

RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY AMID CURRENT INTERNATIONAL TENSIONS

Abstract. Since the presidential elections in 2012 Russian foreign policy has experienced significant changes. The Russian leadership has really attempted to shape one of the poles of the multipolar world around Russia and to achieve strategic parity with the United States. These changes have been the result of several domestic and international circumstances. One of the outcomes of the new foreign policy has been confrontation with the West (the Ukraine crisis, sanctions and restrictions etc.). The attempt to countervail the losses in the West by turning to the Asia-Pacific region has only been partially successful. The new foreign policy has received the support of the popular majority and will not be changed in the near future.

Keywords: Russian foreign policy, Ukraine crisis, Europe, the USA, Asia-Pacific region, sanctions

Introduction

Like the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Russia smashed its totalitarian Communist regime in the late 1980s/early 1990s and set out on the search for its development path in the new conditions. For Russia, the process proved to be considerably more arduous on account of a number of serious domestic and external factors. Not only had the former market economy and elements of civic society and democracy been done away with in the USSR, but even whole sections of the population associated with them suffered repressions and extermination. The population's public conscience was considerably deformed. After the disintegration of the USSR the upper crust of society found itself sharply split. While the people and the elites of Central, Eastern European and Baltic countries had the common objective of ensuring the speediest integration into the European and Transatlantic community, no such uniting goal existed in Russia. Moreover, the top echelons of Russian society soon concluded that it was necessary to enhance the role of the state in every sphere of life and to advance the

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country's significance in world affairs. After the default of 1998 and the Kosovo crisis of 1999, this mood became predominant. It was largely nourished by the traditions and sentiments of state worship that had prevailed in the Russian mentality for several centuries.

In those circumstances, the reversal to state capitalism at the turn of the century was quite natural. In the 21st century the Russian leadership paid close attention to the energy sector and the military industrial complex. Supposedly, the growth of the former was to enhance Russia's role in the world (its ruling circles at one time entertained the idea of an "energy superpower" – Orlov, 2006), while the latter was expected to promote technological advancement and innovations in the economy as a whole, including the civic sector. The latter aspect was particularly stressed by President Putin (Putin, 2015c). The government concentrated its efforts on a small group of state corporations and companies that were supposed to become the locomotives of the country's economic development. This is one of the main reasons for the high degree of the economy's monopolisation and the concentration of huge capital in the hands of a small circle of persons most closely connected with government structures. Naturally, those big corporations exert a great influence not only on domestic affairs, but also on the foreign policy of Russia. As Russia's home market is relatively narrow, those corporations (especially petroleum and gas producers) are striving to make the maximum possible advances in world markets. The government is also interested in the same objective as more than half of the state budget comes from customs and other duties from oil and gas exports. This explains the Russian leadership's constant support for those corporations in the international arena. It was no coincidence that Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev usually paid visits to those countries where important contracts for exports of petroleum and armaments were under preparation and did their best to support the respective Russian corporations.

In the foreign policies of post-Soviet Russia two intertwining trends have been invariably present. The followers of the first one proceed from the idea that the world of today is unipolar and therefore Russia should aspire to getting as close as possible to and subsequently joining the decision-taking apparatus on the global scale. This line was predominant during the initial periods of the presidencies of Boris Yeltsin ('the honeymoon' of relations with the West) and of Vladimir Putin (the anti-terrorist coalition of September 2001), as well as during Medvedev's term of office ('reset', 'partnership for modernisation' etc.). The followers of the other trend believe that today's world is becoming multi-polar and Russia should turn into one of its centres. Also, in the opinion of some of them, the slogan 'multi-polar world' is a means for haggling with the USA and its closest allies for a higher place in the unipolar world, whereas others sincerely believe in the

multi-polar prospect. The second trend became consolidated in the second half of the 1990s when Yevgeny Primakov superseded Andrey Kozyrev as Foreign Minister, as well as in the wake of the Iraq crisis of 2003. It became clearly predominant after Putin returned to the post of President in 2012. It was then that the course was adopted to make Russia into a real centre of a multi-polar world – with many Russian politicians expecting that Russia would be able to unite all those dissatisfied with the world order that had emerged after the end of the Cold War and would head a movement for its replacement with a system in which Russia would play a more influential role.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the new traits and peculiarities of Russia's present-day foreign policy.

Election of Vladimir Putin as President in 2012 and the Reversal of Russia's Foreign Policy

After Vladimir Putin's election as President in 2012, a radical reversal took place in Russia's foreign policy, some signs of which had become manifest even during the few preceding years. The ruling circles of Russia had concluded that the time was ripe to transform the country into a real centre of the multi-polar world.

This reversal of Russian foreign policy had several causes.

First, the overwhelming majority of Russian politicians shared the dominant opinion that the balance of power had changed on the world scene: the capacity of the 'historical West' to dominate the world economy and politics was dwindling, the world potential of power and development was dispersing and shifting to the East as new players were entering the main stage of the world economy and politics (Concept of the Foreign Policy, 2013). These moods became pre-eminent after the financial and economic crisis of 2008 and especially in connection with the complications arising in the European Union. The exceeding Euroscepticism, very characteristic of the Soviet elite (V. I. Lenin, cf. ref 1969, once asserted that the United States of Europe was "either impossible or reactionary"), has largely survived in today's Russia. For that reason, the Greek crisis was regarded as convincing proof of the imminent collapse of the eurozone or probably even of the entire European Union. On the other hand, the significance of the economic strides taken by the BRICS countries was strongly exaggerated.

Second, by that time the major Russian corporations had almost completely vanquished the internal market, squeezing out foreign capital into subordinate positions, and increasingly wanted to expand their business not only in the post-Soviet space, but beyond it as well. This resulted in a sharpening of their differences with transnational companies in which

private (mostly American) capital predominated. In those conditions, the big Russian corporations were desirous of a special zone emerging where they would be in a privileged position and could be free from fears of other competitors.

Third, the Russian leadership had previously succeeded, not without difficulty, in forming a number of international organisations in the post-Soviet space in which Russia played an active role (the Commonwealth of Independent States, the EurAsEC, the Customs Union, the Organisation of Collective Security Treaty, the Union State of Russia and Belarus etc.). It was these formations that largely became the basis for creating the Eurasian Economic Union, which initially comprised Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus – with Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joining later. The Eurasian Economic Union's first steps enhanced the Russian ruling circles' optimism concerning its prospects.

Fourth, Russian politicians were greatly disappointed by President Medvedev's foreign policy results. By recommending to the topmost post a representative of the new generation without any record of working for the KGB, the Russian elite and Vladimir Putin had expected he would be able to achieve agreements with the West that were acceptable to them (Trenin, 2015: 4-7). Initially, the impression was that this was precisely what really happened for after the conflict with Georgia in August 2008 normal relations with the West were quickly restored and positive developments were observed in them, including the Reset in Relations, the New START agreement on a nuclear stockpile reduction (2010), the Partnership for Modernisation (2010) etc. However, the main ambition, to create a niche in the system of global decision-making that the Russian ruling circles thought they deserved, was never granted. This again caused their disappointment, which was amplified manifold by the events in the Arab world during 2011-2012. They were interpreted in Moscow as US schemes aimed at toppling regimes in the region that were geographically close to Russia's southern border. In particular, a great impression was produced by the developments in Libya and Gaddafi's death. The upper crust of Russian society was again convinced that the West did not want to have dealings with Russia and aimed at weakening it.

Fifth, a large role was played by the domestic political unrest in late 2011 and early 2012 when opposition rallies were held in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other major cities. Since as early as 'the orange revolution' in Ukraine (2004) the ruling circles of Russia had been convinced that all 'coloured revolutions' had resulted from the activities of non-government organisations funded by the Americans and were, in fact, rehearsals of coup attempts in Moscow. This time they were sure that the opposition marches had been instigated by the USA and that their rule was in real danger. The opposition

activity soon declined, but fears continued to exist. This circumstance undoubtedly had a serious impact on Russia's foreign policy. All of this led to the sharp growth of anti-Western and anti-American sentiments among the ruling circles, which spread to wide sections of the populace.

Russia's discontent with the unipolar world order that had emerged as a result of the collapse of the bipolar system became evident as early as the end of B. Yeltsin's presidency. Its manifestations were the march of Russian paratroopers on Pristina during the Kosovo crisis of 1999 and Yeltsin's harsh statements during his last visit to China. Moscow was very negatively impressed and felt concerned to see the USA ignoring the advice of France and Germany, its NATO allies, and Russia, a member of the anti-terrorist coalition, and commencing hostilities against Iraq. In Putin's address to the 2007 Munich conference on security, the speaker unequivocally stated that Russia would not regard itself bound by rules that had been established without its participation. In August 2008, the Russian leadership displayed its readiness to resort to military force and enter into an open military conflict with Georgia. That was unexpected not only for the West, but for many other countries. After the presidential election of 2012, the Russian leadership kept reiterating statements about the need for radical changes in world politics. In doing so, Russia now not merely insisted on changes in the world order that would favour Russia, but it in fact proposed that a new world order be created with new structures to replace the existing international institutes where the USA and its allies had dominated. Therefore, the current contradictions that have appeared lately between Russia and the West are primarily conflicts of institutions.

Recently, several Russian officials and politicians have come forward with statements asserting that the main cause of today's conflicts and contradictions in the world is the absence of a treaty that would record the results of the Cold War. Those statements clearly enough suggest a need to return to the Yalta-Potsdam kind of system in a somewhat reduced shape, with well-defined spheres of influence. In a more cautious and masked form, those ideas had been voiced before – thus, for example, in the late 1990s the then Foreign Minister Primakov (2009: 182) spoke about “a red line” running along the borders of the former USSR which the West (NATO in that particular instance) must not overstep. At present, the issue is stated openly. As Putin (2014b) put it in October 2014, “The Cold War ended, but it did not end with the signing of a peace treaty with clear and transparent agreements on respecting existing rules or creating new rules and standards. This gives the impression that the so called ‘victors’ in the Cold War had decided to manipulate events and reshape the world to suit their needs and interests. Whenever the existing system of international relations, international law and appropriate checks and balances available became an obstacle on their

path, the system was declared worthless, outdated and wanting immediate demolition”.

It should be specially emphasised that, although Russian politicians are talking about a multi-polar world, they would actually like to create a more complex combination where two centres, Russia and the USA, would tower over all the others. The idea of the USA and Russia being equals is present in Putin's greetings (2015b) to President Obama on 4 July 2015, where confidence was expressed “that Russia and the USA can find solutions to the most complicated international issues and efficiently resist global threats and challenges as they base their dialogue on principles of equality and respect for each other's interests”. As the present-day Russian economy is several times smaller than that of the USA, the main stress is laid on increasing its military potential. The objective of the Russian armament programmes is undoubtedly to restore the strategic parity that existed between the USSR and the USA in the years of the Cold War. President Obama's statements that “Russia is a regional power” (The White House, 2014) or his Press Secretary Josh Earnest's remark that “the Russian economy is ... one rung below Spain on the ladder” (The White House, 2015a) are highly obnoxious irritants for the upper echelons of Russian society. At the same time, it should be underlined that while the USSR practically always (except for the few last years of Leonid Brezhnev's rule and Michael Gorbachev's period of “new political thinking”) sought world dominance under the slogans of “world revolution” and later of “a global revolutionary process”, modern Russia sets itself no such target.

The political circles of Russia attach particular importance to the problems of maintaining stability, the main threat to which they see in ‘coloured revolutions’. Most Russian politicians regard ‘coloured revolutions’ as coup d'état overturns whereby opposition forces actively supported from abroad topple the legitimate government and impose alien customs and values on the local people. What is stressed is the foreign interference in such cases, whereas internal causes are regarded as secondary. The ruling circles of Russia view ‘coloured revolutions’ as blatant violations of sovereignty. “Respect for sovereignty”, Vladimir Putin observes, means no tolerance for coup d'états, anti-constitutional actions or unlawful deposition of legitimate authorities (Putin, 2015). The Russian military circles equate orange revolutions with military hostilities. According to Gerasimov (2015), Chief of the Russian General Staff, “they increasingly assume the form of armed operations and are fought in accordance with the rules of military science”. Procedures for counteracting such new threats are stipulated in the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation (2014). It is the desire to prevent the internationally supported opposition from scoring a victory that constitutes one of the reasons, if not the chief reason, for Russia's aid to Presidents Yanukovich of Ukraine and Assad of Syria.

In these conditions, a number of new traits and peculiarities have appeared in the external political strategy of the Russian Federation.

First, its attitude to international law has changed somewhat. Officially, strict observation of international law dictates has remained one of the priorities of Russian foreign policy. However, while previously the international law priority implied strict observance of the legal rules adopted, nowadays it is associated primarily with moral categories. Thus, many Russian politicians who have voiced Russia's reasons for its actions in the Crimea resort to the notion of 'fairness' which, in their opinion, was violated earlier. It is noteworthy that one of the first to do so was Stanislav Govorukhin (2012), a well-known figure of contemporary culture, who was the official head of Putin's election campaign. This approach enjoys the support of the majority of the population. A similar shift in the minds of Russia's ruling circles has also occurred in the matter of human rights, the observance of which is being increasingly associated with moral values. Russian politicians and officials increasingly refer to "our citizens' interests" rather than their human rights (Putin, 2014d). For this reason, the Russian understanding of the pre-eminence of international law diverges ever farther from the Western notions, creating grounds for the emergence of new conflicts and contradictions.

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Second, Russian foreign policy has been increasingly coupled with ideology. Yeltsin and Putin in 1999–2008 stressed their pragmatism, as did Medvedev after them, without basing their policy on any ideology. These days, Russia wants to become one of the ideological centres of today's world and poses as a defender of traditional and conservative values. It was conservatism as an ideological foundation for the mainstream of Russian society that Putin (2013) spoke about in his Address to the Federal Assembly in December 2013. Later, the motif was picked up by quite a few politicians, journalists, experts and figures of culture and science. The Russian leadership is doing their best to distinguish themselves from the bulk of the Western ruling circles. Liberalism, which is viewed as the ideology of transnational capital, is proclaimed the main adversary. Simultaneously, from time to time, Moscow flirts with extreme right and extreme left movements, viewing them as possible allies in criticising the liberal mainstream.

Third, the country's external economic strategy has also undergone some changes. The number of integration projects has gradually decreased, except for alliances in the post-Soviet space. This course has been consistently followed since the anti-Russian sanctions were imposed in 2014. The Russian ruling circles are essentially trying to reduce external economic activities to ordinary trade, the emphasis being on the urge to produce as many commodities as possible within the country.

It should be noted that Moscow is closely watching the emergence of new integration coalitions, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership or the

proposed treaty on a free-trade zone between North America and Europe. Although participating in neither, Russia believes that its interests should be taken into account. As Putin (2015d) said to the UN General Assembly Session, "It seems that someone would like to impose upon us some new game rules, deliberately tailored to accommodate the interests of a privileged few, with the WTO having no say in it". At the same time, however, Russia is not putting forward any concrete proposals.

Fourth, a certain militarisation of Russian external policy has taken place. Thus, in the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation (2014) far more attention than before is paid to use of the armed forces for furthering the external policy objectives. In 2013 the Chief of General Staff Gerasimov (2013) declared that the Russia was creating special-operations forces that could operate in both the territory of Russia and beyond its boundaries. The events of the past years have shown that these were not mere declarations. The government circles of Russia do not rule out the eventuality of a nuclear first strike in certain conditions. In the scale of values favoured by Russian politicians, a noticeable devaluation of arms control issues has taken place. Russia has officially withdrawn from the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe and many Russian politicians argue against renewing the Soviet-American Treaty on medium- and short-range missiles (1987) etc.

Fifth, the Russian leadership has set out to demonstrate its preparedness to act in the conditions of international tension and even, in a few instances, to raise confrontation levels. Russian diplomacy has been displaying far less flexibility and readiness for compromise. Russian officials and the state mass media have been constantly making extremely sharp criticism of the USA, the EU, Ukraine and a number of other countries. Previously, Russia avoided this kind of behaviour in the international arena. These days, harsh tones are encouraged in every way as in the ruling class's reckoning it is supposed to demonstrate Russia's resolve and confidence in its power.

Sixth, it has become habitual to attach great importance to the issues of "soft power" and the "Russkiy mir" ("Russian world"). In the Conception of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (2013), "soft power" was for the first time singled out as one of the tools of foreign policy. The importance of soft power was repeatedly highlighted by Russian officials, politicians, public figures, experts and journalists. Budget allocations for this purpose were increased. In real terms, however, the whole thing boiled down to boosting the number of existing programmes and projects rather than to any qualitative changes. As for the "Russkiy mir" notion, its implication has broadened considerably. The phrase "a Russkiy mir person" came into being (Putin, 2014c), including as it did ethnic non-Russians as well. Russian communities abroad came to be regarded not only as conductors in the learning of the Russian language and culture, but also as political supporters of Russia

on the political stage, including criticism of the Western sanctions (Lavrov, 2015). Moreover, in the spring of 2014 the official circles of Russia declared for the first time that they consider the Russian people "divided" and therefore entitled to reunification. It was precisely this idea that was formulated in Putin's address of 18 March 2014 in which he called the Russian people "the world's largest divided nation" and simultaneously appealed to the citizens of Germany, whose reunification was assisted by the USSR, "to support the aspirations of the Russian world, of historical Russia, for the restoration of unity" (Putin, 2014a). Prior to that, this theory had only been propagated by opposition parties and factions and rejected by the government and the *United Russia* Party.

In sum, after the presidential election of 2012, a significant change took place in a number of principles underlying the foreign policy of Russia. In our opinion, the change was qualitative in nature, which gives us grounds for terming the period a new stage in Russian foreign policy. The development was duly reflected also in the regional directions of Russia's external political activities.

Russia and the West: A New Confrontation

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Russia's new external policy course manifested itself with particular lucidity in its Euro-Atlantic vector. It has been the cardinal direction for Russia, which it still remains despite various propaganda campaigns.

Differences and conflicts with the West have been brewing over the past few years. Whereas in the case of the USA, however, they developed openly enough, in Russia's relations with the EU the situation appeared quite safe and the growing difficulties were carefully concealed by both parties. The Ukrainian crisis caused all the accumulated problems and contradictions to come out, while the negative trends received a strong impetus and became overwhelming (Gretskiy et al., 2014). It seems likely that the relations between Russia and the West will be highly confrontational in practically every sphere.

First, in several international conflicts Russia and the West found themselves, as they had done during the Cold War, at diametrically opposite ends. The first of such instances was the Transcaucasia conflict in August 2008, when the USA and the EU gave full support to Georgia in its confrontation with Russia. At present, there are already several of such conflicts. First in line are Ukraine and Syria.

The main reason for the clash of Russia and the EU over Ukraine was the issue of Ukraine's integration option: whether it was to join the European or the Eurasian Economic Union. For Russia, it was an issue of not only economic but also of military significance. In the USSR, the military industrial

complex of Russia and the Ukraine was one integral whole; therefore, severance of the bonds was a very hurtful blow for the Russian defence industry. Later, another reason arose: it was necessary to prevent the victory of the 'coloured revolution' in Kiev out of fear it might have a serious impact on the internal political situation in Russia itself. For that reason, Russia regarded the downfall of President Victor Yanukovich as a coup d'état, whereas the West and nearly every country in the world recognised the new authorities. The Western powers declared their non-recognition of the results of the 16 March 2014 referendum and condemned Russia's incorporation of the Crimea as an annexation. Russia categorically renounced those accusations. The West held Russia responsible for causing the Donbas conflict. In reply, Moscow claims that what is happening in Ukraine is a civil war instigated by the West, while Russia is not participating in the conflict. On the initiative of Western states, a number of international organisations (the UN General Assembly, Parliamentary Assemblies of the Council of Europe, the OSCE, NATO, the European Parliament and others) adopted resolutions containing accusations concerning Russia with varying harshness, especially on the Crimea and Donbas issues. The USA, Canada, Australia, the European Union and several other countries imposed sanctions or restrictions on both certain sections of the Russian economy and private individuals. Russia, in turn, is hindering the endorsement of the Agreement on Association and a Free Trade Zone between the EU and Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia and has banned agricultural product imports from those countries that joined the anti-Russian sanctions.

The Normandy Four (Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France) settlement process in Donbas has thus far yielded just one substantial result: a genuine ceasefire in effect since September 2015. Implementation of the other provisions of the agreements reached in Minsk (September 2014 and February 2015) and in Paris (October 2015) is proceeding very slowly, with no headway observed in some directions. The interpretation of the agreements reached by the participants in the Normandy Four differs a great deal. As for the Crimea issue and some others, there has not even been this little rapprochement. Sergei Ryabkov, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister (2015), has even observed that since Russia has no intention of changing its position regarding the Crimea, the respective part of the Western sanctions is to remain forever. In view of the above, it must be admitted that on the whole the chances of the Ukrainian crisis being settled in the near future are slim to none. The situation of conflict over the various aspects of this problem is to persist for long, with the extent of tensions varying in different periods either way.

Russia's direct military interference in the Syrian conflict in the autumn of 2015 is the first instance of Russia using its armed forces beyond the

post-Soviet space and is a significant manifestation of the new external policy course. It is due to different reasons. To begin with, it is the desire not to have President Assad ousted for Moscow regards all the changes in the Arab world which commenced in 2011–2012 as varieties of ‘coloured revolutions’ instigated by the Americans. Most ruling circles in Russia regard a victorious ‘coloured revolution’ in any part of the globe as a threat to their power. At the same time, some Russian politicians do not mind stressing that they are more reliable partners than the USA, which did not support their long-standing ally Mubarak in 2011. By participating in the Syrian conflict, the Russian leadership undoubtedly wants to demonstrate that it is a global (not a regional) power and to reinforce its position in talks with the West on other issues, including Ukraine. It is also indubitable that the ruling classes of Russia are truly apprehensive of the growth of the terrorist threat. They must beware of the first turn of several thousand Russian citizens fighting in the ranks of the ISIS who may return to Russia to carry out terrorist acts. This threat was specifically addressed by the Security Council of the Russian Federation (Lukyanov, 2015). On the whole, as pointed out by Medvedev (2015), “it is better to do it abroad than to fight terrorism inside the country”.

In point of fact, two coalitions have been formed in the Middle East which have proclaimed fighting terrorism as their objective: one comprises the USA and about 60 other states, while the other consists of Russia, Iran and Syria. There are serious differences between the two groups. To begin with, their definition of terrorism varies. Putin’s address (2015d) to the UN General Assembly contains a declaration that it is only the troops of Bashar Assad and the Kurdish militia that are fighting against terrorists in Syria, with his Press Secretary (2015) openly doubting the existence of a moderate opposition in Syria. The USA and their allies in turn maintain that they support the moderate faction of the opposition to Bashar Assad (the Free Syrian Army and others), while counting as terrorists not only the “Islamic State”, but also the Hezbollah movement, which is closely connected with Iran and is actually fighting on Bashar Assad’s side. Besides, the two groupings have opposite views of the Syrian President’s future. The Russian leadership wants to preserve his power at least in those parts of Syria where Alawites constitute the majority, if not all over the country, whereas the West insists that Bashar Assad has completely lost legitimacy. Barack Obama publicly called him a “tyrant” at the UN General Assembly Session (The White House, 2015c) and said he should depart from the political stage. It should be particularly stressed that both coalitions deeply distrust each other, especially regarding their counterpart’s objectives. After the talks between Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama in autumn 2015, the situation changed a little but large differences still existed. The suspiciousness of the Russian and American militaries and special services has always been considerable, but in the

past two years it has particularly intensified to become an important factor affecting the course of developments. On the whole, the Russian military interference has met with a negative response in the West (The White House, 2015b). In the present circumstances, the probability of the two coalitions cooperating is very low – far more likely is the agenda of preventing clashes between them rather than of cooperation and mutual support. The incident when Turkey attacked a Russian military airplane and the subsequent crisis between two countries which had previously enjoyed good relations shows that this danger really exists.

Ruling out future scenarios with new regional conflicts in which Russia and the West find themselves on opposite sides would be futile. As pointed out by Putin (2015b), “the likelihood of a whole host of acute conflicts in which major powers could be involved – indirectly if not openly – has already greatly increased today”. He stressed that “it concerned countries lying on the junctions of major powers’ geopolitical interests or on the border lines of economic, civilisational or cultural-historical ‘continents’”.

Second, a sharp deterioration in relations between Russia and the West has taken place in the sphere of politics. It has developed in two directions – in an abrupt reduction of contacts and in steps to lessen Russia’s influence in international affairs. The seven most industrially developed democratic states of the West refused to hold a G8 summit in Sochi (2014) and resumed their activity without Russia’s participation. They froze the work of the Russia-NATO Council, cancelled the regular meetings of leaders of the EU and Russia and a number of other meetings, including the Russian-German Intergovernmental Consultations and many other talks and negotiations. Most Western leaders began avoiding talks with Russia, except for meetings to seek a settlement of the Ukrainian conflict and a few other explosive topics. Simultaneously, Western countries are trying to weaken Russia’s role in the G20 Group (its outright expulsion is hardly possible) and to reform the UN Security Council by stripping its permanent members of their veto rights. The latter is causing particular concern among Russian political circles as Russia regards its veto entitlement as one of the few superpower attributes still in existence since the days of the Yalta-Potsdam system.

The Russian diplomatic corps is, in turn, playing its own counteracting game, trying to take advantage of any contradictions and frictions within the Western world. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between the USA and the EU. After the Iraq crisis of 2003, when France, Germany and Russia jointly opposed the prospect of the American invasion, some politicians in Moscow were convinced that the EU might withdraw from cooperation with Washington. It is also hoped in Moscow that at a certain stage some EU countries may oppose the anti-Russian sanctions, making their extension impossible. Particularly big expectations are linked with

smaller European countries that have special relations with Russia (Greece, Slovakia, Hungary and Cyprus). In neither of these directions, however, has Russia achieved any tangible success. At the same time, countries such as South Korea, New Zealand and Israel, which undoubtedly belong to the Western world, never joined in the sanctions. President V. Putin held talks with a number of Western countries' leaders, discussing prospects of developing bilateral links. Moreover, the settlement of some international issues, like the signing of the Iranian Nuclear Programme Agreement, proved impossible without Russia's participation. Russia's positive role in the process was acknowledged by President Obama (*The New York Times*, 2015). The personal meetings between the Russian and American presidents during autumn 2015 also sent a message that American politics had partly changed.

Thus, in many respects Russia found itself in semi-isolation: it failed to retain a number of positions, but the West did not succeed in having it totally isolated.

Third, a high degree of military tension between Russia and the West has emerged for the first time ever since the end of the Cold War. After the events in the Crimea and Donbas, serious fears arose in the West that similar scenarios might be repeated elsewhere, in Latvia and Estonia to begin with, for in those countries there are big enclaves of Russian-language minorities. Those fears were aggravated by military exercises near the border with NATO member states, the stepped up activities of the Russian Air Force and Navy, as well as threats made by several politicians, e.g. Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, and by journalists from the state mass media. NATO countries declared their adherence to Article 5 of the Washington Treaty and began deploying armaments in the member states bordering on Russia. That, in turn, provoked a sharp response from Russia. Some Russian officials even issued a statement saying that those countries which allow their territories and territorial waters to be used for the installation of the American Shield anti-missile system elements might be subject to a nuclear attack. Such statements were made, for example, by Michael Vanin, Russia's Ambassador to Denmark (*Posol Rossii*, 2015). Never before had Russia threatened to use nuclear weapons against NATO countries. Admittedly, the increased potential of Russia and NATO on their borders are a far cry from the scale and concentration of the pile-up of arms in Central Europe during the Cold War. Nevertheless, the threat of unforeseen accidents or non-deliberate clashes is quite real. This is what makes the situation particularly strained.

Fourth, Russia and the West have been engaged in the past few years in propaganda campaigns against each other that are unprecedented in scale and fierceness. Signs that either party demonises the opposite side are obvious. At the same time, Russia and the West are doing their best to emphasise

that they are faithful to contrary values. Undeniably, Russian conservatism and Western liberalism considerably differ from each other, but they are not antagonistic, as were communism and liberalism in the Cold War epoch. They have some features in common – neither denies private property or a market economy etc. Nevertheless, the propaganda warfare, carried out as it is with the latest IT capabilities that did not exist during the Cold War, is creating an extremely detrimental atmosphere in the relations between Russia and the West.

And, last but not least: Russia and the West have found themselves faced with the gravest possible confrontation in the field of the economy. While during the Cold War the main sphere of rivalry was the arms race, at present it is undoubtedly the economy. Some negative trends in Russia's economy became evident as early as in 2012–2013 connected, notably, not so much with any market fluctuations but with the fact that the state capital model had largely exhausted its growth potential. The sanctions and other restrictive measures imposed by the West in consequence of the events in the Crimea and Donbas also had an adverse effect. Besides, they coincided with falling oil prices in world markets which deprived the budget of a considerable share of revenue. In these conditions, the rouble conversion rate decreased nearly twofold against the dollar and euro. The ambitious plans to make the rouble one of the world reserve currencies had to be dropped. The country is also faced with a decline in production and sinking living standards of the bulk of the population. Russia's introduction of counter-sanctions, which provide for banning imports of foodstuff from Western countries, has resulted in reduced quantities of available quality goods, especially in large cities. On the whole, Russia's volume of foreign trade shrank considerably, including with countries that did not join in the sanctions.

Lately, Russia has faced a new series of problems – it has lost large amounts of money as a defendant in several international lawsuits. Fearing more litigation, the Russian ruling circles have created a new line of defence. On 14 July 2015, the Constitutional Court of Russia adopted a decision that Russia be exempt from implementing the rulings of the European Court for Human Rights if they contradict the country's Constitution (Konstitutsionnyi sud, 2015).

Although on the whole the economic situation is deteriorating, the majority of Russian ruling circles share the opinion that Russia can withstand the West's sanctions and restrictions for a long time. They explain it by the fact that the Russian people's limit of susceptibility to falling living standards is higher than that of the Americans and Europeans, and therefore a slow and gradual decline in such standards, unlike the abrupt plummeting that followed the default of 1998, is not to have serious political consequences over a long period of time.

To sum up, the ongoing confrontation is not a repeat of the Cold War – it is neither as global nor as fierce, but at the same time it is less controllable and hence less predictable. It is most likely set to continue in the next few years and, for that reason, participation in it will in practice be the main direction of Russia's foreign policy.

About-face Eastwards?

Russia's confrontation with the West was concurrent with the country's reorientation towards the East. The move is not anything unusual in itself, for the same used to be done by both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union when faced with misfortunes or serious upsets in the West. Characteristically, the extent of Russia's involvement in the international processes unfolding in the East is considerably smaller than in Europe. The fact that the main political and cultural centres of Russia, as well as a considerable part of its economic potential, are concentrated in the European part of Russia cannot but have a bearing on its foreign policy activities in the East. The Russian-American dialogue on Pacific Ocean issues has always been minimal. An important circumstance is that the Asia-Pacific region, unlike the Euro-Atlantic sector, experiences far less confrontation. Except for the USA, Canada, Australia and Japan, no other country of the region has imposed any anti-Russian sanctions or restrictions (with Japan resorting to their softer forms). This provides a more favourable atmosphere for Russia.

One of the most important present-day objectives for Russian diplomacy is the formation of a group of states in Eurasia that could successfully rival the G7. The idea that the outcome of the world-scale struggle depends on Russia, India and China, with their huge populations, is found in one of the last works by Vladimir Lenin, who believed that "in this sense, the ultimate victory of socialism is unconditionally and completely guaranteed" (Lenin, 1970). Later, this idea was reiterated from time to time in the documents of the Communist International and in speeches by Soviet politicians, but the acute contradictions between the USSR and China in the 1960s–1980s and China and India in the 1950s–1970s rendered its implementation impossible. In the post-Soviet years, the idea was revived in a somewhat modified form by Primakov (Pekin podvel Primakova, 1998). In the 21st century, the BRICS group was formed which united the then most dynamically developing economies, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and some others. As in 2015 Russia simultaneously chaired the SCO and the BRICS, it made an attempt to bring the two and the Eurasian Economic Union as close as possible, trying to play a leading or one of the main roles in the process. It was for this reason that the SCO and BRICS summit meetings were held almost simultaneously in Ufa in July 2015. Russia's gains from those summits were

limited. On one hand, India and Pakistan initiated the process of joining the SCO and Belarus acquired an observer status. The SCO and BRICS summits expressed reproof of the use of sanctions in international relations, which was very important for Russia in the context of its confrontation with the West. There are no chances, however, of converting the SCO into a military and political bloc. Russia's motion to create a parliamentary assembly within BRICS was not supported. Moscow had clearly wanted to oppose that body to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, where Russia is sharply and frequently criticised. Besides, a leading role in those processes belongs to China. It should also be noted that the other countries of the SCO and BRICS, for various reasons, are continuing to develop relations with the USA and the European Union and have no intention of conflicting with them. Therefore, what is emerging is an alliance of states whose interests in some fields differ from those of the West – but it is not an anti-Western bloc at all.

In 2011 a summit meeting of APEC (Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation) was held in Vladivostok, for the first time on the territory of Russia. The political circles connected great hopes with it, but they only came true partially. To begin with, Russia poses in the region as a military and, to a lesser extent, political power. Its economic potential in the region is weak. The development programme for Siberia and the Far East had progressed at a slow rate from the very beginning and later its financing was reduced. The extent of integrating the area into the country's economy is also negligible. It should be added that APEC itself proved to be a far less influential and efficient organisation than Moscow had believed. For that reason, Russian politicians' attention became focused on the already existing regional organisations, such as ASEAN. That was favoured by the reactivation of Russian-Vietnamese links. Russia has decided to oppose the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which is lavishly supported by the Americans. Russia's real possibilities in the area are modest because of its limited economic potential.

Since integration processes in the Asia-Pacific region are far less developed than in Europe, Russia has attached great importance to bilateral links. What is noteworthy is that in many cases they are developing in parallel, unconnected with each other. Unlike its European vector, where Russia is trying to make use of its counterparts' internal differences and contradictions, its Eastern diplomacy is marked with much greater caution and Russia prefers not to interfere in any ongoing conflicts or act as a mediator. At the same time, Russia is prepared to cooperate with the USA and other countries on the issues of Iran's and North Korea's nuclear programmes and some other problems.

What the Russian leadership attaches paramount importance to in the current conditions is strengthening relations with China. At present, the

relations between Russia and China are perhaps the best ever throughout their history. The two countries keep consulting with each other on practically every international issue and are developing links in every sphere, including military-technical cooperation. However, contrary to Russian politicians' expectations, China is unwilling to form a union with Russia and keeps developing, simultaneously, its links with the USA. Besides, the Chinese economy is much larger than Russia's and is integrated into the global economy, its volumes of trade with the USA and EU being several times as large as its trading volumes with Russia. For this reason, Russia's rapprochement with China is bound by certain limits. The Russian leadership pays special attention to bilateral relations with India, Vietnam and the Republic of Korea, regarding them as strategic partners. Russia's political and economic relations with these countries are on the whole good. Moscow has hailed Vietnam's desire to create a free-trade zone with the Eurasian Economic Union. The only serious issue with the Republic of Korea is its readiness to have some elements of the American Shield anti-missile system deployed on its territory (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, 2014). There are however, some real hindrances to actual cooperation. Russia's share in those countries' foreign trade turnover is not large, while there are, conversely, no large modern projects that might give an impetus to cooperation. At the same time, China shows some caution where Russia's links with India are concerned, while India and Vietnam are actively developing their cooperation with the USA.

As seen above, in the Asia-Pacific region, in contrast with the Euro-Atlantic zone, no serious confrontation has taken place, although a certain deterioration of the situation has taken place. On the whole, Russia has not succeeded in scoring successes in the East that would make up for its losses in the West.

Conclusion

The first results of the Russian leadership's new foreign policy course elicit various and relatively ambiguous assessments.

To begin with, it should be stressed that the new, tougher line of Russia's foreign policy has received considerable support within the country. The incorporation of the Crimea and the military operation in Syria have been approved by overwhelming majorities according to all public opinion polls. Putin's personal popularity has soared to the highest level during his 15 years in office. Admittedly, some ordinary citizens are concerned about the economic situation deteriorating and the living standards declining, but they connect this with Russia's activities in the international arena. The West's restrictive measures, including personal ones against high-ranking

officials, politicians and businessmen, have not caused a split in the ruling circles. All in all, it can be stated that the positions of the ruling circles within Russia have been strengthened.

Opinions on how the new foreign policy course has impacted Russia's international situation are not so uniform. The majority are sure that overall Russia's positions have been strengthened in the past 2–3 years and the target set – to create a new world order without American dominance – is achievable in the short-term perspective. Thus, for example, in the opinion of Bezrukov and Sushentsov (2015) Russia is in the epicentre of a global hurricane and will be able to overcome all the difficulties arising. "In any case", they believe, "if Russia holds out until 2020 and all attempts by its enemies to bring it to an economic collapse, chaos, and disintegration fail, then we can be certain that the era of Western dominance has ended. Thus, international relations will officially enter a new era".

The minority's attitude is more cautious. They believe that the current confrontation with the West has weakened Russia's position in international affairs and, as a consequence of the ongoing economic crisis, the country's share in the world economy is diminishing. This trend is most likely to remain, the country's chances of influencing global-scale decisions have dwindled, public opinion in many countries reveals negative or at best cautious attitudes to Russia, while the stopping of access to the latest achievements of science has created very grave problems in the mid-term perspective.

Despite considerable losses, especially in the economic sphere, the likelihood of the current foreign policy course changing in the short term is minimal. Since inside the country acts such as the incorporation of the Crimea and the operation in Syria are viewed by almost everybody as proof of Russia's return to world politics as a global power, any noticeable reversal would cause incomprehension or even discontent among supporters of the present leadership of Russia. The ruling classes are unlikely to take that kind of risk at the threshold of the upcoming parliamentary election (2016) and especially the presidential campaign (2018). Moreover, Russian international behaviour has already gained considerable momentum, leaving very little space for retreat or even manoeuvring. Therefore, more likely than not, Russia will not seek a compromise with the West but will attempt to become a centre for all those who feel discontented and aggrieved. There are not so few of them in today's world. For that reason, the high level of confrontation between Russia and the West is set to continue.

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