

Foreign policy at the service of modernisation: old wine in a new bottle

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Russia's contacts with the external world over the past year have been characterised by a gradual improvement in its relations with the West, as well as the use of non-confrontational rhetoric, the most far-reaching example of which was the address President Dmitri Medvedev gave to Russian ambassadors this July. In an attempt to harmonise foreign policy with the widely propagated programme for the modernisation of Russia¹ President Medvedev presented a vision of the Russian Federation as a responsible global power which is open to co-operation. According to this vision, Russian foreign policy would help to attract foreign investments and technologies. The West was presented as a partner, not a rival.

Both this rhetoric and the atmosphere of co-operation in relations with the USA and the EU contrast with the assertive and aggressive Russian policy which was symbolised by and culminated in the Russian-Georgian conflict of 2008.

The changes observed in Russian foreign policy are quite limited, and are not constructing a new external strategy. Those changes are rather an attempt to find more efficient ways to implement old strategic goals. The new image of a responsible global power is inconsistent, and Russian policy is still assertive and geopolitically motivated. Although a new rhetoric is really in place, the Russian political elite's perception of their country's place and role in the contemporary international order remains unchanged. Moscow's readiness to become engaged in genuine co-operation with the West has not increased significantly; it is still to a great extent declarative in nature.

Medvedev's rhetoric

While promoting the concept of Russia's modernisation, President Dmitri Medvedev presented a new vision for Russian foreign policy. Its general outline appeared in Medvedev's manifesto entitled 'Russia, forward' and published in September 2009, his speech to the Federal Assembly in November 2009, and his address to Russian ambassadors in July 2010². President Medvedev's theses were reinforced in May 2010 by a controlled leak of a governmental document formulating a new programme for Russian foreign policy in complian-

¹ The scope of modernisation is a controversial issue inside Russia. Most statements from government representatives indicate that it is being restricted to economic transformation, including attracting foreign investments and modernisation of the economy. The term 'modernisation' has been used within this scope of meaning in this text.

² For the speeches see:
<http://www.kremlin.ru/news/5413>,
<http://www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/5979>,
<http://www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/8325>

ce with presidential guidelines³. President Medvedev has also made efforts to promote the ‘modernisation’ aspects of foreign policy during his foreign visits.

The new vision can be characterised most briefly as a shift from a confrontational to a co-operative approach. In Medvedev’s opinion, Russia should no longer base its policy on “nostalgia, stereotypes, complexes, boastfulness and taking offences” and put an end to “sulking, confrontation and self-isolation.” The primary goal of foreign policy should be to create favourable conditions for modernisation, the measure of success being foreign investments and technologies attracted to Russia. External activity cannot be restricted to politics alone, but must to an increasing extent involve economic aspects.

Referring to Russia’s place and role on the international stage, President Medvedev described a vision of his country as a key great power whose global status would be built on a broad platform (and not solely on oil & gas and nuclear weapons, as before). Russia should become one of the leaders of a multipolar world, a nation which protects its balance and prevents unilateralism, collaborates in dealing with common challenges, has an appropriate say in economic issues, and contributes to the resolution of global problems. Russia is additionally aided in this by the emerging multipolar order and the gradual decrease in the number of external threats. At the same time,

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Dmitri Medvedev sees Russia as a country which needs to co-operate with foreign partners to be able to put its modernisation programme into effect.

The Russian president has strongly emphasised his country’s readiness to co-operate with the West on the Iranian crisis (his rhetoric has become similar to that of the West; for example, he pointed out in July 2010 that Iran was coming ever closer to potential being able to produce nuclear weapons) and climate change (leaning towards the EU’s stance).

What has (really) happened?

Since Dmitri Medvedev announced the programme for the modernisation of Russia, the atmosphere in Russia’s relations with the West (the USA, the EU, NATO and the Council of Europe) has improved significantly, and real changes have taken place in the case of several existing points of disagreement.

In relations with the USA, the predominant issue was the ‘reset’, Washington’s proposal to improve bilateral relations. A new START treaty was signed in April 2010 (although the key dispute over the location of missile defence systems has not been resolved)⁴. Russia supported the imposition of sanctions on Iran in June 2010⁵. The FBI’s detention of ten people on charges of spying for Russia was hushed up, and the agents were exchanged for Russian dissidents sentenced for spying for the West. In August 2010, the USA and Russia carried out their first joint air defence exercises. At the same time, it needs to be noted that the improvement in Russian-US relations is quite limited, and many disputes have simply not been mentioned⁶.

The concept of the Partnership for Modernisation, which emerged for the first time at the Stockholm summit in November 2009, has become a declarative expression of change in relations with the European Union. However, although a declaration launching that programme was adopted at a meeting in Rostov-on-Don in late May/early June 2010, it is lacking in content. At the same time, political contacts – both bi- and multilateral –

³ <http://www.runewsweek.ru/country/34166/>

⁴ For more information see Marcin Kaczmarek, Nowy traktat o kontroli zbrojeń sukcesem Rosji, [‘A new arms control treaty, a Russian success’] *Tydzień na Wschodzie*, nr 14 (132), 14.04.2010.

⁵ For Russia’s approach to the Iranian issue in the context of relations with the USA, see Marcin Kaczmarek, ‘Russia plays the Iran card with the USA’, *Eastweek*, No. 19 (212), 26 May 2010.

⁶ See Marcin Kaczmarek, ‘Russia–USA: limited change’, *Eastweek*, No. 23 (216), 30 June 2010.

abound with assurances of developing relations, although without being supported by any kind of concrete co-operation.

Another sign of change in Russian foreign policy is the improvement in relations with Norway and Poland, with which Russia has been in dispute over numerous issues. In the case of Norway, a statement on the division of the disputed maritime areas in the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean was made in April 2010. Although the accord has not taken the form of a border treaty as yet, the general resolution of the decades-long dispute has had a positive effect on Russia's image. In the case of Poland, the improvement concerns both the climate of mutual relations and historical disputes (primarily the approach to the Katyn issue).

Russia's contacts with NATO have also improved. The political dialogue was activated (officially resumed in June 2009), and military contacts were restarted in January 2010 (after having been suspended since the Russian-Georgian war). Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the new NATO secretary-general, has indicated improving relations with Moscow as one of his priorities. At the same time, despite promised co-operation in such areas as combating maritime piracy and the conflict in Afghanistan, no concrete joint actions have been taken as yet.

The atmosphere has also changed for the better in relations with the Council of Europe. In February 2010, Russia ratified the 14th additional protocol to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which it had withheld since 2006, thus enabling the reform of the European Court of Human Rights. Furthermore, in June 2010, for the first time, the Russian delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe supported a resolution which was moderately critical about the situation in the North Caucasus.

Russian historical policy has also been strongly revised, as since autumn 2009 it has become less confrontational towards the interpretations adopted by Eastern and Western European countries, and definitely less apologetic about Stalin. The evaluation of the Soviet heritage has become more nuanced, and stronger emphasis has been made on promoting the positive role played by the USSR during World War II⁷.

The external causes – geopolitical changes

While analysing the external sources of change in Russian foreign policy, it is worth highlighting several major factors, namely the reduction of geopolitical pressure on Russia from the West, the global economic crisis and the emergence of a multipolar international order.

The consequences of the war with Georgia in 2008, which was a culmination of the Kremlin's assertive policy, proved to be beneficial from the Russian point of view. The Western countries not only refrained from imposing sanctions or taking any other confrontational stance⁸, but also revised their evaluation of Russia, acknowledging the need to respect its interests in the post-Soviet area. In effect, dialogue with Russia was swiftly resumed, and Western activity in the post-Soviet area was scaled down. This reduction of geopolitical pressure was duly noted by Moscow; signs of this change included the effective suspension of plans to enlarge NATO with CIS countries, and the recognition of Russia's special role in this region by implication, all of which made the Kremlin feel more secure. In turn, the EU's initiatives, such as the Eastern Partnership, are seen by Moscow as being harmless at the present stage. The alleviation of perceived pressure on Russia was also noted in the strategic balance field; the USA withdrew from its plan to push through the deployment of elements of the missile defence system in Poland and the Czech Republic in September 2009 (the new project is clearly less ambitious,

⁷ For more information see Jadwiga Rogoża, Marcin Kaczmarek, 'The evolution of Russia's historical policy', *Eastweek*, No. 17 (210), 12 May 2010.

⁸ Only symbolic gestures were made: the suspension of contacts as part of the NATO-Russia Council and the freezing of talks on the new EU-Russia agreement (so-called PCA 2), which were to be resumed as early as November 2008 anyway.

and it has not yet been decided whether it will be implemented at all). Washington has strongly tempered its criticism of Russian authoritarianism, and Dmitri Medvedev's modernisation plans are widely supported by Western leaders. Furthermore, changes have taken place inside the CIS which are seen by Moscow as beneficial for Russia. Those changes include the takeover of power by Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine and the ensuing Russian-Ukrainian rapprochement, and the change of government in Kyrgyzstan (the overthrow of Kurmanbek Bakiev's regime, which Russia had recently criticised). As a result

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of those factors, there are no tense conflict situations between Russia and the West at the present time.

The global economic crisis has impaired the Western countries' position and increased their readiness to compromise with emerging powers as regards reform of global institutions. Given such a multipolar

international order, Russia is trying to maintain its independent global role and is not interested in a long-term confrontation with the West, as this would curtail its ability to conduct its multidimensional policy.

In addition to changes in systems, Russian policy is certainly affected by the desire to support the policy currently adopted by the Obama administration, which Moscow perceives as favourable to its interests.

Internal reasons – Medvedev's game or the elite's consensus?

The majority of the Russian political elite are aware of the Russian need for foreign investments, including technologies, the principal source of which are still Western countries. Even in the field of military modernisation, Russia is forced to search for technologies abroad; hence the attempts to obtain a Mistral-class ship or unmanned aerial vehicles. Although the government has managed to survive the hardest phase of the economic crisis, various defects of the Russian economic model have been revealed as a result of the crisis.

The recent change in foreign policy is being promoted primarily by President Medvedev, but it enjoys wide support among the elite, proof of which is that it has raised no open protests or serious disputes. At most, we may distinguish three issues which have revealed differences of opinions regarding the tactics to be adopted: the reaction to the US shield (both in the context of START negotiations and later), support for the imposition of US sanctions on Iran, and accession to the WTO. However, with the exception of the WTO issue (which has been raising controversies since the middle of this decade at the least), none of those matters concerned strategic decisions.

On the one hand, the vision Medvedev has proposed is an element of domestic policy; the slogan of internal modernisation must be supplemented with an external aspect. On the other, both the changes observed so far and Medvedev's rhetoric have not impaired the interests of any elements of the coalition which makes up the core of the present regime in Russia. At the same time, this rhetoric attracts that part of the Russian elite which demands closer relations with the West closer to Medvedev.

What does this mean? The limits of the new policy

The rhetoric Medvedev has used, the actions listed above and the special features of Russian policy have all led to the signs from Moscow being understood as declarations of a durable and strategic alliance between Russia and the West. Therefore, it is reasonable

to ask what the recently observed changes stand for, to what extent Russia is becoming more open to co-operation with the West, and to what degree Moscow's approach to the wider world can change.

The vision presented by President Medvedev can be seen as an appeal to the Russian elite to focus on the main goal, the modernisation of the state, and to refrain from building an image of the country as an aggressive power. Medvedev's project seems to recall the approach pursued by China since the mid-1990s, making great efforts to assure the external world of the country's positive intentions.

This gives rise to the question as to whether Russia also wants to ensure an international environment favourable for its internal changes and to build an image of a responsible, constructive power. Until the war with Georgia, and even later, despite assurances from Moscow, this image was based on an assertive and often confrontational policy, examples of which were the strategic bomber patrols, emphasising territorial claims in the Arctic, raising the armament levels, and demonstrations of force and independence. Furthermore, other crises and the disturbed international environment have added to the significance of Russia. In this context, the actions taken by Moscow over the past

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The achievement in relations with the USA are rather unconvincing proof of the new quality in Russian politics. Moscow has long insisted on signing

a START treaty; now a timid proposal for a new treaty to regulate missile defence issues is emerging. Russia's support for the imposition of new sanctions on Iran in June 2010 also made it easier for China to do the same, while Iran had previously rejected a proposal to enter a deal which would have offered Russia a privileged position. Nevertheless, Moscow is still taking care to ensure that the sanctions do not affect its existing co-operation with Iran (especially in the energy sector). Moscow has also opposed the imposition of additional sanctions on Iran by the EU and the USA (other than those agreed as part of the 'Six' and the UN Security Council).

Russian rhetoric is inconsistent; some official documents (for example, the military doctrine published in February 2010, which was signed by President Medvedev after his first modernisation promises) are no different from their predecessors as regards the vision of threats surrounding Russia, and their wording is clearly anti-Western.

Some actions Moscow has taken contradict Russia's image as a responsible power. Those include the president's meeting with the leader of Hamas, recognised as a terrorist organisation by the West; a continuous increase in spending on armament, regardless of the economic crisis; Russian objections at the UN Security Council to Western proposals for resolutions regarding Sri Lanka and North Korea; Medvedev's visit to the breakaway republic of Abkhazia; and the lack of a consistent policy regarding accession to the WTO. There is also no proof that Russia will be significantly more ready to respond to Western appeals (for example, helicopters for the government forces in Afghanistan have not been provided, and Moscow's real share in international co-operation for preventing global warming is close to a minimum)⁹. Additionally, the Kremlin is still continuing its policy of making gestures to emphasise its independence.

⁹ Iwona Wiśniewska, Marcin Kaczmarek, 'Russia's position on the Copenhagen climate summit', *Eastweek*, No. 42 (192), 9 December 2009.

Conclusions

It is too early to state that this is another (after the one in 2001–2002) “pro-Western turn” by Moscow, or that it is consistently building an image of a “responsible, constructive power.” The message is still ambiguous and inconsistent, and the rhetoric is still followed by actions which contradict it. Moscow’s goals (in both global and regional terms) and the Russian political elite’s perception of the international environment have not changed,

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nor has there been any change in the Kremlin’s readiness to respect Western appeals. The change mainly covers the wording, and it is too early to state that Russian foreign policy has been revised to make Russia accept greater joint responsibility for global affairs, not to mention a strategic alliance with the West or any part of it. Proof of this is that it is difficult to notice

a pro-Western turn even in the case of Russia’s accession to the WTO; this would be at the most a token of a stronger engagement in the global international community and a sign of readiness for self-restraint in foreign policy. Moscow wants to receive concrete benefits from Western countries, and hopes that a change of image alone will be enough.



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