologies, but also of risks and challenges. The Kremlin saw the conflict in Georgia in 2008 as a direct consequence of NATO expansion, which motivated Saakashvili, the loose cannon of Washington, to assault Tshinval, including Russian peacekeepers. As for the EU, the failure of the European constitution and the inability of the Union to acquire autonomous political power or build upon its economic might, made it in the eyes of Moscow a second-class player in international relations. Two symbols of this period were the termination soon after 2003 of 'big three' summits (Russia, France, Germany) after the political departure of Chirac and Schröder, and the eastern neighbourhood policy of the EU, which in 2014 contributed so much to the crisis in Ukraine (if not to say helped to generate it).

In the past 15 years, the regions neighbouring Russia have been increasingly unstable, be it the Middle East, Transcaucasia, or the 'soft underbelly' in Afghanistan and adjacent territories. A chain of 'colour revolutions' was seen in Moscow at best as an attempt to promote democracy at the expense of stability, or at worst as an attempt by the West to encroach upon Russia's spheres of existential interests. The main outcome of that was a conclusion arrived at by the Russian leadership that without genuine efforts to consolidate the post-Soviet space, the aspirations of the country to play a major role in the polycentric world would stay a pipe dream.

Another factor stimulating Moscow to develop a much more pro-active stance in the post-Soviet space has been the rapid rise of China on the regional and global stage, with all its positive and ambiguous effects in the Russian strategic calculations. The objective fact of China's economic expansion in Central Asia was problematic in terms of Moscow's intention to secure its place as a core of the Eurasian integration.

At the same time, the relative success of the EU's integration policy did not stay unnoticed in Russia. Especially remarkable was the rise of Germany as an economic and political leader of the Union. This happened not in contradiction, but in accordance with the fact that Berlin, as all other member states, had to delegate part of their national sovereignty upwards. In reaction to that and also to the influence of the Russian academic community specialising in European studies, the Kremlin understood that the notion of 'sovereign foreign policy' could be reconciled with the pattern of regional integration under which a 'core country' takes part in a 'pool of sovereignty'.

Moscow was spurred to conduct a more robust approach towards the Near Abroad also by the actions of other regional and global actors: i.e. the EU, the US, China, Turkey – all of which were getting more and more active in promoting their own political, economic, military or cultural interests in the region. For example, Russia was trailing most of them in the application of soft power. Rossotrudnichestvo, the federal state agency in charge of developing cooperation with Russian compatriots, or Russkiy Mir Foundation, the public body designed to support Russian language and culture set up in 2007, became real players in this domain later than their counterparts from other major countries. The massive criticism in the West of Vladimir Putin's declaration that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a geopolitical disaster of the twentieth century was largely misguided. He actually referred to the plight of millions of Russians who had to adapt to life in the new-born sovereign post-Soviet republics, many of which were characterised by ethnocentric policies, especially in Baltic states; his critics understood the statement as an illusionary plot from Russia to resurrect the Soviet empire.

Nevertheless, the increasingly overdue systemic approach to the Near Abroad started to bear fruit by the end of the last decade. The union with Belarus, often messy in public but solid in its essence, deepening relations with most Central Asia countries (especially with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), strategic cooperation with Armenia and mostly good working

relations with Azerbaijan were clear manifestations that Russia was serious in its aspirations to forge an effective regional integration project. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the CSTO, and the ECU were gaining more weight. The EEU, born on 1 January 2015 encompassing Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, is the most serious attempt so far to introduce a multi-speed approach in Moscow's strategy towards the post-Soviet space. In this, as well as in many aspects of this design, including a certain 'pool of sovereignty', Russia is a selective follower of the EU's best practices.

IN PURSUING THIS COURSE OF DEVELOPMENT, RUSSIA HAS BEEN TRYING TO SOLVE SEVERAL PROBLEMS AT ONCE

First, Russia has to ensure a stable neighbourhood, especially taking into consideration that several countries in the region will face a leadership transition challenge in the foreseeable future. For Russia the priority has not been the nature of a given political regime, but the notion of stability. Failed states are the last thing the Kremlin wishes to see on its doorstep. Second, to strengthen economic ties with these countries in order to limit the tendency of their economic divergence from Moscow. Third, the challenge of international terrorism, which is impossible to manage without deep interstate co-operation.

Fourth, in geostrategic terms, in the face of NATO expansion and the EU's ambitions to create a kind of a Eurosphere, Russia wants to preserve or reconstruct a 'belt of friendly states', or at least neutral states, in military-political terms. Moreover, Moscow is adamant to see the Baltic states as the last example of neighbouring countries participating in military organizations – i.e. NATO (which Russia is not a member of). Fifth, to ensure that the rights of Russian minorities are upheld according to the European and international norms. Sixth, to manage a huge migration problem on a Eurasian scale. Few Western specialists, very busy with the migration crisis in the EU, pay enough attention to the fact that Russia for many years has been one of the biggest recipients of migrants in the world.

Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 became red lines for Russia, which it was not to allow its Western partners to cross. Interestingly, in both cases events were imposed on Moscow and not designed by it. It was not Moscow which made it possible for Saakashvili to revert to military means to settle his scores with separatists, and again it was not Moscow which manipulated widespread anti-government sentiments on the Maidan square to take the ugly form of a violent overthrow of the government. In the first instance, it took the shape of Abkhazia and South Ossetia' independence, in the second the reunification of Crimea with Russia and support for the Donbas as a way to persuade Kyiv to conduct decentralisation reforms in the country in order to restore its legitimacy in the eyes of Moscow.

Overall, the predominant aim of Russia in the post-Soviet space is to prevent its shaky security situation unravelling. Status quo here is preferred to any kind of hasty political reform and intrusion of regional and international actors, which unlike Russia are not so exposed or not exposed at all to potential negative consequences of such unravelling. The Achilles heel of the region lies in ethnic, religious or cultural differences and grievances. Ukraine is a conspicuous example of how these differences can get out of hand with the speed of light.

It should be kept in mind that Russia itself is a federation, which includes several dozen national republics, and many of them, especially in the Northern Caucasus, have uneasy relations with one another. A serious destabilisation on their outer borders may have a spill-over effect detrimental for Russia's territorial integrity. In Russia people, are well aware that the main reason for the break-up of the Soviet Union was the genie of nationalism set free.

The simmering animosity between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the precarious state of affairs in Transnistria, the conflict in Donbas, the threat of terrorism and extremism looming over Central Asia, tensions among Central Asian republics themselves, and the balancing act with China are only a few of the region's burning problems. This is a huge challenge which Russia is going to handle with a set of regional integration projects and with its active foreign policy in pursuit of polycentrism in international relations.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. It would significantly contribute to stability in the post-Soviet space and to the wellbeing of peoples who live there if Russia's Western partners stop indiscriminately labelling Eurasian integration as a 'restoration of the Soviet Union' and start treating it as a method for the economic and political modernisation of this region. Those diehards who oppose it on the basis of Cold War mentality are either ignorant, or at best biased, towards this regional integration which is in fact in many respects modelled on the best practices of the EU.

2. All European states and organisations would be wise to design and pursue their policies in such a way that regional integration projects in Europe from the Atlantic to the Pacific are made to be complimentary and compatible instead of being focused on rivalry and zero-sum game. It is high time for the EU and the EEU to launch an official dialogue.

3. Policymakers on all sides would live up to their electorates' expectations if they concentrate on risks and threats common both for the post-Soviet space and for other parts of Europe, not on what divides them. Wider Europe divided is the best recipe for migration, terrorism, social inequality, poor governance, economic stagnation and other pan-European challenges to make further headway over the heads of quarrelling politicians. ■