

# Russia: The Loneliness of an Aspiring Power Center

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Since 2000, the foreign policy of the Russian Federation has gone through several stages. Up until 2003, Russia mostly moved toward rapprochement with the West under the slogan of »European choice« and with the aim of entering into an alliance with the United States. After that, until 2007 Moscow pursued a policy of nonalignment, with a pointed independence from the West, but combined with a reluctance to confront it. In his much-noted Munich speech, Vladimir Putin in effect laid out the conditions under which he expected to coerce America and Europe into partnership with Russia: accept us as we are, treat us as equals, and establish cooperation based on mutual interests. This »coerced partnership« was never realized. In 2008 and early 2009, it became obvious that Russia was moving toward increased isolation from its would-be partners. If this trend prevails, there will be serious and perilous consequences, both for the domestic situation in Russia and for international relations overall.

A year ago, the Russian leadership felt that it was in full control. It had succeeded in modifying the structure of the domestic political regime while fully preserving its essence. Economic growth, market take-off, and an influx of investment allowed the Kremlin to roll out ambitious strategies for the coming decade and a half. Even as the global crisis started to unfold, Russia was seen as an island of stability, and the ruble aspired to become the reserve currency for the huge area between the Eurozone and the sphere of the RMB. This area – the CIS countries – seemed destined to become Russia's sphere of attraction, the region of its privileged interests and its political, economic, military, and cultural preeminence. Beginning in 2008, restoring Russia's »natural« historic position as the dominant power in central Eurasia – the policy option that had long been a »peripheral« alternative to Western integration – became the focus of Russian foreign policy. This had previously been prevented by Russia's »illusions« about the West, on the one hand, and by the lack of resources on the other. Now these illusions had vanished and resources had become available.

The Kremlin clearly identified its opponents in the realization of the »CIS project,« formulated back in 2003. It came to see its main adversaries as those in the US – or more broadly, in the West – who promoted NATO expansion into post-Soviet space and/or supported »color revolutions« there. The »nearest« adversaries were the anti-Russian governments of the neighboring countries, Georgia and Ukraine, as well as their allies in the Baltic States. One of the main goals in 2008 became to disrupt the granting of NATO Membership Action Plans (MAP) to Kiev and Tbilisi. The stakes were extremely high: had the MAP been adopted, the process of integrating the former republics of the USSR into the Atlantic alliance would have become irreversible and relations between Russia and the West would have shifted from a diplomatic stand-off to active political and »special services« warfare, which would inevitably lead to open and direct conflict.

Although a new Cold War was not something the Kremlin wanted, being seen to back down was something it wanted even less. Unable to influence directly the decisions of the Alliance, Moscow depended on the willingness and the ability of leading European NATO members to block Washington's efforts to issue MAPs. In order to make Berlin's and Paris's appeals for caution heard among their NATO allies, Moscow unambiguously pointed to the credible dangers of internal discord in Ukraine and the possibility of the ethnic conflicts in Georgia »unfreezing.« In April 2008, President Putin took the unprecedented step of traveling to the NATO summit in Bucharest to personally warn Western leaders against taking in and welcoming an »unstable Ukraine« and a »warring Georgia.«

The ambivalent decision made at the Bucharest summit (not to issue the MAP for now, but to approve the eventual admission of Ukraine and Georgia to NATO) did not ease tensions, but only exacerbated the situation concerning the two countries. In Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili tried to settle the Ossetia conflict in his favor through the use of force, in an attempt to eliminate a formal obstacle on the road to a MAP. In Kiev, Viktor Yushchenko started his campaign for reelection to a second term with slogans about protecting Ukrainian independence from Moscow's encroachment. Moscow, for its part, moved on to resolute countermeasures.

Enough has already been said about the reckless and adventurist nature of Saakashvili's actions. Russia was forced to counterstrike. But there was another crucial factor: the war in the Caucasus signified the collapse of Moscow's long-standing policy of attempting to use »frozen conflicts« as insurmountable obstacles to Georgian membership of NATO. The pos-

sibility that others might unexpectedly unfreeze these conflicts – which is exactly what happened – was underestimated. Russian peacekeeping efforts thus failed on a political level, and Moscow had to resort to arms. It turned out that this state aspiring to Great Power status was in fact unable to provide security right on its own borders through political means. The embers that have smoldered in the Caucasus and on the Dniester for over a decade and a half testify to the triumph of tactics over strategy in Russian foreign policy-making.

The Kremlin could answer charges of incompetence with the following counterargument: no settlement was possible – after all, Georgia had US backing. Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov flatly declared that certain foreign powers had »decided to test the strength of Russian authority and our peacekeepers« via Saakashvili, and even »to force us to embark on the path of militarization and abandon modernization.«<sup>1</sup> What role the US played in Georgia's decision to unleash a war in the Caucasus is a topic for another study. Yet it is obvious that the Bush administration was responsible for not stopping Tbilisi's attack on Tskhinval, for sending apparently ambiguous signals to President Saakashvili, for the Republicans »investing« in »Misha« as their own »social project,« and so on. It is just as obvious, however, that the allegations that Washington is attempting to stir up militarization in Russia so as to block Russian modernization are fictional or even delusional. Then again, this is not a new thesis. The fact that it is being expressed not by commentators but by »political figures« may show that the Russian leadership believes it. This demonstrates the inadequacy of their perceptions of the outside world. In the same vein are comparisons of the night shelling of Tskhinval with the September 11 terrorist attacks and such maxims as »a sudden reality check,«<sup>2</sup> »the last illusions are gone,«<sup>3</sup> and »the present clarity [that] is always better than vagueness or ambiguity.«<sup>4</sup> It is worth asking what is rhetoric here, and what is real conviction.

After the war with Georgia, the Russian leadership made a series of important statements on relations with former Soviet republics. President Dmitry Medvedev formulated the doctrine of privileged Russian

1. Lavrov, Sergey: »Russian Foreign Policy and the New Quality of the Geopolitical Situation,« [www.mid.ru](http://www.mid.ru).
2. Ibid.
3. Transcript of the meeting with members of the Valdai International Discussion Club; September 12, 2008; [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru).
4. Lavrov, Sergey: op.cit.

interests in the CIS countries, using terms similar to those used 180 years previously by US president James Monroe. Echoing another old American maxim, Medvedev also put forth the thesis that Russia had to protect its citizens abroad. This would have been appreciated by another US president, Zachary Taylor, whose achievements included acquiring the Republic of Texas, first settled by American citizens and then seized from Mexico. The Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs cast doubt on whether it actually corresponded to the spirit of the times for nation-states to begin forming on the ruins of the Soviet Union. After criticizing »modern« nation-building from a »postmodern« perspective, Sergey Lavrov<sup>5</sup> suggested an alternative: integration of a »Second Europe« around Russia. The problem with this, however, is that unlike »First Europe« (the EU), the potential second one (the CIS) has a natural hegemon, and integration here would thus be built on the paradigm of restoring Russia as the center of power.

The unpopularity of this paradigm among virtually all of Russia's partners in the CIS imposes serious limitations on the path to »Eastern« integration. Russia's neighbors are cautious about Russian mantras about civilizational unity and the commonality of historical fate. With regard to recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which Moscow sees as a matter of principal importance, Russia has not found support among any of its formal allies under the Collective Security Treaty or its partners in the Eurasian Economic Community. There is a fundamental reason: all of its allies saw this as a test of their independence, and none of them wanted to appear as Moscow's satellite. As it attempted to get out of this awkward situation, the Kremlin announced that it had not engaged in any arm-twisting.<sup>6</sup> In reality, this was a reluctant admission: none of Russia's allies or partners were prepared to support its actions voluntarily. Moscow's denunciation of the principle of respecting the territorial integrity of the post-Soviet states has set a dangerous precedent for Russia's neighbors, while Moscow's readiness to resort to arms in order to protect the rights of Russian citizens, of whom there are many in Transnistria, in the Crimea, and in other regions of the former USSR, serves to reinforce this impression.

The case of Georgia is an extreme example. Saakashvili is not only an authoritarian ruler but also a skillful demagogue. At one time the

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5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

Bush-Cheney administration preferred to deal with him, unthinkingly and not bothering to solicit the opinions of the Georgian opposition – who, incidentally, are on the whole no less anti-Russian than Saakashvili himself. Moscow, however, has to remember that the entire uncoordinated Georgian political elite and the majority of the Georgian people, for all their diversity of opinion, are in agreement in their highly negative evaluation of Russian policies toward Georgia. The results of a referendum on the question of Georgia's membership of NATO and leaving the CIS were very telling as a vote of no confidence in Moscow. Moscow's official pronouncements of »deep respect for the Georgian people«<sup>7</sup> are left hanging in the air. Georgia has probably lost Abkhazia and South Ossetia forever, but Russia, for its part, has lost Georgia as a friendly country for a long time to come, regardless of the personal make-up of its leadership. In the »belt of good neighbors« that the Russian foreign policy-makers had at one time intended to build in the CIS, there will be at least one link missing.

And possibly more than one. Last summer the worst-case scenario was avoided in Russian-Ukrainian relations, thank God, but it would only have taken the Ukrainian Navy to execute the order of their president and commander-in-chief and to start inspecting Russian Black Sea Fleet ships departing Sevastopol for Sukhum (to aid Abkhazia and monitor the movements of the US Navy) or returning to base, and an armed incident would have been guaranteed, with all the imaginable outcomes for Sevastopol, Crimea, Russian-Ukrainian relations, and peace in Europe. If Mikheil Saakashvili's actions disturbed the fragile peace in the Caucasus, then Yushchenko's order jeopardized the security of the whole continent.

Since then, Kiev and Moscow have stepped back from the brink of the precipice, but they have not achieved a fundamental improvement in their relations. In Russia (whether in the form of the Russian Federation, the USSR or the Russian Empire), the Ukrainian president sees a historical hegemon, oppressor, and assimilator. The guarantee of independence, from his and his supporters' perspective, is joining up with the West: first through NATO, which is easier, and then through the EU. This view is shared by 20 percent of the population, with over half opposed (wanting the country to be part of Europe, but without parting from Russia). Thus, the attempt to force a dichotomous choice on Ukraine is fraught

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7. Ibid.

with repercussions, above all within Ukraine itself. Those who truly want Ukraine to remain whole and free cannot under such conditions favor Ukraine's joining NATO.

The only force that would be able to form a pro-NATO majority in this neighboring fraternal community is Moscow itself. Although its policy has become more refined since the fiasco of 2004, when Moscow perceived the »orange« »uprising of the masses« as nothing more than the work of US special operations, it continues in essence to work for the mutual alienation of these two kindred peoples. High-placed Russian figures have allowed themselves to express public disdain for their neighbors in terms that Moscow itself would have considered extremely offensive if the conversation were reversed. Thinking that Viktor Yushchenko's political enemies would want to applaud his foreign detractors is the kind of self-deception that should be avoided.

The problem is that many in Moscow do not consider Ukraine a foreign state, but rather part of the historic »body of Russia.« Moreover, doubts have been voiced about the stability of Ukrainian nationhood, which would mean that Ukraine is neither foreign nor fully a state. But in that case, what is it? And what is permissible in such a situation, and what not? It would appear that Russian politicians of openly nationalistic orientation have been energetically stoking Crimean separatism, which previously seemed to have cooled off. Russian government figures have meanwhile been thinking aloud about the unthinkable: the possible targeting of Russian missiles at Ukraine if it should allow American bases on its territory. Thus, the means (to turn Ukraine away from NATO) have been quietly transformed into the goal (to bind Ukraine to Russia). The paradox here is characteristic: although it has great potential for »soft power,« Moscow invariably chooses to make it rough. Instead of love, tough love. But you cannot force love. If in response the majority of Ukrainians some day start to see the independence of their country exclusively in terms of independence from Russia, then survey numbers on NATO might turn in a direction that Moscow finds very unpalatable.

The gas Cold War of January 2009 has become an important new watershed in the evolution of Russian foreign policy. The Ukrainian side provoked the confrontation, first because it was unable to settle its relations with Gazprom, and then with absolute irresponsibility as conveyor of Russian gas to Europe. However, what initially was perceived as a disappointing *déjà vu*, a primarily commercial dispute with an immanent component of corruption and unavoidable political overtones (and un-

der conditions less favorable than in 2006 for Kiev), turned into a spat over Russian-Ukrainian relations at the expense of Europe, parts of which were left freezing without gas. This will not be forgotten in a hurry.

What happened, it seems, was an unsuccessful attempt to use the gas factor to enhance the position of Yulia Tymoshenko, the »pragmatic« prime minister of Ukraine, at the expense of the pro-Western president Yushchenko. Obviously, manipulating gas prices, and through them the structure of the political landscape in Ukraine, is just about the most effective tool that the Kremlin has available. Seen from this standpoint, corruption among Ukrainian politicians is not so much a problem as a solution to a problem. This time, however, Yushchenko appears to have been able at the last moment to disrupt the combination played by his opponent and prime minister Putin, raising the stakes so high that he seriously complicated relations between Russia and the EU.

What occurred as a result was the very thing that »Russo-skeptics« on both sides of the Atlantic have always used to frighten the »naive Europeans,« who have (say these skeptics) relied on Gazprom blindly: the supply of gas from Russia was shut off at the very peak of the cold season. The Europeans, lacking the opportunity, interest, or (owing to the closed nature of the contract conditions) even the ability to figure out who was right in the dispute between Gazprom and Naftogaz, got the message very clearly: for Europe, energy security means security from a real shut-off of the Russian »pipe.« This will bring about long-term changes in EU policies, from the development of a unified energy policy and a united position in negotiations with Moscow to a more active search for alternative sources of energy, including compressed gas, and the construction of new gas pipelines that do not pass through Russian, Ukrainian, or Belorussian territory. Being technically in the right, but clumsy in its maneuvering, Moscow fell into the very trap it always feared falling into. Its exasperated pledges to redirect the gas streams from Europe to Asia only reinforced the feeling among Europeans of the necessity and urgency of fundamentally reevaluating their long-term energy policy.

The Russian-European energy dialogue has turned into an extreme form of shuttle diplomacy between Kiev and Moscow, carried out by the Czech premier. Europe may no longer consider Ukraine to be the »unfortunate victim of Russian dictates,« as it had three years before, but it still attributes responsibility for the situation to Russia: after all, its contract is with Gazprom, not Naftogaz. In the meantime, the negotiating process on a new Russia-EU agreement, formally renewed after a lapse

caused by the war in the Caucasus, remains at a virtual standstill. Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, security has once again become the central issue in relations between Russia and the West.

One must indeed admit that the architecture of European security created in the 1990s has proven to be unsuccessful. The West hoped that Europe could be organized around the NATO-EU pair, which would naturally »attract« other countries and regions that gravitate toward the Atlantic alliance and the EU, while Russia would be satisfied with formal partnerships with both institutions. The latter assumption proved ill-founded. The policy of »engaging Russia« first sputtered, then helplessly spun its wheels, and finally came to a halt. Putin left no doubts about this in Munich. Moscow had a number of questions for the US and its allies: what is to be done about the expansion of NATO into the CIS countries, the problem of European ABM, and the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe? To ignore any of these problems is to play Russian roulette.

What to do now is a different question. Analysis of the Russian ideas publicized in 2008 leaves the impression that by suggesting the conclusion of a European security treaty (EST, or »Helsinki 2«), Moscow is striving to recreate, in a greatly simplified form, a situation similar to the last stage of the Cold War. Under this arrangement, the »New West« (NATO plus the EU) and the »New East« (the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization) would have a legally binding treaty fixing national borders and collective zones of responsibility; any future expansion of NATO to the East would be illegal; a number of countries between blocs (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Azerbaijan) would declare neutrality alongside Finland and Sweden, which would retain and reaffirm this status; agreements on the American ABM system in Europe (with Poland and the Czech Republic) would be scrapped and replaced by joint Russian-American or Russian-American-European agreements, and so on. The main thing, however, is that Europe would once again acquire recognized leaders with the authority to address all of its problems: the US, the EU, and the Russian Federation.

It is not so much that faith in summits and their outcomes – legally binding treaties – is in itself naive: mutual relations are not established by treaty. The real root of the problem is that trilateral cooperation between the EU, the US, and Russia in the Euro-Atlantic region, which Moscow has been pushing for many years, requires totally different policies than those practiced by Russia today. This does not apply solely, or primarily, to its foreign policy. The problem of NATO expansion concerns not only



building security in Europe, but also the construction of a modern state in Russia. The European choice – despite what Minister Lavrov has asserted – manifests itself not in ideas such as EST (in which case both Brezhnev and Chernenko would be »model Europeans«), but in a willingness to build a »Europe« (a state based on laws, a social market economy, political democracy, human rights, and so on) at home. Central and Eastern Europe, liberated twenty years ago, already shows evidence of this. In Russia, we clearly have a »Europe« deficit – not counting, of course, the supposedly »European«-style term extension for president and parliament introduced at the end of 2008.

One stumbling block in relations between Russia and the EU is the Central and Eastern European countries, including the Baltic States. Attention to this region has remained sporadic for nearly two decades. Many of these countries are considered »hopeless« from Russia's standpoint, and some are considered hopelessly hostile. Meanwhile, after the entry of Central and Eastern European countries into NATO and the EU, this approach began to seriously affect relations between Russia and the EU as a whole. Especially problematic has been the lack of any serious dialogue with Poland. In summer 2008, immediately following the war in the Caucasus, 70 percent of Poles were expecting Russian tanks to invade Poland. Such a poor appreciation of NATO's guarantees may appear to be heartening news for the Kremlin, yet one cannot but be concerned about the almost total lack of trust in Russia on the part of the citizens of a large neighboring state. The year 2009 will mark the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the seventieth anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The smartest thing that Russia could do now would be to open its archives on the Katyn massacre, the annexation of the Baltic States, World War II, and the post-war period in general. A sterile defensive stance on the difficult periods of common history and using Kremlin-backed youth movements such as *Nashi* (»Ours«) beyond Russia's borders will only do Russia further harm. It should also be remembered that Moscow's relations with Europe have to do not only with Berlin, Paris, and Rome, but also with Budapest, Prague, and Riga. Moreover, they concern not only nations and governments, but also businesses and individuals.

In its relations with the US, Moscow continues to be hindered by its perpetual obsession with the »struggle against a unipolar world,« which, we now see, no longer exists and perhaps never existed at all. In preparing to work with the new US administration, the Kremlin might pose the

question, »What does Russia want from America?« – beyond the three familiar »don'ts«: don't intrude into the CIS, don't expand NATO, and don't deploy troops or weapons near Russian borders. For example, how can Russian-American relations be »steered« in a direction that would really help the country to modernize? It would be useful to reflect critically on whether Americans really are incapable of »understanding constructive arguments« and whether »toughness is the only way to deal with them.« The sharp tone of Dmitry Medvedev's first State-of-the-Nation address was an unpleasant shock for the American audience, while the threat to deploy Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad in response to the US ABM plans for Europe was an obvious mistake, and precisely from the standpoint of Russian interests. Russia's other PR blunders in terms of their impact on the US public were the demonstrative flights of Russian strategic bombers to Venezuela and sending Northern Fleet ships into the Caribbean. Strategic bombers, of course, must train to fly long distances, and ships must put to sea, but the public camaraderie with Hugo Chávez constituted Exhibit A in terms of negative publicity, while the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia by Nicaragua – Russia's only diplomatic ally on this matter in the entire world – was simply an embarrassment.

Containing Russia from the outside is a useless and dangerous policy; Western interference in Russian internal affairs is hopeless and senseless. At the same time, Russians themselves must be fully aware that in the twenty-first century, true parity lies in the parity of institutions, not in multi-megaton ballistic missiles or, say, in GDP. Legalism is not the same thing as the rule of law. Corruption cannot be the norm. Until Russia becomes a modern state, its political system will not be seen as legitimate and as having legitimate interests in the outside world. Such is the reality, whether pleasing or not. The ideal way for Russia to attain the highest international status is through a consistent national modernization led by goal-oriented policies that expand citizen participation in decision-making processes and control over their implementation. As is generally known, the price for not pursuing reforms is political crisis.

In order for Russia to rise, it must drop its arrogance. The celebrated »collapse of liberal capitalism« is not exactly the same thing as the fall of communism, nor does the »unraveling of the latest imperial order« (however this might be understood) compare with the breakup of the USSR. Before our very eyes, the American people have demonstrated an ability to renew their political system. With the election of Barack Obama,

America has once again reinvented itself. The most striking thing about this election was not the fact that an African-American was elected, but that he was elected by ordinary Americans, not elites, clans, or political machines. For those Russians who can still analyze and compare, it is indicative and instructive to compare the elections of 2008 in Russia and in the US. In general, it is better not to dwell on the problems of your opponents, but rather to think about the lessons that can be learned from their and your own experience – for instance, how to develop and practice the values that President Medvedev spoke of in his November address to Russia's Federal Assembly, and then to the Russian people on New Year's Eve.

Russia has proposed the revision of the global order formed in the wake of the Cold War. Moscow has every reason to aspire to a more active role in global affairs and a more substantial part in global governance. But what exactly is the world order? The replacement of the vaunted unipolarity by an oligarchy of five or six states, which includes Russia? Moscow loves the UN, mainly for its veto powers in the Security Council, but dislikes the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe because it lacks a similar arrangement. It would be beneficial for Russia to think about what it could do for the rest of the world and what responsibilities it should shoulder. In present-day Russia, the idea of national interests remains the most popular and most often used, but it is obviously based on national egotism rather than on the creation of social well-being. Russians need to understand in which spheres they would be able to play the role of a global or regional leader. Before it recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia had a chance, for example, to act as a guardian of international law. But Moscow, in the heat of the post-war period, acting out of fear and pragmatism, let this chance slip away. Now a new niche needs to be found. For now, however, one must take a sober look at the potential of such an exotic and conceptual structure as BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China), or at the potential and capabilities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. It is time to recognize that Russia's foreign policy has hit a dead-end. Never before in contemporary history have Russia's relations with Europe, America, and its nearest neighbors (Ukraine, Georgia, Estonia) been so tense across the board. The maxim about permanent interests and impermanent friends, the expression »beautiful solitude,« or the aphorism that the army and navy are Russia's only true friends can be cited and recited, but we still have to admit to ourselves that what we are really talking about is the danger of

the country's isolation. Neither Medvedev nor Putin nor Lavrov would want to take credit for that.

In late 2008 and early 2009, the global economic crisis has continued to broaden and deepen. In reality, an »island of stability« can turn out to be more vulnerable than others. The Russian stock market fell harder than stock markets in either BRIC or OECD countries. Capital has fled, oil is falling and undermining the budget, and the ruble is plummeting. One can of course continue to harp on about America's responsibility for having »infected« the world with its crisis, but the more important question remains how to get out of the crisis and where to go from there. In giving priority to the goal of national modernization, Russia must proceed along the path of a rapprochement with Europe and North America, and with the economically and politically developed world as a whole. If it puts the emphasis on restoring its dominance in Eurasia, Russia will rapidly expend its resources in conflicts with the objects of its ambitions and regional players, and will enter a period of intense competition with both America and Europe. This course will probably bring about a short-term but painful and destructive double isolation of the country – both from the outside and from the inside – and will ultimately block Russia's current modernization project. Perhaps this would be welcomed by the opponents of a strong Russia. But Russia's friends and Russians themselves should reject such a course.