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Russia's Conundrum in the post-Soviet Space

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

In the 1990s the implementation of this task was neither consistent nor pursued in a systemic way. In fact, Russia's approaches towards the space were chaotic and mostly tactical, in many ways – a function of subjective factors. Still the achievement was to constitutionalize relations among post-Soviet space through signing of basic agreements and treaties. The framework of these relations was installed but without comprehensive policy on all sides they were influenced more by the drift than by any meaningful strategy. It was as though the idea of free market forces was implanted in the post-Soviet political domain, prioritizing “self-regulation” while marginalizing the role of the state and strategy. Conceptually there was no clear vision what Russia expected from the space in the long run and if CIS should be considered as merely a convenient mechanism of the Soviet Union's “political divorce”.

Moreover according to the widespread view at that time, inherited from the Leninist revolutionary tactics, “at first we should separate before we can reunite”. Many politicians of the old guard were under impression that other republics of the former Soviet Union, except Baltic states, sooner or later would return to the fold of Russia.

As a result of such thinking and expectations of history moving on the auto-pilot, private or semi-state economic actors became main foreign policy players with sometimes corrosive consequences for bilateral relations.

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

At the start of the new century, the idea of economic rational was introduced in the relations between Russia and other post-Soviet states. Economic diplomacy was supposed to phase out uncertainty, clientelism and possibilities of a free ride by Russian partners when price-setting mechanisms for Russian natural resources were open to arbitrary use in accordance with the current state of political bilateral affairs, usually for the benefit of Russia’s neighbours’ political elites without symmetric reciprocity. That voluntarisms was marginal if certain natural resources had clear international markets value and their costs were regulated by transparent rules; but in case, for example, of natural gas political factor could play a significant role. In the absence of consistent foreign policy strategy in Moscow towards the post-Soviet space in the 1990s, apart from illusion that different parts of this space are bound to get together, those benefits did not usually bear fruit in terms of Russia’s national interests.

So in the 2000s market mechanisms were to replace political contingency or expedience, but, this time, under Russia’s state supervision. Results of the new approach were ambivalent. While the state was rational in trying to use economic leverage in international relations to its advantage, the lack of a comprehensive strategy in the Near Abroad still did not allow Moscow to conduct an effective foreign policy in the region. That began to change when traditional but for a long time hollow priority of the Near Abroad as the first and most important “circle” of the Russia’s foreign policy started to fill with real content.

Simultaneously, by the middle of the 2000s illusions of Russia joining traditional Euro-Atlantic organisations, like NATO or the EU, evaporated. The disastrous neoconservative period in the US foreign policy convinced Russia that the Western part of the Far Abroad was not only a source of investments and technologies but also of risks and challenges. The

Kremlin saw the conflict in Georgia in 2008 as a direct consequence of NATO expansion, which motivated Saakashvili, the loose cannon of Washington, to assault Tshinval, including Russian peacekeepers. As to the EU, the failure of the European constitution and the inability of the Union to acquire autonomous political power, built upon its economic might, made it in the eyes of Moscow a second-class player in international relations. Two symbols of that were the termination soon after 2003 of “big three” summits (Russia, France, Germany) after political departure of Chirac and Schröder and the “Eastern Neighbourhood” policy of the EU, which in 2014 contributed so much to the crisis in Ukraine (if not to say helped to generate it).

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

Another factor stimulating Moscow to get much more pro-active in the post-Soviet space has been the fast ascend of China on the regional and global stage with all its positive and ambivalent effects in the Russian strategic calculations. The objective process of China’s economic expansion in the Central Asia was problematic in terms of Moscow’s intention to secure its place as the core of the Eurasian integration.

At the same time successes of the EU in its integration policy did not go unnoticed in Russia. Especially remarkable was the rise of Germany as an economic and political leader of the Union. And it happened not in contradiction but in accordance with the fact that Berlin, as all other member states, had to delegate a part of its national sovereignty upwards. In reaction to that and also to the influence of the Russian academic community, specialising in European studies, the Kremlin understood that the notion of the sovereign foreign policy did not contradict the pattern of regional integration under which a “core country” take part in a “pool of sovereignty”.

Moscow was spurred to conduct a more robust approach towards the Near Abroad also by actions of other regional and global actors. The EU, the US, China, Turkey – all of them were getting more and more active in promoting their own political, economic, military or cultural interests in the region. For example, Russia was trailing most of them in application of her soft power. Rossotrudnichestvo, the federal state agency in charge of developing cooperation with Russian compatriots, or Russkiy Mir Foundation — the public body designed to support Russian language and culture, set up only in 2007, became real players in this domain much later then their vis-a-vis from other major countries. The massive

criticism in the West of Vladimir Putin's declaration that the dissolution of the Soviet Union had been a geopolitical earthquake of the XX century was largely misguided. He meant the plight of millions of Russians who had to adapt to life in the newborn sovereign post-Soviet republics, many of which were characterized by ethnocratic policies, especially in Baltic states; his critics meant the illusory plot of Russia to resurrect the Soviet empire.

Still the so much overdue systemic approach to the Near Abroad started to bear fruit by the end of the last decade. The state union with Belarus, often messy in public but solid in its essence, deepening relations with most Central Asia countries, especially with Kazakhstan, Kirghizia and Tajikistan, strategic cooperation with Armenia and mostly good working relations with Azerbaijan were clear manifestation that Russia is serious in its aspirations to forge effective regional integration. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Eurasian Economic Cooperation were gaining more weight. The Eurasian Economic Union, born on 1 January, 2015, embracing Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia and Kirghizia, is the most serious attempt so far to introduce multi-speed approach in Moscow's strategy towards the post-Soviet space. In this as well as in many aspects of this design, including a certain "pool of sovereignty", Russia is a selective follower of the European Union best practices.

In pursuing this course of development, Russia has been trying to solve several problems at once.

First, to ensure stable neighbourhood, especially taking into consideration that several countries in the region in the foreseeable future will face a leadership transition challenge. For Russia the priority has been not the nature of a given political regime but the notion of stability. Failed states are the last thing the Kremlin wishes to see on its doorsteps.

Second, to strengthen economic ties with these countries to stem the tendency of their economic divergence from Moscow.

Third, the challenge of international terrorism, which is impossible to deal with without deep interstate co-operation.

Fourth, in geostrategic terms, in the face of NATO expansion and the European Union ambitions to create a kind of a Eurosphere, Russia wants to preserve or reconstruct a "belt of friendly states" or at least neutral states in military-political terms. And she is adamant to see Baltic states as the North Atlantic Alliance members as the last example of neighbouring countries participating in military organizations, which Russia is not a member of.

Fifth, to ensure that the rights of Russian minorities are upheld according to the European and international norms.

Sixth, to manage a huge migration problem on a Eurasian scale. Few Western specialists, overbusy with the migration crisis in the EU, pay enough attention to the fact that Russia for many years has been one of the biggest recipients of migrants in the world.

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

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

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

The simmering animosity between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the precarious state of affairs in Transnistria, the conflict in Donbass, the threat of terrorism and extremism looming over Central Asia and tensions among Central Asian republics themselves, the balancing act with China to name but a few burning problems — is a huge challenge Russia is going to tackle with a set of regional integration projects and with her active foreign policy in pursuit of polycentrism.

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