

Summary: Russian foreign policy in the new Putin-era is not going to fundamentally differ from the one pursued under Dmitry Medvedev. In the post-Soviet region the same integrationist policies — both economic and security-related — are likely to continue, aimed at maintaining and increasing the formal and informal influence of the Russian Federation, only with growing intensity. Concerning the West, Russian interests are likely to become increasingly divergent. Deepening and widening the cooperation with the EU is clearly in the interest of the Russian Federation. On the other hand, existing tensions in the U.S.-Russia relationship are unlikely to decrease, while a key field of common interest is going to disappear following the Allied withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014.

Good Cop or Bad Cop? Russian Foreign Policy in the New Putin Era

by *Andras Racz*

The Russian presidential elections in March 2012 are likely to result in the return of Vladimir Putin to the Kremlin. This paper analyzes the main trends of Russian foreign policy, and provides a short- and mid-term policy forecast. It examines three specific directions of Russian foreign policy: the relationships with the post-Soviet region, with Europe, and the United States. The research question is similar in all three cases: should we expect any significant changes in Russian foreign policy in the new Putin Era compared to that of the Medvedev Era?

The Post-Soviet Region: An Even Firmer Grip

With the exception of the three Baltic republics, Russia still views the countries of the former Soviet Union as a zone of special interest. The document “National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation until 2020,” adopted in 2009, makes this clear: “The development of bilateral and multilateral cooperation with member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States is a priority of Russian foreign policy.”¹ This perception is unlikely to

change in the future. Therefore, during the next presidency period, Russia is likely to do its utmost to maintain and strengthen control over the post-Soviet region.

The strengthening of various Russia-led integration fora will surely be continued in the years ahead. This applies to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Community (Eurasian Community (Eurasian Community (Eurasian Community (EarAsEc), and also to the new Customs Union, which has recently developed into the Eurasian Union project. By deepening the institutionalization of these Moscow-dominated organizations, Russia can increasingly cement the informal control it has already had over member countries, particularly in the fields of economy, energy, trade, and defense.

In the field of energy policy, Russia is likely to keep pushing to take over energy infrastructure in the Commonwealth of Independent State (CIS) countries, or at least to secure a dominant position in them. The motivation behind this is to secure uninterrupted flow of Russian energy to the West, and also to gain political and economic leverage over the affected countries. So far, this strategy has been strikingly successful: the energy sectors of

1. Стратегия национальной безопасности Российской Федерации до 2020 года. [National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation until 2020]. Available: <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/99.html> Last accessed: January 20, 2012.

Analysis

Armenia and Moldova are completely controlled by Russian companies, Georgia is highly dependent, and recently the key Belarusian gas transit company, Beltransgaz, was fully taken over by Russian Gazprom. The last important “prey” left is the gas transit infrastructure of Ukraine, for which the struggle is underway. Building alternative pipelines that bypass Ukraine and Belarus (e.g. the South Stream and the recently completed North Stream) fits the same bill: they weaken these countries’ blackmailing potential by decreasing their transit role, thereby undermining their bargaining positions and increasing the security of transit to Western countries.

Military presence has long been an integral part of the Russian foreign policy inventory towards the CIS region, aimed both at preserving regional influence, and also at preventing any future NATO-enlargement to the East. Maintaining this presence in neighboring countries will continue even in the long run, indicated by the fact that Russia managed to significantly extend Russian military forces stationing agreements abroad. The current withdrawal deadline from Ukraine is 2042, and Armenia is 2044, while Russian forces will be deployed even longer in the two Georgian separatist “republics.”

Following the planned withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in 2014, Russia is highly likely to take advantage of the regional power vacuum and further strengthen its position in Central Asia. The charter of the CSTO was recently modified in such a way so as to prohibit any member state from hosting a foreign military base on its

Following the planned withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in 2014, Russia is highly likely to take advantage of the regional power vacuum and further strengthen its position in Central Asia.

territory without the consent of all other CSTO members. This move, in fact, is aimed at gradually pushing out all non-Russian military bases from the territories of the CSTO countries.

During the next presidential administration, Russia is highly likely to extensively use its political, economic, and media leverage to influence the domestic politics in post-Soviet countries. In this way, 2012-2013 will be particularly intensive years. In 2012, parliamentary elections will take place in Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus, Armenia, and possibly also in Moldova, while in 2013, presidential elections will be held in Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Aside from the latter three, the political landscapes in these countries are rather diverse, so intense political struggles are likely to take place, and Russia will surely not miss the opportunity to actively pursue its own interests.

Relations with the EU: Modernization Goes On

Contrary to the post-Soviet trends, Russia is likely to continue to try to improve its relations with the European Union. The most important motivation is the modernization agenda, launched by President Medvedev. The support of Europe is critical for the intended economic, financial, and technological modernization of the Russian Federation. Looking at the presidential campaign program of Vladimir Putin on the newly launched *Putin2012* website,² it becomes clear that the modernization project will indeed be continued, and so, the need for close ties to Europe will also remain.

Economic interests point in the same direction. Bilateral trade and investments between the EU and Russia are growing rapidly, despite the crisis. Besides, energy interdependence (e.g. the EU needs Russian oil and gas, while Russia needs EU money) is not likely to decrease in the near future, particularly in the light of the post-Fukushima closing down of German nuclear power plants. The coming WTO-accession of Russia will further intensify trade relations with European countries.

Moscow will continue to push for an institutionalized position on issues of European security as well. Certain European countries are indeed receptive to the idea. There are various options on the table: in November 2009, Presi-

² www.putin2012.ru Last accessed: January 20, 2012.

Analysis

dent Medvedev launched his proposal on need for a New European Security Treaty; in June 2010, a bilateral German-Russian proposal on security policy cooperation was signed in Meseberg, quickly joined by France in October the same year. Another option is getting the French-German-Polish Weimar Triangle cooperation extended to Russia. The common element in these initiatives is the Russian intention to get decision-making positions institutionalized in issues of European security that would be stronger than the consultative ones it currently holds.

The U.S.-Russia Relationship: A “Reset” Freezing Down?

The nature of the future U.S.-Russia relationship obviously depends a lot on the outcome of the U.S. presidential elections. And no significant positive development is likely to happen in 2012 as the pre-election period is hardly suitable for U.S. politicians taking a soft position on Russia. However, as a starting point for mid-term predictions, one may well presume that a Democratic administration in Washington is more likely to follow a rather more cooperative course with Moscow than a Republican one. Regardless of the election results, however, certain mid-term sources of tension in the U.S.-Russia bilateral relationship are already visible.

The most important one is that with the forthcoming Allied withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014, a key area of common U.S.-Russia interests is going to disappear. Perhaps the most important practical result of the “reset” was the U.S.-Russia cooperation in Afghanistan, in particular Moscow’s allowing the transit of military shipments over Russian territory, which made supply management for Allied forces a lot easier and cheaper. Termination of the large-scale U.S. engagement will end this fruitful practical cooperation.

The missile defense debate is likely to remain another source of tension. Russia clearly perceives the ballistic missile defense (BMD) system as a fundamental threat to its nuclear deterrence capabilities. According the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation,³ adopted in 2010, one of the main external military dangers is the “the creation and deployment of strategic missile defense systems that undermine global stability.” Russia has kept demanding

first to have an institutionalized position inside the BMD system, then to be given legally binding guarantees that the system will not be used against Russia. Neither of this is likely to happen, since the current U.S. position seems being constant on the issue, something Russia is well aware of. Consequently, as the U.S. missile defense system gets further developed, tensions are likely to increase.

The Russian position on Iran’s nuclear program significantly differs from that of the United States. However, it also has its ambivalences. Though Moscow is concerned about the possibility of an Iranian nuclear weapon, a direct U.S. military action would clearly be unacceptable to Russia. This, of course, does not mean that Russia would be ready to take up any military confrontation over Iran. Russia actually has its own proposals on the table aimed at ensuring the exclusively peaceful nature of the Iranian nuclear program — and also at maintaining the lucrative contracts Russian companies have in the Iranian energy sector. All in all, as the Iranian nuclear program develops, the gap between the U.S. attitude urging action and the Russian strategy of mediating and preserving the status quo is likely to become wider.

The toughening Russian position on the post-Soviet space may also have a negative effect on U.S.-Russia relations. A key U.S. ally in the region, Georgia, may again become a hotspot. Fortunately, serious military confrontation can be excluded. As the separatists territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are under its firm control, Russia has nothing to fight for, and Georgia also learned grave lessons from the 2008 war. However, Russia is strongly opposed to

Russia has its own proposals on the table aimed at ensuring the exclusively peaceful nature of the Iranian nuclear program — and also at maintaining the lucrative contracts Russian companies have in the Iranian energy sector.

³ Военная доктрина Российской Федерации. [Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation.] Available: <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/33.html> Last accessed: January 20, 2012.

Analysis

the current pro-Western course of Georgian foreign and security policy, and may take the opportunity offered by the coming Georgian elections to intervene in domestic politics. Such moves will, if only as an unintended consequence, certainly affect the U.S.-Russia relationship as well.

Conclusions

These diverging strategic courses may well provide a fertile ground for a deliberate “divide and rule” strategy to be pursued by Russia in its relations with the West. The preference for a multi-polar world is clearly present both in the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation⁴ and in the declarations of various Russian top officials. Hence, from Moscow’s perspective, it would be absolutely rational to follow fundamentally different foreign policy courses with the United States and the EU, contributing to the goal of multi-polarity by weakening transatlantic cooperation. All in all, following the return of Vladimir Putin to presidency, maintaining the coherence of the transatlantic community is going to require particular attention both from the United States and the EU.

⁴ The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation. Available: <http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/text/docs/2008/07/204750.shtml> Last accessed: January 20, 2012.

About the Author

Andras Racz is a Volkswagen Foundation Visiting Fellow at the Transatlantic Academy. He is an expert on EU foreign and security policy, the European Neighborhood Policy, and the post-Soviet region, and currently works as a senior research fellow at the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs. He also lectures at the Department of International Studies at the Péter Pázmány Catholic University in Budapest. Previously he worked as a research fellow at the Institute for Strategic and Defense Studies at the Zrínyi Miklós National Defense University and the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs.

The views expressed here are of the author’s own, and they no way represent the official position of the Transatlantic Academy, Volkswagen, or the German Marshall Fund.

Transatlantic Academy Paper Series

The Transatlantic Academy Paper Series presents research on a variety of transatlantic topics by staff, fellows, and partners of the Transatlantic Academy. Comments from readers are welcome; please reply by e-mail to TA@gmfus.org.

About the Transatlantic Academy

The Transatlantic Academy is a research institution devoted to creating common approaches to the long-term challenges facing Europe and North America. The Academy does this by each year bringing together scholars, policy experts, and authors from both sides of the Atlantic and from different disciplinary perspectives to research and analyze a distinct policy theme of transatlantic interest. The Academy was created in 2007 as a partnership between the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) and the ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius. The Robert Bosch Stiftung and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation joined as full partners beginning in 2008, and the Fritz Thyssen Foundation joined as a full partner in 2011. The Compagnia di San Paolo joined in providing additional support in May 2009, as did the Joachim Herz Stiftung and the Volkswagen Stiftung in 2011.

The Transatlantic Academy’s Volkswagen Visiting Fellowship is made possible with generous support from the Volkswagen Stiftung.