

Russia's Foreign Policy and Security: The evolution of approaches, goals and aims

Sergey Markedonov

Russian foreign policy: key points (as seen from the outside)

Ukraine's political crisis (aggravated by the transfer of Crimea to the Russian jurisdiction and the armed confrontation in Donbas) has become the most serious and dangerous challenge to European security after the collapse of Yugoslavia and the series of ethnic and political conflicts in the Balkans. It has brought about the deepest confrontation between Russia and the West (the United States and the European Union) over the entire period since the end of the Cold War, marked by the dissolution of the Warsaw Treaty Organization and the collapse of the Soviet Union, one of the poles of the bipolar world¹.

There had been differences between Moscow, on the one part, and Washington and Brussels, on the other, before the crisis. Their most striking manifestation was the "five-day war" of August 2008 in the Trans-Caucasian region, when attempts by the Georgian authorities, which had opted for NATO and the European Union as a strategic goal, to crush the infrastructure of the breakaway republic of South Ossetia and minimize the role of Russia in the region resulted in an open intervention by Russian forces². However, the current confrontation, unlike the previous manifestation of antagonism, is taking place against the backdrop of the coming understanding of the failure of post-Soviet Russia's plans to integrate into the Western world while preserving its "special position" with respect to a number of issues (first and foremost, the security of its "close neighborhood").

In this context, certain ideas have been formed in the Western expert literature and the media. As a rule, five narratives are in the focus:

¹ Украинский вызов для России: рабочая тетрадь № 24/2015 / [гл. ред. И. С. Иванов]; Российский совет по международным делам (РСМД). – М.: Спецкнига, 2015. – 48 с.

² Конфликты на постсоветском пространстве: перспективы урегулирования и роль России. Рабочая тетрадь № 36/2016 / [А.В. Гущин; А.Г. Данков; С.М. Маркедонov; С.В. Рекеда]; [гл. ред. И.С. Иванов]; Российский совет по международным делам (РСМД). – М.: НП РСМД, 2016. – 52 с.; Asmus R. A Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia and the Future of the West. Palgrave MacMillan. 2010. 272 p.; De Waal T. Missiles Over Tskhinvali//The National Interest. 2010. № 107 May/June P. 52–55

- The identification of Russia as a revisionist state that violates international law and European order, while questioning the sovereignty and independence of neighboring countries;
- The absolutization of the Crimean case, treatment of Crimea as a possible example case for breaking the status quo not only in the post-Soviet space, but also in Central and Eastern Europe;
- The treatment of the confrontation between the Russian Federation and the West as a second edition or “remake” of the Cold War;
- The identification of the Russian foreign policy with the personality of President Vladimir Putin, this approach de facto implying that it is about responding to the personal “Putin’s course”;
- The idea of Russia as the main source of European instability, as an unpredictable country, whose actions cannot be assessed rationally; but at the same time as a “giant with feet of clay” overloaded with internal issues (primarily in the republics of the North Caucasus)³.

Meanwhile, these approaches tend to oversimplify the situation and fail to ensure a complete picture to properly shed light on the evolution of Russia’s foreign policy approaches throughout the entire post-Soviet period. They also fail to articulate reasons for changes in Moscow’s approaches to both Western countries and the newly independent states of Eurasia. Most importantly, they do not clarify the motives and logic of the Kremlin. It should also be understood that in many cases Russia’s activities were not manifestations of any proactive policy, but a response to actions undertaken by various partners of the Russian Federation, as well as their implementation of various projects.

In this regard, we believe it to be urgently important to consider the fundamentals of Russia’s foreign policy in the post-Soviet period, analyze the changes that occurred in the period from 1991 to 2018, as well as the main triggers of those changes. It is deemed fundamentally important to identify general and special trends in Moscow’s actions internationally under Boris Yeltsin and then Vladimir Putin. This will make it possible to correctly perceive the available alternatives and opportunities for Russian foreign policy maneuvering and, ultimately, the prospects of reducing or increasing confrontation with the West.

The collapses: the foundation of Russia’s foreign policy

When it comes to the starting point of Russia’s foreign policy in the post-Soviet period, it should be understood that it began to take shape in the context of two collapses – of the once united state named the Soviet Union and the Yalta-Potsdam system of international relations⁴. From the very first days, Russia’s foreign policy beyond the framework of the USSR was intertwined with the search for its own national and state identity, when the former value- and

³ Toal G. *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 408 p; Treisman D. *Why Putin Took Crimea: The Gambler in the Kremlin* // *Foreign Affairs* (May– June, 2016 // <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2016-04-18/why-putin-tookcrimea> (accessed December 19, 2016)

⁴ Tsygankov A. *Russia’s Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013. 336 p.

ideology-based guidelines collapsed, and there was no time for new ones to emerge. This pathos fills the first Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, approved in April 1993⁵.

The emergence of new nation states after the collapse of the USSR was accompanied (and is still accompanied) by ethnic and political conflicts⁶ and border disputes, as well as claims to Russia. In this context, it is hard to talk about the completion of the process of the disintegration of the USSR as a political, rather than a legal process, because new state and national identities that have arisen on the ruins of the Soviet Union are still in the process of their emergence.

For the most part, the post-Soviet ethnic and political conflicts were (and are still) associated with the internal security of the Russian Federation. The course of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict was closely interlaced with the Ossetian-Ingush confrontation inside Russia, the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict was intertwined with the situation in the western part of the Russian Caucasus, and the problems in the Pankisi Gorge of Georgia are interknit with the conflict in Chechnya and the spread of radical Islam in the North Caucasian republics of the Russian Federation. Therefore, instability in the post-Soviet space was fraught with the intervention of “third forces”, negative implications for the internal political situation in Russia and, ultimately, the appearance of additional risks for the successful implementation of the Russian national and state project.

The “two-collapses” framework thereby formed back in the 1990s the main outlines of Russia’s foreign policy and the logic of its behavior in the international scene. Among the original priorities of Russia’s foreign policy the following can be highlighted:

- Focus on the status quo due to concerns that any uncontrolled change of it without the involvement of Moscow (or against its will) will be to the detriment of Russia’s interests;
- Active interference in the affairs of the post-Soviet countries (not as a revanchist effort, but to prevent the export of instability inside the Russian Federation)⁷;
- Pragmatic policy in all dimensions, determined by national interests, rather than by ideology;

⁵ As its “pivotal objective” the Concept declared the “preservation of the unity and territorial integrity” of Russia. In conditions when Chechnya de facto found itself outside the political and legal scope of the Russian Federation and on May 22, 1992, the Supreme Council of Tatarstan adopted a Resolution on the status of the republic as a “sovereign state”, such a conceptual position was more than reasonable. See for more details: Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации // Внешняя политика и безопасность современной России. 1991-2002. Хрестоматия в четырех томах / составитель Т.А. Шаклеина. Т. IV. Документы. М., 2002. С.19.

⁶ Throughout the period since the collapse of the USSR, nine armed conflicts have taken place in the former Soviet Union (ethnic and political confrontations and civil wars). With the exception of the internal Georgian civil war (1991-1993), the others cannot be considered fully resolved. Currently, there are two partially recognized states in the former Soviet Union, as well as four de facto formations. For details, see: Никитин А.И. Международные конфликты: вмешательство, миротворчество, урегулирование. М.: Аспект-Пресс, 2017. 384 с.

⁷ Contrary to the media images that have been broadly presented in recent years, it was back in the 1990s and not with the commencement of the presidency of Vladimir Putin that Moscow chose to be actively involved in the affairs of neighboring states, whether that be the format of military intervention in the civil wars in Georgia and Tajikistan or peacekeeping and diplomatic mediation (conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria). Hill F. & Jewett P. Russia’s Interventions in the Internal Affairs of the Former Soviet Republics and Their Implications for US Policy towards Russia. Washington. Brookings Institutions, 1994

- Lack of anti-Westernism, Islamophobia, or any other ideologically sensitive approaches;
- Reactivity (which was determined by the orientation towards the status quo and intention to prevent the demolition of the usual order for unpredictable results);
- Contextuality determined for the most part by partners' approaches;
- Declaration of equitable partnership relationships with the "outside world" (by default the United States and other leading countries of the world);
- Desire to integrate with the "civilized world" as a precondition to put an end to the Cold War;
- The positioning of the Russian Federation as a guardian of international law (specifically, this was manifested in conflicts in the former Yugoslavia)⁸.

Modification of the original framework: causes and motives

Subsequently, some of these priorities – although not all of them – underwent a significant transformation. However, the onset of those changes was recorded a lot earlier than the start of Vladimir Putin's era. Indeed, the preamble to the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, adopted in June 2000 by already the second president of Russia, reads that the hopes of the establishment of new equitable, mutually beneficial, partnership relationships between Moscow and the outside world that were declared as the main goals of the 1993 Concept, did not come true⁹. That conceptual statement was based on the political experience of the previous few years.

In this context, we can emphasize the discrepancies between Russia and the West, originally marked by the publication of the Brussels Communiqué (December 1, 1994) on the eastward NATO expansion. Moscow's position on that matter was explicitly declared by President Boris Yeltsin in speech at the CSCE Summit in Budapest on December 5, 1994¹⁰. Therefore, since the very first days of the implementation of the NATO expansion project towards the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Moscow has acted as its consistent opponent. Its position has remained unchanged, despite the signing of bilateral fundamental documents (the NATO-Russia Founding Act), involvement of the Russian Federation in NATO programs ("Partnership for Peace"), bilateral cooperation (the NATO-Russia Council (NRC)).

At the same time, the concept for NATO expansion to the East was slammed by not only diplomats and 'siloviki', but also influential reformers, representatives of the liberal wing of the Russian politics. For example, according to Anatoly Chubais (a privatization mastermind and practitioner in the Russian Federation), the course chosen by Brussels was a "big mistake",

⁸ Никитин А.И. *Op. cit.*

⁹ For details see: Концепция внешней политики РФ // Внешняя политика и безопасность современной России. 1991-2002... С. 109. Hereinafter all quotes from the document are borrowed from that publication.

¹⁰ In his speech, Boris Yeltsin said that the "Cold War" was replaced by the "Cold Peace", and that the expansion of NATO undermined European security, based on the Charter of Paris for a New Europe (1990). From his viewpoint, the alternative to that scenario was a multilateral system (OSCE-EU-NATO-CIS). For details, see: <https://yeltsin.ru/archive/audio/9035/>

because de facto it demonstrated “distrust” in Russia’s market and democratic reforms in Russia and drove the country into isolation¹¹.

The first crisis hit the relationship between the Russian Federation and NATO in March 1999 following the commencement of NATO’s military operation in Kosovo, which Russia qualified as “aggression”. Compared with the other two crises (of 2008 and 2014), it was notably not Brussels, but Moscow which in 1999 initiated the suspension of the bilateral relationship¹². In a lot of ways, that was the reason why official representatives of the United States and the European Union, who had previously been making cautious statements about the situation in the Russian North Caucasus, subjected Moscow to severe criticism for the “disproportionate use of force” and the violation of human rights in Chechnya. At the OSCE summit in Istanbul in November 1999, President Yeltsin unequivocally spoke about the necessity to respect Russia’s interests, inadmissibility of Western intervention in the internal affairs of the country, and the need to build relations of equals¹³.

Therefore, the evolution of relations between Russia and the West did not depend on the change of leaders in the Kremlin. On the contrary, attempts to normalize the engagement (revitalization of direct dialogue with the U.S. and NATO, proposal for the Russian Federation to join the Alliance, withdrawal of Russian bases from Vietnam and Cuba) were made after Vladimir Putin succeeded Boris Yeltsin as president. That rapprochement only stopped because of the U.S.-British operation in Iraq.

From the status quo to partial revisionism

The subsequent increase in negative trends was due to:

- The establishment of a NATO-centered model of European security;
- The disregard for the interests and approaches of Moscow first in the Balkans (the first half of the 1990s-2000s), and then in the post-Soviet space (the definitive turn was made during the failure of the Kozak Plan on the Transnistrian settlement in 2003)¹⁴;
- The encouragement by the West (which intensified after the series of NATO and EU enlargements in 1997 and 2004) of the choice of new post-Soviet elites in favor of minimized Russian influence;

¹¹ Quoted from: Андреев Е. И. Россия и НАТО: развитие стратегического партнерства// Обозреватель. 2004. № 12. С. 90-95.

¹² At that time, the opposition Communist Party of Russia dominated in the State Duma of the Russian Federation, and a bill was discussed on the accession of the FRY (Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) to the Union State of Russia and the Republic of Belarus. For details see Фененко А.В Балканский кризис и российские внешнеполитические приоритеты / А. Фененко // Pro et Contra. - 2001. - Т.6. - №4. - С.59-73.

¹³ B.N. Yeltsin’s speech at the OSCE Summit on 19 November 1999 // <http://www.km.ru/glavnoe/1999/11/19/kommentarii-dnya/vystuplenie-bneltsina-na-sammite-obse>

¹⁴ For details see Маркедонов С.М. Де-факто образования постсоветского пространства: двадцать лет государственного строительства. Ереван. 2012. С. 145-167.

- The intensification of the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of a number of post-Soviet republics (primarily, Georgia and Ukraine);
- The aspiration of the U.S. and the EU to internationalize the process of conflict settlement in the former USSR while diminishing the role of Russia and disregarding its special interests;
- The fundamental difference between the approaches of the Russian Federation and the West to conflicts (“freezing” as a priority option for Moscow, and intervention to ensure its “settlement” as the foundation for the approach of the U.S. and the EU);
- The disillusionment of a number of post-Soviet elites about the Russian policy of maintaining the status quo (and their revanchist interest with respect to breakaway territories, rather than in compromise-based conflict settlement);
- The “defrosting of conflicts” (South Ossetia in 2004–2008, Abkhazia in 2006–2008), in which the West acted as an opponent of Russia.

Therefore, the Ukrainian crisis did not uncork the confrontation between Russia and the West, it only exacerbated it. At the same time, the transformation of Russia’s foreign policy approaches was accompanied by a tougher line, both with respect to its neighboring states and the West, and the rejection of the universality of the status quo. This concerned both military intervention (the “five-day war” of 2008 in the Caucasus and the involvement of the Russian armed forces in securing a pro-Russian referendum in Crimea in 2014) and diplomatic pressure.

In August 2008, Moscow set a precedent for a revision of the inter-republican borders established during the Soviet period, by recognizing the independence of the two former autonomies of the Georgian SSR (Abkhazia and South Ossetia). In March 2014, a new precedent was created. The Crimean peninsula (previously it was part of independent Ukraine) was incorporated into Russia as two separate constituent entities of the Russian Federation (the Republic of Crimea and the City of Federal subordination Sevastopol).

Consequently, Russia relinquished its role of a status quo state, having introduced revisionist practices into its policy. This is what fundamentally distinguishes its behavior today from its course back in the 1990s – mid-2000s. At the same time, Moscow’s revisionism is blatantly selective. Furthermore, there is also no universal approach to the resolution of ethnic and political conflicts. These provisions are reflected in the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation of 2013 and 2016¹⁵.

Whereas in the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Moscow seeks to foster “their formation” as “modern democratic states”, Transnistria is only viewed as a participant in the negotiation process with Moldova over the “territorial integrity” of the latter. Consequently, the territorial

¹⁵ All quotes are borrowed from: Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (adopted by President of the Russian Federation V.V. Putin on 12 February 2013) (repealed) http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/122186 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 1 December 2016 // http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJEo2Bw/content/id/2542248

integrity of Georgia is questioned, but not of Azerbaijan or Moldova. Such breakaway states as NKR (the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic) and two “people’s republics” of Donbas have no mention in Russia’s doctrinal documents. The only aspect referred to is the role of Russia in settling the “Nagorno-Karabakh” and “internal Ukrainian” conflicts.

Moscow refrained from multiplying its Crimean experience, despite, among others, appeals from the leadership of South Ossetia to hold a referendum on joining the Russian Federation. The case of Crimea did not become a pattern for Donbas, either. Moscow does not intend to include this region into Russia by analogy with the experience of 2014. At the same time, if the Kremlin does not rule out direct talks between Sukhumi and Tskhinvali and Tbilisi, including over the possible future status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the “Crimean issue” is officially declared decided and closed once and for all. In fact, Moscow justifies its revisionism citing exclusive circumstances (whether it is Georgia’s desire to incorporate its former autonomies using military force, while ignoring previous agreements with Moscow, or expulsion of President Viktor Yanukovich, which might imply the need to revise the deployment of the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol).

However, at the same time, Moscow is apprehensive about making use of such practices where it is possible to preserve negotiation formats and its role of a mediator (for example, in Nagorno-Karabakh, where military escalation in April 2016 never led to Russia’s military intervention or recognition of the Armenian de facto state of the NKR). The involvement in the Normandy Four and preservation of at least the appearance of the “Minsk Agreements” (at least until Kyiv explicitly rejects the document) are keeping Moscow from recognizing the “people’s republics” in Donbas. Their integration with a special status within the framework of the Ukrainian state project is considered (although with no official declaration) a counterweight to the NATO and EU aspirations of the “core” part of Ukraine.

Therefore, revisionism is not an end in itself for Moscow. It is rather a tool that is employed only when the status quo proves ineffective (as was the case with Georgia or Ukraine). However, where the status quo (Armenia-Azerbaijan, Moldova) stays, Russia prefers making no abrupt movements.

Confrontation without a “Cold War”

Political experts, politicians and journalists are increasingly using the term “Cold War” when describing the current phase of the relationship between the West and Russia. Today, a few fundamentally important features are missing to define the current degree of confrontation as a new “Cold War”. These include the presence of a second superpower, a military bloc that would shape around it, and an ideology that would differ from the philosophy and values of the Western world. None of the concepts of Russian foreign policy (1993, 2000, 2008, 2013 and 2016) declares Russia as a state implementing an alternative socio-economic and political project or building a “new type of society” (as was the case with the Soviet Union).

At the same time, we see changes that are designed to demonstrate that Russia is seeking to move away from the role of a country, for which external assessment is important. For example, the Concept of 2000 envisages the “promotion of the positive perception of the Russian

Federation in the world” as one of the goals, whereas in the 2008 document it changed to the “promotion of the objective perception”¹⁶ of the country in the world. It was not so much the positive assessment of Russia that came to the forefront, but rather the focus on the need to take its national interests into account. Not to be liked, but to be reckoned with! The 2016 Concept already prioritizes efforts to “strengthen the position of the Russian mass media and mass communications in the global information space and bring the Russian point of view on international processes home to the broader global community.”

However, at the moment, Russia is not the second pole of world politics, as used to be the case with the USSR. The Collective Security Treaty Organization is not fit to play the role of the “twenty-first century” Warsaw Treaty Organization when it comes to both quantitative and financial and economic indicators. Furthermore, the Russian Federation, despite the harsh rhetoric of its authorities, is not going to spread revolutionary ideology across the world.

In the Concept adopted in 2016, the world was for the first time ever conceptually divided into the Asia-Pacific Region, the Euro-Atlantic region, and the Eurasian region. However, the relationships between them are not conceived as permanent antagonism. They are not described in terms of the confrontation between the “poles” or “worlds”. Moreover, their security is referred to as “a prerequisite for stability of international relations”, whereas the Concept itself calls for “true unification of the efforts of the international community” relying on “the shared spiritual and moral potential of the main world religions, as well as on such principles and concepts as the pursuit of peace and justice, dignity, freedom, responsibility, integrity, mercy and hard work.”

At the same time, Moscow’s geopolitical interests are much more local compared with those pursued by the Soviet Union. Yet, according to the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept, the Russian Federation fully realizes its special responsibility for maintaining security in the world, both at the global and regional levels.”

Nevertheless, the priority of post-Soviet Russia is the space within the former USSR. And ensuring security in that part of the world is seen not as a restoration of an “empire”, not as a historical debt, or a trauma caused by the Soviet collapse, but as the fulfillment of current relevant objectives. The obvious exception to this rule is Syria – Russia’s military intervention in the Syrian conflict became the first use of the Russian armed forces beyond the former Soviet Union. However, in this case, along with the motive of “deterring” the West and maintaining an ally (President Bashar al-Assad), clear “post-Soviet motives” (preventing the export of radical Islamist ideas from the Middle East to the Caucasus and the Volga region)¹⁷ can be observed.

In this context, it is imperative to understand the status of the internal stability of Russia, a country that literally since the first days after the collapse of the USSR has been involved in separatist conflicts (Chechnya) and the resolution of numerous open and latent religious and ethnic disputes.

¹⁶ Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 15 July 2008 <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/news/785>

¹⁷ Угроза ИГИЛ: пути противодействия национально-религиозному экстремизму. М., Academia. 2018. Изд. 2-е исправленное и дополненное. 184 с.

At the same time, since the start of the 2000s, ethnic separatism as a threat to the Russian state and society has been pushed to the background by the jihadist challenge. This changed the pattern of “hot spots” in the North Caucasus. Back in the 1990s and in the early 2000s Chechnya was considered the most dangerous region, but Dagestan, the largest and most populated entity in the North Caucasus eventually took over. As of September 2018, the latter remains the “leader”. Throughout the entire post-Soviet period, the Russian North Caucasus has been in the focus of the international community. The situation in the region was discussed in several contexts, including the problem of the viability of Russia as a single integral polyethnic state, its ability to exercise effective control over all of its regions, the problem of the observance of human rights, terrorist threat, and security in its broadest sense¹⁸.

However, over the past five years, it became possible to significantly reduce the number of terrorist attacks and incidents involving the use of arms in the North Caucasus, including Dagestan¹⁹. Currently, the separatist threat is minimized as well (there are no movements in the region that call for isolation from Russia), although the special informal status of Chechnya in its relations with the center (as well as the independence of its head, Ramzan Kadyrov) raises some questions. At the same time, what we witness here is the involvement of regional elites of the North Caucasus in the diplomatic endeavor of the Russian Federation (this is especially important where official channels do not work or they are not effective enough, for example, in Libya, Syria, Afghanistan) to resolve national problems²⁰.

However, it is impossible to ignore the existing unresolved land issues (closely related to internal migration and expansion of various ethnic groups), administrative borders²¹, issues of representation of various ethnic groups in administrative bodies and difficulties in the relations between the state and religious groups. They all create certain conflict potential alongside risks. All of these matters should be kept in mind when assessing Russia’s internal stability.

It should also be noted that since the internal threats that immobilized Moscow in the international arena in the 1990s – early 2000s were minimized, Russia has become an increasingly assertive player on the global stage. Today, as well, this assertiveness, especially in the Middle

¹⁸ For details see: Маркедонов С.М. Северный Кавказ: «ахиллесова пята» или политический ресурс? //Россия в глобальной политике. 2017. № 4. С. 175-185.

¹⁹ In 2015, the number of victims of terrorist incidents almost halved from 2014. The number of acts of terrorism decreased by 33%. In 2016, the number of victims of incidents involving the use of arms increased by 11% (from 258 to 287 people), but the level of terrorist attacks and incidents remained the same. In 2017, the number of people killed and injured as a result of armed violence decreased again (to 150 people). At the same time, in Dagestan (the most turbulent republic of the North Caucasus), a 73% decrease in the number of victims was reported (the number of incidents also dropped by two-thirds), and in Kabardino-Balkaria, the number of victims went down by 93%; although certain republics (Ingushetia and Chechnya) saw a rebound, as the number of incidents increased. See for more details: North Caucasus – victims count //http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/gubric/1103

²⁰ Лузин П. Рамзан Кадыров во внешней политике России //http://intersectionproject.eu/ru/article/security/ramzan-kadyrov-vo-vneshney-politike-

²¹ After the heads of Chechnya and Ingushetia, Ramzan Kadyrov and Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, signed the Agreement on the determination of the inter-republican administrative border on September 26, 2018, Ingush activists embarked on mass protests against the decision. The Constitutional Court of Ingushetia resolved that the treaty between Grozny and Magas ran counter to the Constitution of the republic. See Resolution of the Ingush Constitutional Court on the validation of the law establishing the border with Chechnya // https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/327322/ 2018. – 30 October.

East, Central Asia and Transcaucasia, helps the Russian Federation to maintain its own internal stability.

Crimean consensus?

Is it safe to say today that serious debate is underway in Russia regarding its foreign policy, or that there are certain societal discrepancies on the matter? Unlike the 1990s and the early 2000s, what we see today is the greater unanimity of opinions. There is the so-called “Crimean consensus” among the parties that have seats in the Federal Assembly (Parliament) of the Russian Federation, as well as at the level of the constituent entities of the federation. That is, the status of Crimea as part of Russia is not challenged not only by the ruling United Russia party, but also by the opposition Communist Party of the Russian Federation, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia led by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and A Just Russia.

At the same time, when it comes to the internal agenda (the pension reform, economic course of the government, budget adoption), these forces may have different views. However, as far as foreign policy is concerned, communists or liberal democrats (a.k.a “Zhirinovskiy”) will only criticize the Kremlin for the lack of action, if they criticize it at all. This criticism is not a call to abandon confrontation with the West, but rather a reproach that Moscow does not do everything to deter the “offensive” of the United States and NATO.

The Russian jurisdiction over Crimea was supported by the ex-president of the USSR Mikhail Gorbachev, who is a popular politician in the West. According to him, “if he were in Putin’s shoes, he would do the same.”²² When asked whether he could return Crimea to Ukraine if he became president, the former CEO of YUKOS, businessman Mikhail Khodorkovskiy (who spent more than 10 years in prison on charges of economic crimes, which many observers interpret as revenge by the Kremlin) replied: “My straightforward answer is ‘no’, because the problem of Crimea will take decades to resolve.”²³ The popular blogger and opposition politician Alexey Navalny once said that Crimea is “not a sandwich” that can be given away and returned. Subsequently, he clarified his position adding that the referendum organized by the Kremlin on the peninsula could not be considered legitimate, and a new expression of will was necessary²⁴.

Similarly, Ksenia Sobchak, a 2018 presidential candidate, commented on this matter. According to her, the issue of the status of Crimea is two-fold. From the formal legal perspective, the peninsula belongs to Ukraine, but it is impossible “just to give it back.”²⁵ Another presidential contender, Grigory Yavlinskiy, called for organizing an international conference on the status of the peninsula and a new referendum²⁶. However, Sobchak and Yavlinskiy polled only 1.68% and 1.05%, respectively.

²² Gorbachev on the annexation of Crimea // <https://russian.rt.com/inotv/2016-05-22/Gorbachev-o-prisoedinenii-Krima-Na> 2016. - 22 May

²³ Михаил Ходорковский: Я Крым не отдам // <https://echo.msk.ru/blog/echomsk/1419790-echo/> 2014 -16 октября.

²⁴ Путилов И. Чего ждать Крыму от президента Навального? // <https://ru.krymr.com/a/28180627.html> 2016. - 16 декабря.

²⁵ Ксения Собчак: Просто взять и отдать Крым обратно не получится <https://echo.msk.ru/blog/echomsk/2143854-echo/> 2018. - 07 февраля.

²⁶ Явлинский выступил за международную конференцию и новый референдум по Крыму <https://ria.ru/politics/20171118/1509084402.html> 2017. - 18 ноября.

Also notably, even some of the harsh critics and opponents of the authorities try not to give clear answers when asked about the status of Crimea. At the very least, they call for refraining from hasty unambiguous decisions. The public figures already quoted above, Khodorkovsky and Navalny, in 2008 supported Russia in its campaign in the Trans-Caucasian region. Navalny said in an interview that Transnistria is not Moldova²⁷, whereas Khodorkovsky stressed his willingness to defend Russia's territorial integrity in the republics of the North Caucasus²⁸.

At the same time, when it comes to Donbas, the Russian opposition (Yavlinsky, Sobchak, Navalny) are more eager to make concessions. This conflict itself seems to them (unlike Crimea) to be in many ways an artificial problem²⁹. All of these politicians criticize Russia for its obstinacy to the West and its unwillingness to withdraw from confrontation. However, at present, their influence on the media and political mainstream is minute. And this should be borne in mind by those who are studying Russia's foreign policy at the current stage. Calls for internal democratization and economic liberalization are not synonymous with the refusal to annex Crimea, pursue an assertive foreign policy, and protect Russia's interests, as Putin's opponents understand them.

Conclusions

Throughout the period since the collapse of the USSR, Russia has seen a complex transformation of its foreign policy. Starting with attempts to integrate into the "civilized world", Moscow eventually recognized the primacy of its special interests and dissimilarity of its fundamental vision of the world order and European and global security with that of the West.

Yet, the negative trends of the last four years should not be exaggerated in this process. Russia declared its rejection of a NATO-centered world as far back as 1994, two decades before Crimea was incorporated into the Russian Federation. The post-Soviet space was declared to be the most important priority almost immediately after the disintegration of the USSR. At the same time, Moscow clearly separated its adherence to "international law", the special role of the UN, and the inviolability of the principles of non-interference in internal affairs as far as "countries beyond the FSU" were concerned (the Middle East, Yugoslavia, Africa), from the "countries of the FSU", for which exceptions were made in the 1990 and 2000s.

Over the past three decades, Russia's capacity in terms of foreign policy efforts has varied. Faced with internal separatism, as well as difficulties of economic reforms, Moscow could not afford excessive external activities. However, as statehood and the economy consolidated, and risks of a split were overcome, international-level ambitions grew stronger, which does not mean, though, that Russia had previously been satisfied with its place and role after the end of the Cold War. The thing is that it could benefit from new opportunities to promote its vision. This is where the theories of a "multipolar world", which used to be voiced mostly as part of academic discussions, had a chance to be put in practice.

²⁷ Навальный: Приднестровье, на самом деле, независимо от Молдовы // https://noi.md/ru/news_id/227322 2017. – 9 июня.

²⁸ Ходорковский удивил своих поклонников готовностью воевать за Кавказ https://echo.msk.ru/blog/kavkaz_politic/1224545-echo/ 2014. - 23 декабря.

²⁹ Навальный vs Стрелков: что сказали про Донбасс и Крым // <https://ru.hromadske.ua/posts/navalny-vs-hyrkyn-cto-skazaly-pro-donbass-y-krym> 2017. -20 июля

The reason for today's outburst of contradictions between Moscow, on the one hand, and Washington and Brussels, on the other, is not a "second Cold war" or ideology-driven differences, but the asymmetry of their perceptions of national priorities. Russia and the West have different points of reference in terms of what violates world order and the international law. The Americans and their allies assess the doings of the Russian Federation as exclusive violations of European borders after World War II. But for Moscow, the violation of the international law began a lot earlier; and the Ukrainian-Crimean crisis is only part of the broader process that began with the collapse of the Warsaw Treaty Organization, the USSR, Yugoslavia and the eastward expansion of NATO.

The case of Ukraine is therefore not a dispute about "who started it." It is a story about the non-existence of operational and effective international law and efficient international arbitration for controversial issues relating to the relationship between the center and periphery in crisis. Again, as it happened before in the Balkans or in Transcaucasia, the world's leading actors disagreed as to clear criteria for secession or preservation of territorial integrity.

Therefore, it should be understood that Russia's policy is not a compendium of phobias and fixations of the first person in the Kremlin. There is a good reason why there is little difference between assessments made by Vladimir Putin and statements about the status of Crimea made by such diverse politicians as Alexey Navalny, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Mikhail Khodorkovsky. With or without Putin, Moscow will take care of its close neighborhood, and as soon as it sees direct threats to itself, it will resort to force (as it happened repeatedly before Crimea). With or without Putin, Moscow is not interested in having a unipolar world in which its interests are either disregarded or perceived as unimportant because Russia's economic potential cannot be compared to that of the West.

At the same time, with Putin or with any other leader, Moscow will be interested in pragmatizing its relations with the U.S. and the EU, integrating into the global economy, as it is keen to benefit from economic and technological cooperation, as well as in minimizing risks of terrorism. However, without equitable dialogue, possibilities for overcoming the current confrontation are extremely limited.

Sergey Markedonov

Associate Professor at the Department of Foreign Regional Studies and Foreign Policy, the Russian State University for the Humanities