

PUTIN'S FOREIGN POLICY AS HOSTAGE TO THE REGIME'S DOMESTIC LEGITIMACY

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In mid-February 2017, a trusted source with good connections to VGTRK – Russia's main state owned multimedia holding - told me that the company received new instructions from the Kremlin regarding coverage of US politics. In a nutshell, these instructions could be summed up by a phrase 'No more Donald Trump!' The company includes among others 'Russia' and 'Russia 24', two of a host of major nationwide television channels under direct or indirect control of the Russian state and ultimately, Vladimir Putin himself (1)

Ever since the 2016 US presidential campaign Russian state and state-controlled TV was producing generally positive coverage of Donald Trump. From time to time this coverage bordered on fawning. Pro-Kremlin experts and State Duma members were paraded in front of the cameras to rally against the old Washington 'establishment' and proclaim to the Russian people that with Donald Trump as president US and then EU sanctions against the Russian government will be lifted, Ukraine showed its place as Russia's *de facto* protectorate and Washington's lectures to Moscow on human rights will stop. But then came the resignation in early February of the White House's national security advisor Michael Flynn over allegations that he had dubious contacts with the Russian ambassador and lied about them to Vice-President Mike Pence. Then Trump's press-secretary Sean Spicer's made tough statements about Russia's policy vis-à-vis Ukraine including a demand that Moscow cede the Crimea back to Kiev's control. The détente or reset that the Kremlin hoped for in US-Russian relations seems to have failed before it even began. So, instructions were issued to the Kremlin's mass-media to immediately to scale back the coverage of American politics and stop mentioning Trump in a positive context if at all – at least until the situation in bilateral relations becomes clearer.

This is not another expose on the importance of the Kremlin's domestic propaganda machine - although it is hard to imagine Putin keeping his grip on power without his media empire. It is rather an illustration of how important foreign policy and especially relationship with the United States is to the Russian regime. Especially since the beginning in 2014 of Russian-Ukrainian war the Western analysts focused primarily on Putin's opposition to NATO enlargement or his concerns about a possible US base appearing in the Crimea in case a pro-Western government takes over in Kiev or his wish to keep intact the Russian naval station in Syria or his general desire to 'make Russia great again', to paraphrase another famous president's campaign slogan. But many of Russia's actions on the global scene may seem too risky and even counterproductive if one looks at them from the normal perspective of national interest. For a country with the GDP the size of the state of New York - 1,3 trillion dollars in 2015 according to the World Bank (2) to take on NATO and the EU in an open-ended confrontation over such vague goals seems to be impractical and costly in the very least. However, if one looks at Russian foreign policy through the optics of domestic politics and Putin's regime legitimacy these seemingly strange actions take on a new dimension and start to look quite logical. To understand the seemingly bizarre nature of Russia's foreign policy one is to look back to the end of the Cold War to understand how it came to this.

When the red Soviet flag was forever lowered and Russian tricolour hoisted over the Kremlin on the 25th of December 1991 for many in the West this seemed like the end of more than seventy years of nearly constant fear – first of a Communist takeover, then of an imminent nuclear annihilation if the Cold War suddenly turned into a hot one. For the states of Central and Eastern Europe, Moscow's former satellites and Warsaw pact's unwilling members, as well as for the Baltics, Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika*, the fall of the Berlin Wall and a string of 'velvet

revolutions' were first and foremost long-anticipated moments of liberation from foreign occupation. Post-totalitarian transition for these countries and peoples was greatly facilitated by this historical fact. In more than forty years they of course had their share of local enthusiasts for the Communist rule as well as collaborators with the Soviets. But at the time, in the late 190s and early 1990s, this could be conveniently forgotten. Every problem could have been ascribed to the Soviet occupation. Moreover, at the turn of the 1990s most families in Central and Eastern Europe kept very much alive the memories of life before Communism. In many of those families there were grandparents who could reminisce about the old days and explain to an ordinary Estonian or a Pole what life was under President Paets or Marshal Pilsudski. It may have been not a particularly prosperous or democratic life as many of those states went through different stages of authoritarianism in the interwar period. But it was nevertheless a life radically different from the existence under a foreign-imposed system. The fact that most Central European nations had their borders sealed by authorities in a much less severe way than it was in the Soviet Union helped their citizens to maintain some contacts with émigré relatives living in the West whose narratives provided a viable and powerful antidote to Communist propaganda. These two factors – leaving behind the Soviet occupation and relating to living memories of pre-Communist national life – crucially made the transition relatively easy for the Czechs, Lithuanians and others. Although each of these countries took its own road during this transition – and it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss this process – now all of them are firmly anchored in the Transatlantic community structures as members of NATO and the EU.

It was different for the Russians. In that fateful December of 1991 hardly anyone in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic – this was the name of what now is the Russian Federation when it was one of fifteen constituent republics of the Soviet Union – could boast of any memory of what life was before Communism. Even the memories of Stalin's deadly rule were already quite distant at the time. What most people remembered was a relatively quiet time of Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev when there was no GULAG, salaries were paid on time, pensions guaranteed and life was predictable. Unless you engaged in the dissident activity or listened to the BBC Russian Service broadcasts at full volume the Soviet citizen was generally safe from any repression. There was shortage of basic foodstuffs or consumer products in the shops and you had to wait in a cue – hours for meat, five years for a car, ten or more years for a new flat – but after many millions died in Stalin's labour camps or at the hands of NKVD executioners this was a rather tolerable existence.

Instead the Russian had 'their' empire – a number two superpower which was 'respected' – read 'feared' by the rest of the world. This imperial pride made up for the drabness and stagnation of the late Soviet life for majority of Russians. Very few people wanted to see the end of Communist rule not to mention the breakup of the USSR. Most desired improvement in their living standards but did not realise that this was hardly possible in a Soviet system which had objectively reached its expiry date. It was mostly the spirited pro-democracy citizens of Moscow and Leningrad (renamed again as Saint Petersburg in a referendum in June 1991) as well as independence movements in the Baltic states, Georgia, Armenia and to some extent Ukraine that brought down the nearly 300 million strong USSR. The citizens of the newly independent Russia (of whom by 1991 there were 151 million) had to grapple with the consequences.

To this day "Russians are ... confused about who they are and hark back to the «glory days» of the late USSR... The seemingly inexplicable collapse of the Soviet system in 1989-1991 is rejected by the popular conscience as an aberration, a result of the «CIA plot», Mikhail Gorbachev's "treachery", global Masonic conspiracy – anything but the consequences of the GULAG, bad governance, economic and technological backwardness and moral decay, which were the real reasons for the swift disappearance of the USSR. This is a source of huge trauma for Russian national psychology..." (3)

Considering the USSR has been gone for more than a quarter of a century public opinion polls taken in the last few years show absolute consistency. According to Levada Centre, Russia's most respected independent pollster, 56 per cent of Russians grieve consider the disappearance of the Soviet Union a tragic event. 43 per cent say that what they miss most is the status of a 'great power' that the USSR was. 60 per cent want the USSR restored in some form – although admittedly also recognise that this goal would be difficult to achieve (4)

In my personal view this state of mind is key to understanding what modern day Russia is. It is a country that constantly looks back rather than forward, cultivates nostalgia rather than makes plans for the future, immerses itself in self-pity rather than faces reality and acts on it. This is not to blame the Russian people. After all, they are still going through a triple transition – from the state-controlled economy to the market, from a totalitarian state to political democracy and, crucially, from an empire to a nation-state.

One may blame Russia's post-Soviet political leadership that, as opposed to Central European and Baltic elites, failed to provide a concise and attractive vision for the future. But could it? Boris Yeltsin, Russia's first democratically elected president, was no doubt a towering figure. He launched the largest privatisation in world history, gave Russia its first democratic constitution, free elections and freedom of travel. Still he was no Vaclav Havel or Vytautas Landsbergis, leaders of the Czech and Lithuanian anti-Communist revolutions. His rejection of Communism was never complimented by an understanding that only a clear break with the past and profound institutional change could guarantee that changes become irreversible. President Yeltsin's inability to dismantle what remains to this day a Soviet-style court system, police and security services, his increasing reliance on Soviet-era third grade *nomenklatura* as well as increasing corruption in his immediate entourage led to a creation of a state in which it is not the wealth that breeds political power but rather vice versa it is the bureaucracy that makes or breaks fortunes. However, Mr Yeltsin possessed a legitimacy of his own. He fought and won two presidential campaigns although the second one in 1996 was and still is hotly disputed. What's more, by his defeating a hard line Communist coup in August 1991 he achieved an iconic status that even his most steadfast opponents cannot undermine to this day.

Vladimir Putin's *de facto* appointment in 1999 as successor to Yeltsin made his legitimacy look and feel different from the very beginning. He never held public office before. None of Putin's electoral campaigns were ever even remotely as competitive as those of his predecessor. Instead of Yeltsin era oligarchy presiding over a chaotic but relatively free society current political system in Russia, in the words of prominent Russian political scientist Ekaterina Schulman, is a "hybrid regime" presided over by former security services officers and their closest friends (5).

As opposed to members the Soviet Politburo, people who govern Russia today also happen to own it. When Mr Yeltsin left the presidency, there was only one state owned enterprise to speak of – Gazprom, Russia's natural gas monopoly. Today there are more than sixty of them. Combined these companies control more than half if not two thirds of Russia's economy. One doesn't have to look further than Gazprom and Rosneft to understand that political authority and ownership of the main sectors of Russian economy are concentrated within a very narrow circle of friends and sometimes relatives. In Russia's State-owned enterprises (SOEs) all losses are state but all profits are *de facto* private. This regime is focused on its own survival rather than development goals. In such circumstances democracy is not an option for the ruling class. Instead it relies on a series of evolving narratives to convince the Russian people that it is this system that remains their only viable political option. In the absence of a coherent national vision for the future, viable middle class, as well as the Kremlin's of political institutions foreign policy becomes not so much an expression of national interests but rather the interests of the ruling class. It is Putin's foreign policy rather than Russia's.

Reliance on the Russian imperial nostalgia, avenging the perceived wrongs the West and especially the United States inflicted on Russia turned out to be the Kremlin's safest bet in controlling Russian public opinion. It is a constant element of the national mentality that doesn't change over time. The Russian government's propaganda machine makes certain that this attitude is carefully cultivated. In December 2016 Levada Centre poll showed that 57 per cent of Russians agree that NATO and the West in general pose a direct threat to Russia (6). By the way, this constitutes an improvement on 2014-2015 when up to 70 per cent of Russians held such opinion.

What is also important is the fact that Russian travel very little. According to the Levada Centre, only 29 percent of Russians own passports (7) – compared for example to the British citizens, 75 per cent of whom have passports (8). What is even more important, only 8-9 per cent of Russian travel abroad every year at least once. Also, most of these trips are to the beach resorts in Turkey, Thailand, and before 2015 terrorist act against a Russian airplane, Egypt. This means that for the overwhelming majority of Russians the West with its institutions like NATO and the EU remains a complete abstraction. Hence the ease with which the Kremlin portrays the West as an enemy that is out to humiliate or even destroy Russia. Consolidating this image of "Fortress Russia" is one of the main elements of the regime's survival.

It may sound like a paradox but in my view, "the most important event in the Putin-era domestic Russian politics happened outside of Russia. It was the «Orange revolution» of 2004 in Ukraine, which along with the Georgian «Rose revolution» of 2003 has sent shock waves of panic through the Russian leadership. An authentically anti-authoritarian message of what many now call simply «the first Maidan» forced the Kremlin to accept the possibility of «people power» scenario in Russia proper. Since then an increasing amount of time and resources was dedicated to one aim – to avoid such developments in Russia at any cost" (9).

Russia's political class is firmly convinced that values and moral judgment do not count in politics. The only thing that matters is bare interest – national or private. This attitude finds significant resonance with ordinary Russians.

In 2012 I suggested in article for 'Policy Review' that 'nowhere it was better demonstrated then during the 2011 crisis over Libya. In spring of that year, just after the allied air operation started, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin voiced a suspicion that Western nations went to war because they wanted to control Libyan oil. He overlooked the fact that Western companies worked in Libya perfectly well under Muammar Gaddafi until the disturbances started. The wealth and power of Russia's political class stem from oil and gas, and so in their view the world revolves around hydrocarbons. During the so called "Arab Spring" Mr. Putin memorably touted an idea that the Arab mentality is inclined towards authoritarianism. It was also a projection of Russian elite's domestic attitudes. The idea of their own fellow citizens as eternal adolescents, who need in turn to be threatened, flattered or bought off, is another article of faith for majority of Russia's politicians". (10)

When people of Moscow and several other cities took to the streets in December 2011 to protest the falsifications at the general election, the Kremlin was shocked. It saw in those peaceful demonstrations that lasted through most of 2012 not a legitimate grievance of the middle classes but a ghost of 'regime change' inspired if not directed by the US. Michael McFaul, US ambassador to Moscow in 2012-2014 recalled that Mr Putin personally berated him in front of Secretary of State John Kerry for "trying to overthrow his government (11).

Understanding the Kremlin's actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine is impossible without reference to Russia's "winter of discontent" in 2011-2012. Annexation of the Crimea was not so much a reaction to real or perceived threats by the West but a key step towards societal mobilisation and strengthening "Fortress Russia" that I mentioned before. President Putin's popularity jumped from a little more than 50 per cent to the record 86 per cent in matter of

weeks (12). This had a lot to do with unique place that the Crimea occupied in the post-Soviet Russian mythology as a territory “stolen” by the Ukrainians.

That Russia recognised Ukraine’s borders in a so called “Bolshoi dogovor” – “Grand Treaty” - concluded between Moscow and Kiev in 1997, mattered little. What is seen in the West as an annexation was and is seen by the Russians as justice finally served to Russia, moreover, as a victory not only over the imaginary “Ukrainian fascists” but over the United States which are seen by most Russians as the country’s arch-foe.

This was the high point of prestige for the political regime and for Putin personally. This achievement will be hard to repeat due exactly to the unique significance of the Crimea for the popular imagination. For example, Russian air force operation in Syria launched in autumn 2015 wrong-footed president Barack Obama’s administration, made it look weak and indecisive, but did not lead to anything comparable to the Crimean effect. Naturally Russians see any foreign military action that does not lead to major loss of soldiers’ and officers’ lives as a something to be proud of. But it came against the background of a deep economic recession and ultimately concerned, to borrow British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s infamous description of Czechoslovakia in 1938, “a faraway country we know little about”. The Kremlin is very careful not to expand Russian presence in Syria beyond certain level as it is bound to lead to more casualties. This in turn could lead to the return of the painful popular memories of the wars in Afghanistan in the 1980s and Chechnya in the 1990s – a potential damage to the ratings that Mr Putin would very much like to avoid in the run up to what is supposed to be his triumphant return to the Kremlin in 2018 for a fourth term. Paradoxically Moscow finds itself torn between inability to act decisively enough for domestic reasons and lack of a meaningful exit strategy in Syria which would not make Russia look defeated.

The approaching presidential election due in spring 2018 poses a serious challenge for the Kremlin. In the absence of dramatic improvement in Russia’s economic situation (it has become marginally better compared to 2015-2016, but not much) public opinion mobilisation against external threats and again confronting the West remain the Kremlin’s well-tested and seemingly reliable policy tool. This may signify more turbulent times ahead. Vladimir Putin’s decree last Saturday recognising IDs issued by Moscow controlled and financed separatist Donetsk and Luhansk “republics” may be a foretaste of another round of confrontation with Ukraine, possibly a military one played out by proxies. If so it will again be presented in apocalyptic terms as struggle with US attempts to impose its order in Russia’s backyard.

Whether, if implemented, this strategy will succeed remains an important question for the future. Data from the Levada Centre poll conducted in November 2016 shows that despite the fear of the West 71 per cent of Russians desire to improve political, economic and cultural ties with Europe and America (13). I am not a sociologist but this seemingly contradictory attitude should not surprise anyone. Any society even one confused by a painful post-Communist transition like Russia cannot live in a state of permanent mobilisation and war hysteria. This presents a problem for Russia’s ruling class which for too long relied on the image of external enemy to prepare a plan B. While it cannot allow for meaningful reforms at home it also has only so much resources to wage a confrontational policy abroad. If anything, such conundrum means rather more turbulence in Russia’s relations with its neighbours and the world at large.

(1) http://www.brandmedia.ru/serv__idP_51_idP1_68_idP2_2425.html

(2) <http://data.worldbank.org/country/russian-federation>

(3) <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/all-politics-are-local-crimea-explained>

(4) <http://www.levada.ru/2016/12/23/lovushki-pamyati/>

(5) <http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2014/08/15/carstvo-imitacii>

- (6) <http://www.levada.ru/2016/11/29/rossiya-i-zapad-2>
- (7) [http://www.levada.ru/2014/10/03/zybkost-nezyblemyh-svobod\](http://www.levada.ru/2014/10/03/zybkost-nezyblemyh-svobod)
- (8) <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/TRAVEL/02/04/americans.travel.domestically/>
- (9) <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/all-politics-are-local-crimea-explained>
- (10) <http://www.hoover.org/research/russian-power-russian-weakness>
- (11) https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/mcfaul-leaves-moscow-and-two-dramatic-years-in-relations-between-us-and-russia/2014/02/26/bb360742-9ef5-11e3-9ba6-800d1192d08b_story.html?utm_term=.94fa75232d9f
- (12) <http://www.levada.ru/2017/01/25/yanvarskie-rejtingi-2/>
- (13) <http://www.levada.ru/2016/11/29/rossiya-i-zapad-2/>