

The mentality of the Russian elite and society and its influence on foreign policy

Executive summary

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The difficulty of explaining Russia's international behavior has troubled foreign policy observers for many years and has received renewed attention since Russia's invasion of Georgia in August 2008. This report looks into the mentality of the current Russian elite and society, with a view to finding some explanations for Russia's aggressive behavior, and exploring its drivers and limits.

1. Russia's lack of democracy as the root cause of problems

Our key finding, and the main thesis of this report, is that the problems between Russia and the West have their roots in the different political and value systems and the different understanding of the rules of the game in international politics of the two sides. Frictions and disputes are inevitable; and it is precisely the post-Soviet pro-Western neighbors of Russia who have unavoidably become the prime battlefield between Western values and Russia's interests (as defined by the Kremlin).

The inescapable, existential nature of these countries' problems with Russia is often misunderstood by the old Western countries. It is assumed that the causes of their permanent dispute with Russia are the traumas and insecurities caused by history and the actions of politicians who are either constrained by those prejudices or ready to use them for political advantage. While there is some truth in this, the real causes of trouble are much deeper and related to questions of identity and values.

1.1 *Different paths of transformation as a source of problems*

While many of Russia's former satellites succeeded in reforming their political systems and in becoming functioning democracies, Russia remained an imitation democracy. In words it subscribed to all the necessary principles but in reality, while the basic components of democracy - such as the separation of powers, rule of law, free media, etc – have been evident in post-1991 Russia to various degrees at different times, they have always failed to combine in ways that would constitute a democratic system of state government. The absence or weakness of rule-based ways of organizing life and addressing problems has given a green light to alternative ways: such as bargaining, trade-offs, coercion, shows of force, etc.

While the old Western countries have observed the nature of the Russian regime with intense interest, but still from some distance, Russia's neighbors, by virtue of sharing with Russia not only common borders, but also a common past and many of its loose ends, have been exposed to different patterns of political problem-solving in the most direct ways. Where similar problems have existed, these different solutions have become a source of irritation: a solution adopted by

a democratic neighbor implicitly challenges the solution adopted by Russia. But Russia's solution, if of a distinctly undemocratic nature, increases the sense of insecurity of the neighbors who have correctly decided that a democratic Russia is their best security guarantee. In the case of problems between Russia and a neighbor, different understandings of the principles on which a compromise should be based, create a sure path towards a clash. The issues of contention can spring from various spheres and be of different weight, sometimes seemingly very trivial. However, those that turn into emotional quarrels are, upon closer inspection, almost always rooted in fundamental value-related concepts: in understandings about things such as truth, justice, freedom and independence.

1.2 Russia's goal: geopolitical spheres of influence

For Russia, its neighbors' different values and ways are an irritant in themselves, but the fact that this makes them part of the West's geopolitical 'sphere of influence' and brings this close to Russia's borders, has made the irritant grow in proportion to Moscow's consolidation of its autocratic regime.

The concept of geopolitical spheres of influence has always figured prominently in the minds of Russia's foreign policy making elite. While Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin may not have personally subscribed to this notion, Vladimir Putin certainly did; and President Dmitry Medvedev's declaration that Russia is entitled to a "sphere of privileged interests" makes it all but official: Russia defines its interests at the expense of its neighbors.

1.3 Aggressive foreign political rhetoric as a means to mobilize society and of self-legitimization

In a society in which the governing elite does not achieve legitimacy by way of competition in democratic elections, it has to secure its legitimacy by other means – such as international competition and the mobilization of society to support its cause. The role of foreign political resources in securing the Russian regime has dramatically strengthened over the years – indicating that domestic reserves are insufficient for this purpose. "In order to preserve the domestic status quo that guarantees power to the bureaucratic corporation, the Kremlin is trying to review the status quo that was established on the global scene after the fall of the Soviet Union."¹

Russia's pro-Western neighbors constitute an obvious 'enemy of choice' for the Russian elite: they lack international weight and are thus harmless enemies; there is little information, but lots of emotion about them; and discrediting their image both domestically and internationally helps the Kremlin on two fronts: the domestic audience fails to compare the successfully democratized countries with their own reality and, in the eyes of the West, the neighbors acquire an image of paranoid Russophobes whose assessment of the situation in Russia cannot be taken seriously.

2. The mood of Russian society

When Putin entered the Kremlin on the New Year's Eve, 1999, Russia was not a democracy, but still could have become one. The opportunities for good were unused, but still open. It is Putin,

¹ Lilia Shevtsova, „Rossiya i Zapad: liberalnyi vzglyad“, discussion paper, 30.10.2008 (<http://www.carnegie.ru/ru/pubs/media/79587.htm>)

supported by his regime, who has closed the path towards democracy for quite some time. Even so, this would not have been possible, had not the bulk of Russian society been a willing partner in this process.

When discussing Russian society, the key words are inertia, apathy and a passive nature. Even in the late 1980s and early 1990s – the time when the society's political activity peaked – active engagement was mostly confined to big centres such as Moscow and Saint Petersburg. The part of society that demanded democratic change was noisy and visible, but actually small and elitist.

The bulk of Russian society – the 60%² who live in small towns and villages - has always been traditionalist in its views; and remains that way. These people rarely travel abroad and their sphere of information is confined to the two state-controlled TV-channels. The mechanisms of civil society are extremely weak: 90% of Russians do not belong to any organisations or societies. Under Putin, social apathy has only increased.

According to Russian sociologists, the 'enemy figure' is a handy means by which the ruling elite can mobilise an atomized society. The successful use of this is testified by opinion polls: 77% of people believe that Russia has enemies abroad (compared to 30% in 1989.) The loss of the reputation of the West and Western organisations has been dramatic. Western criticism of Russia is overwhelmingly (by 60%) seen as hypocritical and aimed at weakening Russia. The extent of anti-Westernism in today's Russia – alongside the background of general xenophobia – surpasses the levels remembered by most observers for any time since 1950s.

The Kremlins' blatant propaganda is not the only explanation for this situation. Fluctuations in living standards play a big role too. The Russian people have come to identify democracy with the hardship and chaos of the 1990s and blame the West for causing much of this; while the improvement of life made possible by the rise of oil prices since 1999 allows Putin's authoritarianism to enjoy popularity. Anti-Westernism has also been enhanced by the West's own actions, such as the bombing of Kosovo and the war in Iraq, while a racial type of xenophobia owes its prominence to the wars in Chechnya.

There are forces in society that could act as agents for democratic change – such as businessmen suffering from corruption, the emerging middle class, the younger generation and NGOs. However, so far this remains a theoretical possibility. In real life all these groups show signs of adapting to the situation and adopting its rules. Should Putin's regime crumble today, it is the nationalist and xenophobic, rather than the democratic forces that would be most likely to take advantage of the situation.

3. The nature of the current Russian elite

The current Russian elite is monopolized by the so-called "*siloviki*" – people with their background in the security services, brought to power by Putin. While before Putin their proportional representation in the power structures did not exceed 13%, by 2003 they already constituted 25% of the federal elite, and by 2008 at least 42%, but possibly even more as not everyone's connection to the services can be firmly established.³ In certain sectors their representation is as high as 70%.

² All sociological data used in this paper originates in research conducted by the Levada Centre in Moscow.

³ Lecture by Olga Kryshnanovskaya on 29.05.2008 (http://www.polit.ru/lectures/2008/07/31/rus_elita.html)

Their grip on Russia is firm and relatively unchallenged. In many ways, they enjoy a more monopolistic position than any of the rulers of the Soviet Union. If back then the separation of the CPSU and the KGB allowed for at least some institutional competition and some checks and balances, these days the “siloviki” are the state: they control the majority in the State Duma and in other relevant institutions. Whereas the Soviet era liberal intelligentsia constituted a powerful force in society – the group that became the backbone of changes under Gorbachev – there is no comparable group now; the intelligentsia’s authority has been eroded. The groups or people who have tried to challenge the power of the siloviki – such as some Yeltsin-era oligarchs, some liberal politicians and journalists – have been unable to build any meaningful support in society and have ended up marginalized, driven to exile or even killed.

Their means of their recruitment make the siloviki a very closed group, suspicious of the world and the rest of the society. The entrants to their main *alma mater* - the FSB academy – come from among the old siloviki dynasties or, alternatively, from underprivileged families living in depressed circumstances. For both types of people, the FSB-brotherhood becomes the only social group they know and trust. The lack of any social base outside the service(s) makes leaving it a fearsome prospect. The peculiar type of the education they receive – neither technical nor humanitarian – makes them receptive to various conspiracy theories, the ground for which has already been prepared by virtue of their ignorance of the world.

The political activity of the siloviki is driven by two – seemingly mutually exclusive – ambitions: the desire to put an end to what is interpreted as the slow break-up of Russia under Yeltsin and to restore the state’s perceived former (i.e. Soviet-era) strength; and to become personally wealthy in the process. Remarkable success on both fronts has added to their self-confidence and bravado, while their inherent paranoid world-view adds to their sense of insecurity. The disagreements between the different siloviki groups regarding the best ways to secure power and distribute wealth fracture their unity, but so far this has not had meaningful consequences for their monopoly of power.

4. The main thinking patterns and stereotypes that influence how foreign policy is understood in Russia

We have identified a selection of thinking patterns and stereotypes that shape how foreign policy is understood in Russia. These are largely shared by the population and often presented in the rhetoric of foreign policy makers and spin doctors. The extent to which the elite believes in these thinking patterns - as opposed to cynically uses them for political purposes - varies from person to person and stereotype to stereotype: the line is blurred.

4.1 Stereotypes and patterns that already existed before 1991:

- a) Russia has a special way, destiny, mission; its path has to be different from that of other (Western) countries;
- b) A tendency to see small countries as inevitably *vassal states* with no independent foreign policy; the only question being whose vassals they are;
- c) The concept of spheres of influence;
- d) The conviction that wars are waged for geopolitical reasons; failure to acknowledge the existence of idealistic motivations, such as the protection of human rights;

- e) A tendency to value territorial acquisitions; people's readiness to sacrifice their comfort for the sake of a powerful state;
- f) A tendency to believe that fear causes respect in international relations;
- g) A tendency to understand foreign policy as being conducted via deals; a desire to seek deals;

4.2 *More circumstantial, post-1991 stereotypes and patterns*

- a) The myth of Russia as a victim of the West during the 1990s; the concept of "Russia raising from its knees" under Putin;
- b) A tendency to see the West as having broken its promises not to expand NATO;
- c) A tendency to see post-Soviet countries as traitors who rushed to embrace the West because its wealth; a failure to realize that the Soviet satellites in Europe were not the USSR's allies, but its prisoners;
- d) The notion that the West wants to get control of Russia's raw materials;
- e) A tendency to see anti-Russian motives behind actions unrelated to Russia of other countries. This applies to the small neighbors as well as to the US.

4.3 *Three events that have shaped how Russia sees its relations with the world*

- a) The attack by Nazi-Germany against the Soviet Union on June 22 1941. The experience of being invaded from the West by a country that had assured Moscow of its friendly intentions has left a deep imprint on Russia's threat perception, resulting in a 'June 22 complex' which can explain why the emotional focus of Russia's security establishment is always on the West, even though the real security threats originate elsewhere;
- b) The Kosovo war of 1999 and the region's subsequent independence. The Russian political establishment did not fail to see the danger that the Kosovo precedent constituted for Russia. In the eyes of the population, the bombing of Kosovo was the event that changed the image of NATO from that of an alliance for the defense of the noble cause of democracy into that of an aggressive offensive force.
- c) The 2004 Orange revolution in Ukraine. The Russian elite saw this as a *coup d'etat*, arranged and financed by the US. The fact that Moscow's best spin doctors and their manipulation technologies failed to help the Kremlin-sponsored candidate in Ukraine made Moscow panic in anticipation of similar events in Russia.
The Kremlin's pre-emptive actions included the creation of massive 'anti-revolutionary' youth movements; widening the spread of the pro-Kremlin political parties; restricting the activities of NGOs and international organizations; and intensifying the propaganda campaign, which at times included resort to stoking dangerous nationalist feelings.

5. Other important factors that drive Russia's policy towards its neighbors

5.1 *The questions of history*

The question of how to interpret the Soviet past is a highly contentious issue between Russia and its pro-Western neighbors. The process that had started in the Soviet Union during the perestroika years of exposing Soviet crimes was abandoned under Yeltsin, but not reversed.

Putin brought the topic of history back to the political agenda, using very different, near-Soviet interpretations. By around 2004, Putin's regime had started to use memories of the Second World War and its victory almost as a substitute for ideology and as a means to legitimize the current Russian regime both at home and internationally. This automatically turned the contrasting truths and memories of the Baltic states, Poland and Ukraine from being simple nuisances into obstacles to an important ideological project.

5.2 Different concepts of truth

Discussions about history reveal a fundamental difference between Moscow's and the West's definition of truth: if for the West truth is something to acknowledge and deal with, then for Russia, truth is a commodity that can be traded and used for pragmatic purposes. It is illuminating to hear how Russian diplomats have tried to test the ground with Poles: "if we give you Katyn (ie. acknowledge the killing of Polish officers by the Soviet Union), what would you give us in return?"⁴

5.3 The question of Russians abroad

Complaints about the alleged mistreatment of Russians have been a permanent feature in Russia's arsenal of rhetoric against the pro-Western former Soviet republics. The republics can be divided into three categories according to the intensity of rhetoric and Moscow's motivations to use it.

- a) Latvia and Estonia, which did not grant the Soviet-era immigrants automatic citizenship, have been the recipients of the fiercest criticism, although both countries' citizenship policies and practices have passed the scrutiny of all relevant Western organizations. In addition to wounded pride, Moscow's real problem with Latvia and Estonia (but also Lithuania) is their concept of restored statehood and everything this potentially brings along: citizenship laws as well as (by now abandoned) calls to return to pre-war borders; concepts of history that are increasingly at odds with those of Russia; and calls for compensation for occupation. Russia's aim is to treat all post-Soviet countries as new countries that became independent in 1991. Thus it has become almost obligatory for Russia to bring up the status of Russians in Estonia and Latvia - as it does not agree with the causes and implications of that status.
- b) In sharp contrast, the authoritarian neighbors, such as the Central Asian states where ethnic Russians are indeed persecuted, are almost never criticized. As, by virtue of their political regimes and practices, these countries cannot aspire to join the West, Moscow tries to use the opportunity to be their primary ally, including being, for the sake of the relationship sometimes complicit in these regimes' human rights abuses.
- c) In Georgia, Moscow used the Russian citizens living abroad as a pretext to start a war. The notion that Russian passport holders offer, in certain cases, a legitimate justification for military intervention is quite widespread among the Russian elite and reflected in its actions abroad (the distribution of passports) as well as in its insecurities (concerns about Estonian passport holders in the Pskov region).

5.4 Business interests

⁴ From Anne Applebaum's speech at the Englesberg seminar in Sweden on June 13, 2008.

The business interests of Russian companies in the former Soviet republics have normally been subordinate to the state's geopolitical goals. Thus, Gazprom has been willing to forgive the anti-Western countries their payment arrears, but to increase prices and start to demand timely payments as soon as a country's orientation changes. Ukraine is a case in point.

However, there have also been peculiar cases of business interests secretly hijacking the political agenda and apparatus, by skillful manipulation of the foreign political instincts already created by the propaganda industry of the state. For countries at the receiving end, such situations are close to impossible to manage: an apparently political problem with Russia cannot be tackled by political or diplomatic means; the real driving force behind political actions tends to stay hidden and, even if known or suspected, may be beyond influence.

6. Conclusion and policy recommendations

Russia's aggressive behavior stems from the nature of its regime. Contrary to common wisdom in the West, expressed in questions such as "who lost Russia?" Russia is moving according to its own logic of development. The West's chances to influence Russia's domestic arrangements have always been limited; today they are minuscule. However, opportunities – albeit no short-term fixes – still exist to influence Russia's international behavior.

For now, the West is split in its understanding of Russia. Russia's neighbors and former satellites realize the inescapability of Russia's aggressiveness towards them and feel threatened, but the degree and character of that feeling is related to the degree and character of the civilizational choices made by those countries so far:

a) The countries that are basically happy to be in Russia's sphere of influence and which try to copy Russia's model of 'sovereign democracy' are motivated to threaten to initiate closer ties with the West - with the goal of using those ties as bargaining chips in their relationship with Russia and fending off those of Russia's demands that are deemed excessive. Among the countries covered by this study, Belarus is a perfect example.

b) The countries of the "color revolutions," i.e. Georgia and Ukraine (and we place Moldova in the same group) find themselves in the toughest situation. They have oriented themselves seriously towards the West, but have not yet managed – or even grasped the need - to translate this orientation into effective institutional reforms. But real reforms would be the only means to acquire the reputation of countries worth defending in the eyes of the West. However, reforms that take time to materialize and even longer to translate into image are hard to conduct in the type of dire security situation, including acute military threats, that is currently the case in Georgia.

c) For the Baltic states, which have used their years of independence to firmly anchor themselves in the West and in Western organizations, immediate security concerns are less acute, but not non-existent. For them, the working principle of the post-1991 Europe – that all countries are free to choose their own alliances and can join once they qualify, without fear of veto by third countries - has been a strong security guarantee in itself. The West's Russia-related hesitation to give the NATO Membership

Action Plan to Georgia and Ukraine is seen as an erosion of that principle, and therefore a reason to be concerned.

In the political classes of the old Western countries, however, there are many people who do not see the challenges posed by Russia as existential threats at all; and many others who acknowledge the geopolitical ambitions of Russia, but think that as long as these stay within 'acceptable' (geographical) limits, they should be tolerated and acquiesced in - because, as they see it, Russia is actually right to complain about the loss of its sphere of influence.

It is evident that such a state of affairs has the potential to gravely split Europe and to pose very difficult challenges to the trans-Atlantic relationship. A fractured West in turn has almost no chance to create a working relationship with Russia on terms compatible with the proclaimed Western principles. In order to be effective, the West needs a united policy towards Russia. Lately, and for dangerously too long, it has neither been united nor had any policy at all.

Below are some policy suggestions for the West:

- a) The first is to **acknowledge the reality: Russia is not a democracy** and is not moving towards becoming one.
- b) Secondly, **restore honest and substantial debate about Russia**. Over the last eight years the Western political class has become constrained by a peculiar type of self-censorship on matters that touch Russia. There are many possible reasons: fears stemming from the assumed energy dependence on Russia; the fact that criticism of the current situation implies the need for better policies, while there are no evident options; distrust and fearfulness of East Europeans' noisy criticism of Moscow; narrow international scope or the populist and opportunist characters of several recent leaders, etc. One should also certainly credit Russia's PR policies which have all but managed to brand criticism of Putin as old-fashioned Russophobia and a vestige from the times of the Cold War.
At NATO, discussing Russia among allies and without Russia was all but taboo until 2008. The debates that have taken place in 2008 have, for the most part, been caused by the need to reach a decision on some – usually contentious – issue, making countries' arguments look politically laden and effectively excluding intelligent debate of substance.⁵
Now it is desirable that the Western allies should sit together, at a sufficiently high political level, and conduct an 'audit' of their relations with Russia, discussing which policies have worked and under what circumstances. Also, there is a need to readdress the question as to where and why the West needs Russia – and has Russia demonstrated any inclination to understand and meet those needs?
- c) **Make Europe immune to Russia's divisive gas-politics by integrating the European gas market**. The European Union's dependency on Russia as a gas exporter is a myth: in fact, as a share of Europe's primary energy consumption, gas imports from Russia have stabilized since 1990 at around 6,5%; and this figure is more likely to decline than go up. A recent report by the European Council

⁵ ICDS interview with a NATO ambassador, 3.12.2008

on Foreign Relations⁶ argues that the main problem is not the dominance of Russian gas in the European market, but the insufficiently integrated European gas market, which makes it possible for Russia to use gas exports as a means to divide Europe politically. An integrated European market, overseen by a powerful regulator, would transform the current-day political 'gas relationship' between the EU and Russia into a depoliticized 'gas trade' – similar to the oil trade between OPEC and the rest of the world.

d) It has been widely noticed that one of Russia's ways to acquire influence in the West, especially Europe, is by corrupting its businesses and recruiting its (mostly, but not exclusively, former) politicians. To counter that, it makes sense to **revise the European laws that concern the transparency of money movements**, and the ways individual officials are expected to manage potential conflicts of interests, etc. It would also be helpful to adopt some pan-European or even trans-Atlantic codes of conduct addressing the future employment opportunities of politicians or senior civil servants and other potentially vulnerable groups.

e) **The West should also revise its institutional ties with Russia.** Currently, the institutional framework between the West and Russia consists overwhelmingly of organizations to which Russia has been offered access under the assumption that it was moving towards democracy. This circumstance confronts the West with an inconvenient dilemma: a newly assertive and undemocratic Russia no longer qualifies for those institutions and, all too often, its incompatible nature has the visible effect of eroding the organizations' principles or paralyzing their work. However, expelling Russia is mostly not considered to be an option as this would also remove a channel for communication.

The solution would be to try to replace some of the value-based formats with neutral, pragmatic formats. For example, the NATO-Russia Council with its value-laden charter and demand that allies not discuss Russia-related matters among themselves has become a senseless burden. It should be scrapped and replaced with a neutral format that would be explicitly designed only for discussions on matters of mutual interest. The fate of each value-based Russia-related organization should be debated separately, with all relevant aspects considered – not least the interests of ordinary Russian citizens, for whom the European Court of Human Rights, for example, has become an irreplaceable and often the only source of justice.

The big question in the context of international organizations is whether the West should try to make Russia adhere to some value-laden clauses in their framework or not. As implied above, so far such attempts have only resulted in the credibility of the respective organizations and their Western members being eroded. Is there a chance to be more successful in the future and actually bend Russia to follow Western rules, at least some and however reluctantly?

f) The answer depends on whether or not the West will ultimately be able to **translate its principles into a policy vis-à-vis Russia.** So far, this has not been the case. The Kremlin's misdeeds have been met in the West with initial, occasionally quite harsh criticism, but as soon as it has become evident that the

⁶ This passage relies on the recent policy brief by the European Council on Foreign relations: see Pierre Noël, „Beyond dependence: how to deal with Russian gas,” www.ecfr.eu

criticism fails to change the situation, the West has preferred to forget the original misbehavior. This is especially evident with Europe. Even when it has made successful and strong moves – such as mediating the election crises in Ukraine during the Orange revolution, the ability of Angela Merkel to stand up for Estonia and Poland during the German EU presidency in 2007, France’s negotiation of the ceasefire between Russia and Georgia in 2008 - it has not built a policy from actions that have proved popular but, vice versa, has fearfully stepped back, anxious that it has ‘pressurized Russia too much’. Such behavior does not increase Russia’s respect towards the West, quite the opposite: Russia draws the conclusion that the West does not take its principles very seriously at all.

- g) Thus the task of the European Union and the West as a whole is **to move from ad hoc actions towards a coherent policy**. To a great extent this can be achieved simply by changing style and tone, and by articulating one’s objectives more often and more clearly. It makes no sense to threaten Russia with sanctions or punishments that the West is not actually ready to deliver, nor is it wise to refrain from criticizing Russia where criticism is due. The West should spell out clearly what kind of international behavior is expected from Russia, and then be ready to base its policy on those principles and back it up with deeds.