



Continuity and change in Russia's policy toward Central and Eastern Europe



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ABSTRACT

The accession of the CEE states to NATO and the European Union has put an end to the geopolitical ambiguity and implicit insecurity in the region between Russia and the so-called 'Old Europe'. Instead of being an area of great powers' rivalry, elements of 'buffer belts' lacking meaningful strategic options, objects of raw Nazi-Soviet deals, or zones under Russian occupation and domination, the three Baltic States and the Visegrad group countries became full-fledged members of the European Union and were given NATO's security guarantees. By the middle of the 2000s, one would conclude that traditional geopolitics had ended in this region.

However, the changes in the strategic situation in CEE have not changed the deep rooted moving forces and long-term strategic goals of the Russian policy toward the region. Moscow seeks to have the position, as its official rhetoric says, of an 'influential centre of a multipolar world' that would be nearly equal to the USA, China, or the EU. With this in view Moscow seeks for the establishment of its domination over the new independent states of the former USSR and for the formation of a sphere of influence for itself in Central Eastern Europe. If it achieves these goals, then Europe may return once again to traditional geopolitics fraught with great power rivalries and permanent instabilities radiating far beyond CEE borders. Yet a few questions remain. Has Russia come to the conclusion that attempting to restore its privileged position of influence in Central-Eastern Europe is wrong? Has Russia enough power to threaten the CEE countries? How credible are NATO's security guarantees? How may Russian behavior in CEE affect a wider European geopolitical context? These questions are appropriate in the light of Russia's 'resurgence' as a revanchist power and because Russia is, and most probably will remain in the next five to ten years, a weighty economic and strategic factor in areas along the Western borders of the former USSR.

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1. Conceptual roots and historical patterns

Russia's policy toward Central-Eastern Europe is still hotly debated both politically and academically. In particular, Russian pundits close to the Kremlin and leading ideologies of the Putin's regime, above all those from the top circles of the Russian Orthodox Church, often portray Russian strategy in Europe, including in CEE, as a defensive reaction to the West's centuries-old expansion that combined military invasions with a cultural aggression, aimed at destruction of the Russian values and traditions, in order to disable its ability to resist foreign influence. The document presenting the view of the Russian Orthodox Church said

Today, Russia is experiencing strong pressure of forces interested in destroying its humanitarian sovereignty and civilizational orientation. We are obliged ... to protect from defamation and distortions those fundamental moral values that determined the historical path of the Russian society, and for which laid down their lives our grandfathers and

great-grandfathers. This is not just our topical task in the context of modern geopolitical struggle; it is our sacred duty to the memory of those who have fallen for Russia', said The Conciliar address of the XVI session of the Russian People World Council crafted by the Moscow Patriarchy, playing now the central role in development of the conceptual core of the Russian state ideology (The Conciliar address, 2012).

The opposite vision presuming that Empire building and expansionism are inherent features of the Russian statehood shared by academics with high international reputation, Pipes (1996), Yanov (2009), Afanasiev (2008) to mention few only. This view, however, is strongly disputed by a number of Western scholars, Anatol Lieven above all (Lieven, 2000/2001).

In attempting to unveil Moscow's policy regarding Central and Eastern Europe it would be helpful to look first at its historical and conceptual constants. 'Only by drawing back from the detail of the moment can one distinguish what in Russia's behavior is transitory from what is enduring. Only by thinking historically does one begin to see policy's deeper substructure. This substructure consists of patterns – patterns that reveal the biases, aspirations, and fears that endure over time' (Legvold, 2009). Indeed, there is a growing body of evidence of an essential continuity in the Russian international strategy: it reproduces many elements of the intellectual mainstream and the national self-identity that were typical of both the Soviet and the pre-Soviet periods of Russia's history.

Among Russia's deeply rooted behavioral patterns a fundamental one was formed by four centuries of territorial expansion. In Europe the spreading out of Russia's domination to the Baltic Sea Region and then to Poland was one of the principle constants of its policy from the early days of the Romanov Empire to the formation of the 'outer empire', a belt of 'putatively sovereign states that owed their allegiance to Russia and were linked to it formally, via the Warsaw Pact and/or Comecon' (Holmes, 2009). In a sense, it was a typical example of 'overexpansion' fuelled by the 'myth of security through expansion', as Jack Snyder explained it:

Counterproductive aggressive policies are caused most directly by the idea that the state's security can be safeguarded only through expansion. This idea, the central myth of empire, was the major force propelling every case of over-expansion by industrialized great powers. ... The myth of security through expansion originated in each case as a justification for the policies of domestic coalitions formed among groups having parochial interests in imperial expansion, military preparations, or economic autarky. These groups, including economic sector and state bureaucracies, logrolled their various imperialist or military interests, using arguments about security through expansion to justify their self-serving policies in terms of a broader public interest in national survival (Snyder, 1991).

Russia's territorial annexations resulted in permanent wars of conquest along the periphery of its borders, which produced specific types of political and strategic cultures, including the 'siege mentality' culture, which involved a paranoid image of Russia as a country surrounded by enemies. This, in its turn, was pushing Russian activism westward as it was now in quest of 'buffer zones', strategic springboards and bridgeheads to protect the heartland of the Empire and achieve positions that would be convenient for new offensives. As a result, expansion and building of the Empire became strategic values for the Russian discourse and are often perceived as norms of the country's external activities. What is more, they are also perceived as a fundamental law of political behavior and a *condicio sine qua non* of Russia's national existence as an independent international entity. Vladislav Surkov, a leading ideologist of the Russian regime in the 2000s, wrote that 'expansion is the only way to survive. In the world of biology it is so. Human society in this sense does not differ from other large ecosystems. If a system does not expand it dies; it's a fundamental law. Therefore, there is no doubt that danger and competition are powerful means of awaking people out of sleep' (Surkov, 2010).

The perception of CEE countries not as subjects of international relations but as objects of a competition between great powers is another deeply rooted pattern of Russia's strategic thinking. Partly, it results from a megalomania inherited from the Soviet and the imperial past. Yet this approach is also based on historical experience. The partitions of Poland, the Munich Dictate, the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, and the division of Europe after World War II – all these and a number of other international events have convinced Russian policy-makers that in order to achieve their ends in Central and Eastern Europe Moscow should make deals with a few major powers – the USA, France, Germany and Great Britain.

This is in line with the essence of the 'multipolar' concept developed in the second half of the 1990s by a group of experts assembled around Eugenie Primakov, one of the most sullen figures in post-Soviet Russia. Particularly, it supposes that due to the end of the Cold War the West is turning into a combination of independent 'power centers' moving along different geopolitical trajectories. This, as they believe, gives Russia an opportunity to influence world politics using means and methods typical of 'balance of power' international systems. In particular, regarding Europe, Moscow's policy based on this concept seeks building 'special relations' with countries like France and Germany for the purpose of meeting Russia's interests. The 2007 Review of the Russian Foreign Policy sketched this idea:

Relationships with the leading European countries – Germany, France, Spain and Italy – are of crucial importance for [the] establishment of a European architecture meeting our interests. ... A mechanism of trilateral political dialogue [between Russia, Germany and France] and other 'variable geometry' formats of relations with European countries that recognize Russia's role in Eurasia as a stabilizing factor will be even more demanded in the period ahead (Obzor, 2007).

A number of Russian experts concluded most probably with all good reasons, that since the end of the 1990s Moscow was focusing on the establishment of an international arrangement consisting of Russia and a few leading European countries, which would decide all European affairs, including those related to Central-Eastern Europe. For instance, Dmitry Trenin, now

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