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RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES IN EURASIA AND NORTHERN AFRICA AFTER AMERICA'S WITHDRAWAL FROM THE MIDDLE EAST

THE PURPORT OF STATEMENTS

ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the priorities of Russian foreign policy in relation to the Middle East, North Africa, and, above all, Russia's Eastern European neighbors, after a significant reduction in the activity of the United States in the Middle East. The main research material is the official statements of the top-level Russian decision-makers. It is assumed that the priorities can be examined after analyzing the determination of states to sacrifice a certain group of benefits for more significant gains in the long-term and axiological perspective. The official Russian narrative since President Putin's Munich speech in 2007 has been characterized by increasing criticism of the US and its allies, especially in view of the destabilization of the situation in the Maghreb, Syria and Afghanistan. What Russia proposes instead is to stop promoting political patterns that are alien to the region and to start pragmatic cooperation. Its obsessive goal is to build a multipolar world that respects zones of influence. The annexation of Crimea and further steps towards assertiveness towards Belarus and Ukraine, which could be observed verbally, became the motivation for sanctions by NATO countries. However, according to its narrative, Russia does not trade with its sovereignty, and the economic activity of the state and the oligarchs rather focused on moderating the effects of the sanctions that the Kremlin was and still is ready to take into account in the long-term perspective with the hope to reunite the so-called Russian World and keep an eye on the 'near abroad'. After the Russian in-

vasion of Ukraine, the Russian narrative only became sharper, without departing from its fundamental assumptions. In addition to the obsession with multipolarism, the imperative of defending the Russian population in eternally Russian territories sounded even clearer. Despite the obvious aggression in real behavior, the Kremlin's verbal propaganda portrays Western policy as the source of international problems and makes it responsible for the outbreak of war. This may indicate the validity of Mearsheimer's thesis that the presence of Russia's closest neighbors in the European Union, and even more so in NATO, is perceived in Moscow as an existential threat.

Keywords: Russia, priorities, foreign policy, Eurasia, Middle East

INTRODUCTION

The consequences of the Arab Spring and the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq have led to a clear change in the orientation of the foreign policies conducted by major actors across Eurasia. This may be contrasted with sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Oceania, and Australia, where there have been essentially no significant changes in international behaviors. In China, as well as in Iran and Russia, the official narrative in diplomacy was obsessed with criticism about the discrepancy between the unipolar model (allegedly imposed by the US) and the real balance of powers after the three decades that have passed since the end of the Cold War. These allegations relate to such issues as economic pressure, the domination of institutions that de facto represent the interests of the United States and its allies, and, above all, the imposition of Western political standards on other cultural circles. Mainly, however, they concern the attempts to introduce liberal democracy in the states where it is alien to the local tradition and about efforts to interfere in the internal affairs of states under the pretext of the implementation of human rights.

This rhetoric is most typical of Russian diplomatic language and remains congruent with the state's *Realpolitik*. However, the practical outcome of Russia's recent foreign policy does not seem to confirm the productivity of this line. Putin's assertiveness concerning Crimea and the Ukrainian East led to severe sanctions; at the beginning of the 2020s, the Russian economy was still in stagnation, which was exacerbated by the Coronavirus crisis. Moreover, the demographic tendencies, in spite of the steps taken by the state, could not encourage optimism in the society. Russia's belief in its beneficial influence in the 'near abroad', especially in Ukraine, is not shared among the neighbors (with the exception of Armenia, which has no alternative in its dramatic geopolitical situation).

However, the brink of the third decade, quite unexpectedly, brought a glimmer of hope to Russian hawks and critics of American policy. In the years 2018-2022, a decrease in the involvement of the United States in the Middle East and North African

affairs could be observed. This applies to a number of countries, but most important steps backward concerned Operation Inherent Resolve and the final withdrawal from Afghanistan. In July 2018 American officials met with the Taliban political commission in Qatar, which led to signing the Doha Agreement on February 29, 2020.¹ In September 2018 Zalmay Mamozy Khalilzad was appointed by Donald Trump a special adviser on Afghan affairs and was still kept in office under Joe Biden, from which one can conclude that the wish to cease the intervention was taken seriously not only by the Republican team but by the blue camp as well.

What seems interesting is the fact that it is Russia that hosted a special peace talk between the delegates of Kabul and the representation of the Taliban in November 2018, when minister Lavrov expressed his hope *to open a new page in the history of Afghanistan through joint efforts* and warned against the expansion of ISIL, a force being actually driven by 'foreign sponsors' and willing to *turn Afghanistan into a springboard for its expansion in Central Asia*.²

In spite of the relatively positive outcomes of the negotiations the Taliban attacked the Afghan governmental security forces and seized control over the country on August 15, 2021. The sequence of actions forced the Americans to concentrate on evacuating their own staff and the collaborating Afghans vulnerable to the Taliban. The last USAF C-17 left Kabul a minute before midnight on August 30.

Within the framework of OIR, which is a theoretically international intervention against the ISIS (because of the US' co-operation with some local forces such as Iraqi security troops and Syrian Democratic Forces), the American invasion in Libya (which began on November 13, 2015) ended on October 30, 2019 and the one in Iraq on December 9, 2021. In Syria the operation, which began on September 22, 2014, has been continued until the completion of the present publication.³

This tendency concerned a more general regularity in the West. It is enough to mention the example of the withdrawal of Polish forces from Afghanistan on June 30, 2021 or German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's decision (legitimized by the approval of the Bundestag) to end the anti-ISIL mission in Syria on January 12, 2022.⁴

Given the extremely tense state of international relations in the Eastern hemisphere the aim of this modest study is to explain Russia's international behavior by outlining the crucial priorities in her foreign policy as reflected not only in radical

¹ H. Najibullah, "Afghan Women – the Quintessence for Peace," Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation, at <https://www.vidc.org/en/detail/afghan-women-the-quintessence-for-peace>, 12 February 2023.

² "Afghanistan Peace Conference Kicks Off in Moscow," Al-Jazeera, 9 November 2018, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/9/afghanistan-peace-conference-kicks-off-in-moscow>, 12 February 2023.

³ J. Schogol, "US Troops Conducted 313 Missions and Killed 686 ISIS Fighters in 2022," Task and Purpose, 29 December 2022, at <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/us-military-isis-iraq-syria/>, 30 December 2022.

⁴ Comp. O. Scholz, "Wir sind erschüttert über die vielen Toten und Verletzten," Bundesregierung, 9 February 2023, at <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/-wir-sind-erschuettert-ueber-die-vielen-toten-und-verletzten--2164008>, 21 February 2023.

actions but even more in its selected Russian decision-makers' statements about the most critical problems concerning the Arab world and the Middle East, and, which turned out crucial after February 24, 2022, the post-Soviet East European 'near abroad'. The basic importance of harder data – official documents and the practical details of Russia's international behaviors since 2014 cannot be questioned; however, these issues go beyond the scope of this article and are a very promising object for further research.

Priorities emerge from perceived interests and, as a consequence, the hierarchy of objectives. These are revealed by particular decisions. Priorities can be estimated on the basis of declarations or decisions, followed by political actions. Both spheres: the official declarations and the *Realpolitik*, are useful in analyses because declarations are actually actions, elements of policies that remain on the verbal level. The emphasis placed on examining priorities results from the assumption that the decision-making center is sometimes put in an uncomfortable situation of making a necessary, but difficult, choice. This reveals the interests and goals that decision-makers are willing to sacrifice for the sake of achieving more important ones. In other words, the situation of sacrifice reveals those priorities which might become priceless while constructing a policy toward particular partners.

The theoretical background of our considerations is, to the greatest extent, the neo-classical realist paradigm. However, this does not result so much from an imaginary universal superiority, but rather from its adequacy to the situation in which we are dealing with a misinterpretation of the intentions of states or with a misunderstanding of the evolution of the international system. Moreover, neoclassical realism also encompasses some important constructivist intuitions, which cannot be ignored while interpreting Russia's international behaviour.⁵ The utility of this approach was confirmed by several researchers, such as J. Samuel Barkin (2003)⁶ or E. Kropatcheva (2011).⁷

INTERPRETATIONS OF RUSSIA'S INTERNATIONAL BEHAVIOUR

In his 2019 article in *International Politics*, Richard Sakwa mentioned several explanatory positions regarding Russia's assertive engagement with the West. One of them, represented by Keir Giles, claimed *that the insecurity of others makes Russia itself more secure*.⁸ Another one is based on popular Russophobia, which puts forward the idea that the Russian political culture, having been formed throughout centuries, makes Russia unable to take another position: it will always neglect its neighbor's right to

⁵ A. Tsygankov, "National Ideology and IR Theory: Three Incarnations of the Russian Idea," *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 16, no. 4 (2010), pp. 663-686.

⁶ J.S. Barkin, "Realist Constructivism," *International Studies Review*, no. 5 (2003), pp. 325-342.

⁷ E. Kropatcheva, "Russian Foreign Policy in the Realm of European Security Through the Lens of Neoclassical Realism," *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2012), pp. 30-40.

⁸ K. Giles, *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West*, Washington, D.C. 2019, p. 23.

self-determination and try to coopt another area, effectively becoming larger and larger and, in this way, fulfilling its permanent preoccupation.⁹

The third explanatory model boils down to the conviction that Russia has undergone an 'unfinished revolution' after the Soviet times and its leaders are still mentally immersed in the set of Soviet political imperatives.¹⁰ The old Soviet system, due to the inconsistency of its transformation, has actually been reintroduced in the Russian Federation, thereby retaining its former anti-Westernism and the domination of the security apparatus. Explanatory model No. 4 consists of a deconstruction of the old Cold War scheme: the previous opposition between the capitalist West and Communist USSR has been replaced by the hostility between democracies and autocracies. Each of the alliances *tries to subvert the other using a range of instruments while advancing soft power agendas*. However, as some analysts suggest, *the Kremlin needs to have an external enemy to distract the Russian people from the problems plaguing their country*.¹¹

The fifth explanatory model is generally constructivist and takes us to Gorbachev's 'new political thinking': one ought to interpret Russia's behaviors as a result of a new international consciousness, where the old schemes are rejected by Russia because of their inadequacy to the new real (or postulated) world order. Russia would simply not accept the outdated and dysfunctional Cold War scheme and accuses the West of resorting to unrealistic objectives and unfortunate methods that were supposed to improve the situation in a number of countries, especially in the Maghreb or in the Middle East. Last, but not least, the traditional neorealistic models (both in the defensive, structural version and in Mearsheimer's offensive scheme) should also be allowed for. Russia, even if considered a passive giant, is more concerned about maintaining the *status quo* than on revisionism; as such, it could have finally found out that it has lost the position of the regional power pole.¹²

Sakwa himself found these presuppositions wrong, arguing that *in fact in the nineteenth century, Russia became the 'gendarme' of Europe, and while Putin repudiates the country assuming such a role again, Russia has undoubtedly returned as an international conservative power. Maintenance of a specifically historically determined definition of the status quo is the essence of its neo-revisionism: a defense of traditional ideas of state sovereignty and of an internationalism structured by its commitment to the structures of the international system as it took shape after 1945*.¹³ Sakwa's position is probably closest, in its main intention, to Waltzian structural realism; however, *even the defensive realist*

⁹ Comp. F.W. Ermarth, *Russia's Strategic Culture: Past, Present and in Transition?*, Advanced Systems and Concepts Office of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, Washington, D.C. 2006, p. 3 ff. See also T. Graham, "The Sources of Russian Conduct," *The National Interest*, at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-sources-russian-conduct-17462>, 24 August 2016.

¹⁰ M. McFaul, *Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin*, Ithaca 2001.

¹¹ A. Polyakova, "U.S. and Russia in a New Cold War?," *The Brookings Institution*, 20 January 2019, at <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/are-u-s-and-russia-in-a-new-cold-war/>, July 29 2021.

¹² R. Sakwa, "Greater Russia: Is Moscow Out to Subvert the West?," *International Politics*, no. 58 (2021), pp. 334-362.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 356.

position has guarded against any reassertion of Russia's great power ambitions, hence the concern to ensure that Ukraine was distanced as far as possible from any putative Russian 'sphere of influence'.¹⁴

This modest list enumerates only the most important theoretical interpretations of the decision-making process during the Putin period. It could also be supplemented by strictly constructivist concepts, such as the old myth of Russia acting not only as a conservative power striving to restore Moscow's former role in the region, but also as the ethos holding together Eastern Orthodox Slavdom, known as Rus.¹⁵

All of the explanations given above are, in a way, justified. Their productivity as interpretative models can be examined only after an inductive analysis of basic statements, documents, and behaviors. This may reveal the major priorities of Russia's agenda in its foreign policy. Another important aspect of their possible confirmation is that they can only be studied in the context of the declarations and behaviors of other actors.

AMERICAN, EUROPEAN, AND CHINESE PERCEPTIONS

In the declarative sphere, some international players significantly changed the vector of their foreign policies. Donald Trump, with his *America first and only America first* mentality, actually began a period of apparent passivity in America's engagements. After Obama's spectacular actions, such as the liquidation of Osama Bin Laden, Trump and his team understood that the Middle East is, for various reasons, a problematic, rather than promising, area. Moreover, the painful truth that China is quickly becoming a real (if not the only) threat to America's leadership in the global perspective, motivated the acceleration of American withdrawal from the Middle East despite the previous 'ideational' steps taken in the region following the Arab Spring. The crucial point was the decision to end the endless war in Afghanistan and count on the Taliban's goodwill.

The new administration, despite presenting a different rhetoric: 'America is back', has turned out to be intent on consuming Trump's deal with the previous opponent, the Taliban. A closer look at President J.R. Biden's *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* issued in March 2021 leaves no doubts about the basic priorities of American foreign policy in the forthcoming years. As far as the infamous episode in Afghanistan, the document openly states that *The United States should not, and will not, engage in 'forever wars' that have cost thousands of lives and trillions of dollars. We will work to responsibly end America's longest war in Afghanistan while ensuring that Afghanistan does not again become a safe haven for terrorist attacks against the United States.*¹⁶ There is no word about securing or nurturing democracy in the Middle East, let alone Afghanistan.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 339.

¹⁵ Comp. R.N. Lunkin, "Tserkov' i vneshniaia politika: ot "russkogo mira" k globalizatsii," *Nauchnye vedomosti VGU, Seriya: Istorija. Politologiya*, vol. 45, no. 1 (2018), at <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/tserkov-i-vneshnyaya-politika-ot-russkogo-mira-k-globalizatsii/viewer>, 29 August 2021.

¹⁶ J.R. Biden, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, The White House, Washington, D.C. 2021, p. 15.

The American presence in the region is planned to be minimized and focused on preventing international terrorism and deterring Iranian aggression.

The *Guidance* perceives China and Russia as problematic states, with the Dragon described as *the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system* and the Bear as a state *determined to enhance its global influence and play a disruptive role on the world stage*.¹⁷ In other words, having listed the evil powers: religious (predominantly Muslim) extremism, as well as Chinese and Russian expansionism, the US is going to 'be back' but within the world of its allies. This philosophy boils down (more or less) to the conviction that there is no use exploiting resources for those nations who do not intend to follow the Western axiological standards. The US had better focus on its own infrastructure and on the security of its genuine friends to confront increasingly more assertive foreign actors.

Biden's administration, at the cost of losing its image, did exactly what it preached in March 2021: it decided to end the endless war and left behind three confrontational forces with the US (radical Islam, Chinese expansionism, and Russian ambitions in Eurasia) for a gradual increase in the divergence of its interests, a clash, and gradual bleeding out. The logic hidden behind this policy theoretically does not take into account the positive declarations of possible cooperation between Russia and China and both actors with the Taliban or other fundamentalist forces in the Middle East. However, it visibly rests upon the concept of the 'objective enemy' and counts on the impossibility of harmonizing the interests of Muslim radicalism and two neighboring expansionist forces in the long run. They have been invited to consume the fruit of expected multipolarity.

The EU (if it has one telephone number to call to) in a similar way, after a long period of new accessions, seems to have clashed with the wall. We can even see an opposite tendency: in losing the UK, it actually lost not only a key net contributor, but also political initiative. In Arnold Toynbee's categorization, today's Europe could be described as a civilization in the period of *withdrawal* (hoping for a return in an unpredictable moment). For some commentators, such as John Keiger, the European foreign policy has been too much based in soft power for years. The EU seems to be an old man deprived of even a pinch of readiness to take a risk. By having no stick, it turned out to conduct an inconsistent policy of sanctions toward Russia and visibly allowed powerful China to take the upper hand. There is no wonder that pessimistic remarks such as *Soft power is a fine thing, but hard power helps when the going gets tough; all mouth and no trousers' means humiliation sooner or later*¹⁸ appear more and more frequently in reference to the EU's conduct in its relations with the most powerful partners in Eurasia.

Contrary to that swan song, Xi Jinping's political line is much more assertive when compared to Deng Xiaoping's followers, who strictly obeyed the commandments expressed in his famous *24-Character Strategy: observe calmly, secure our position, cope with*

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 8.

¹⁸ J. Keiger, "The EU's Decline is Self-inflicted," *The Spectator*, 28 March 2021, at <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-eu-s-decline-is-self-inflicted>, 29 March 2021.

*affairs calmly, hide our capacities and bide our time, be good at maintaining a low profile, and never claim leadership.*¹⁹ After more than a decade, it has become clear that China is not only preoccupied with reintegrating territories around the PRC. Beijing still seeks new territories for economic expansion and a method for securing sufficient resources for its infinitely hungry economy. In this way, it is being put between Scylla and Charybdis: Central Asia with Afghanistan becomes a tasty morsel because of the raw materials hidden below the arid ground and its cheap labor potential. However, on the other hand, it causes problematic threats in the perspective of the Muslim resistance in Xinjiang. The Chinese reactions to America's withdrawal from Afghanistan were generally critical but reserved. What is usually emphasized is the fact that the White House might have become a victim of false information, that the intelligence misled Biden – thus making him overestimate the ability of the Afghan government and underestimate the strength of the Taliban's counterattack. As a result, in America's willingness to withdraw, he went further than the Trump administration and became an object of criticism.²⁰ The official Chinese narrative is that *the facts on the ground in Afghanistan proved that a foreign model could not be arbitrarily applied to a country with different cultural and historical conditions.*²¹ In other words, China is ready for cooperation if the other great powers 'mind their business' and limit their activities to their own civilizational niche.

DISAPPOINTED RUSSIA STRIKES BACK

After the honeymoon of the 1990s, Russia's attitude to the West, especially to the United States, became increasingly critical. The first scratches on the joyful image of harmony after the end of the Cold War appeared following the bombing of Yugoslavia by NATO, which caused resistance on the Russian side (it traditionally considered the Serbs to be proven allies). Nevertheless, Russia found itself in the position of an opponent to the West only in the Putin era. A symbolic declaration of this position was the Russian president's famous Munich speech, delivered on Feb 10, 2007. The Russian leader criticized the United States' monopolistic dominance in global relations, and its *almost uncontained hyper use of force in international relations*. The Munich Speech was also an occasion to reject the illusion of unipolarity and support the vision of a multipolar world order.²²

¹⁹ "Deng Xiaoping's 24-Character Strategy," Global Security, at <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/china/24-character.htm>, 27 July 2021.

²⁰ Comp. Zhao Minghao's analysis: *Zhàomíngào | lái yì lái, qù nán qù: Tǎlìbān yǔ měiguó de ēnyuàn jiǎn shǐ* (赵明昊, 来易来, 去难去: 塔利班与美国的恩怨简史, 清华大学战略与安全研究中心), at <http://ciss.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/zlyaq/3856>, 17 August 2021.

²¹ "China's Foreign Minister Slams «Hurried» U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan," Reuters, 17 August 2021, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-secretary-state-discussed-afghanistan-with-top-chinese-russian-diplomats-2021-08-16/>, 19 August 2021.

²² V.V. Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," Prezident Rossii, 10 February 2007, at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>, 17 September 2021.

The following years of Putin's presidency, broken up by an *intermezzo* when the post was officially occupied by Dmitry Medvedev, brought about an increasingly more assertive rhetoric, especially when it referred to Russian interests in the so-called 'near abroad'. Hannes Adomeit correctly stated that the Euro-Atlanticist interval in Russia's foreign policy (characterized by the promotion of the idea of a common space 'from Vancouver to Vladivostok') was relatively short and Russia soon returned to its Great Power policy, thus treating the post-Soviet area as neither an autonomous or independent part of the international system, but as a zone of Russia's privileged interests.²³ In other words, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, or Georgia, etc. are considered not as partners with equally important interests, but as elements of a *limitrophic* area²⁴, which merges with Russia's indigenous domain. This kind of perception seems to be the key to the conceptualization of Russia's international behavior after the year 2000.

THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE MAGHREB – A NEW GREAT GAME?

The time of turbulence in the Maghreb and the Middle East known as the Arab Spring changed quite a bit in the Muslim states that surround Europe in the Southeast. Not for the better, however, in the Russian context. The night old Libya was driven down, Russia lost a moody (but ultimately good) partner. The tradition of constructive relationships goes back to the 1970s when Anwar Sadat was accused of being an American servant and Gadhafi a supporter of the Soviets and terrorists. The destruction of the old regime, which was only one of many sudden changes in the region, blocked a part of Russia's market. It is no wonder that during a Russian-African summit in October 1919 Putin roughly criticized the Libyan affairs stating that the events in Libya were a result of the irresponsible actions of a number of states and expressed the hope that all countries would contribute to the restoration of Libyan statehood.²⁵

As Fasanotti correctly stated, Putin, after the Yeltsin era, when the previous Soviet-Libyan relationships lost their valor, agreed to cancel the \$4.5 billion Libyan debt to make a series of 'favorable' trade agreements worth 5-10 billion USD.²⁶ However, a closer look at the numbers puts the profitability of this conversion into question. The same could be said after a decade: even if we consider the fact that the Kremlin (with its apparent support for the UN-backed Government of National Accord) actually counted on the weapons market targeted at Haftar's forces, this trade appears to be a trailblazing effort rather than a long-term, promising business.

²³ H. Adomeit, "Russia and its Near Neighbourhood: Competition and Conflict with the EU," *Natolin Research Papers*, no. 4 (2011), p. 63.

²⁴ A term introduced to world geopolitics by Vadim Tsymbursky.

²⁵ "Putin nazval sobytiia v Livii rezul'tatom 'bezotvetstvennoi politiki riada gosudarstv,'" TASS Agency, 24 October 2019, at <https://tass.ru/politika/7040007>, 25 October 2019.

²⁶ E.S. Fasanotti, "Russia and Libya: A brief history of an on-again-off-again friendship," Brookings, 1 September 2016, at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/09/01/russia-and-libya-a-brief-history-of-an-on-again-off-again-friendship/>, 15 September 2021.

Overall, Russia has increased its involvement with the Maghreb and the Middle East. It has tried to improve relations with all partners, flirting with regional leaders, including the Egyptian president As-Sisi. During the Russian-African summit mentioned above, Putin stressed the importance of Russia's cooperation with Egypt and expressed the fact that this exchange makes 40% of the overall Russia's trade with African states.²⁷ It is quite clear, however, that Russian engagement is visible mainly in Syria, where, after Donald Trump's decision to abandon Syria's northern territory, the Kremlin has tried to present itself as a reliable partner against the backdrop of an unstable and generally unsuccessful American foreign policy.²⁸

A new occasion to criticize the chaos caused by careless American actions appeared after the turmoil, in the wake of the sudden withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan. The official Russian position on that hasty and tragic farewell was more than predictable. While enjoying the new situation, Russia verbally returned to assert its interests in the Middle East – leaving no doubt that the region will not be neglected in the country's foreign policy in coming years. As Putin declared during the meeting of Russia's Security Council: *We have many interests there, many friends and partners. This is a promising region for the development of our foreign economic relations, traditionally friendly for us. Let's discuss the current state of affairs and development prospects in this region of the world in the near future.*²⁹

After five months, while addressing the participants of the joint CSTO and Shanghai Cooperation Organization online summit (officially hosted in Dushanbe) on September 17, 2021, Putin said that the NATO presence in Afghanistan had left behind *an open Pandora's box*, full of problems related to terrorism, drug trafficking, organized crime, and religious extremism. Putin's rhetoric has adapted the Soviet dream: according to the Russian president, *for historical, socio-economic, ethnocultural and geographical reasons, this country should objectively be an integral part of the Eurasian space of security and cooperation.*³⁰ The Russian narrative concerning the policy of the Western powers in the Middle East is actually congruent with the Chinese one: the imposition of Western standards and political imperatives in a region of a completely different historical and cultural tradition is short-sighted, dogmatic, and ultimately harmful. As Putin declared in 2014: *Like a bull in a china shop, they came, stomped about, left – and that's it, under a good pretext, it seems, under good intentions. And everything falls apart: chaos and collapse.*³¹ In other words, the Russian diagnosis is that American interventions (esp. in Iraq and Afghanistan) or

²⁷ "Plenarnoe zasedanie ekonomicheskogo foruma Rossiia – Afrika," Prezident Rossii, 23 October 2019, at <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61880>, 12 July 2022.

²⁸ Comp. E. Rumer, A.S Weiss, "A Brief Guide to Russia's Return to the Middle East," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, at <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/24/brief-guide-to-russia-s-return-to-middle-east-pub-80134>, 24 October 2019.

²⁹ Interfax, "Putin otmetil, chto u Rossii 'mnogo interesov' na Blizhnem Vostoke," 12 March 2021, at <https://www.interfax.ru/world/755708>, 22 March 2021.

³⁰ See "Sovmestnoe zasedanie glav gosudarstv – chlenov ShOS i ODKB," Prezident Rossii, 17 September 2021, at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66707>, 21 October 2022.

³¹ "Putin sviazal sud'bu Iraka s prenebrezheniem traditsiiami," Interfax, 3 July 2014, at <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/383992>, 11 July 2022.

incentives (Libya, Egypt, Syria) brought about internal conflicts, an enormous emergence of religious radicalism, and destruction – rather than the implementation of democracy. This ultimately pushed a part of the population to leave their homeland and knock on the doors of other states.³²

Soon, the tone of Russian statements (although still anti-American) began to reveal an awareness regarding how complex the situation in the Middle East actually is and how much must be done to put the region in order. After the US and allied troops left Afghanistan, the most meaningful expression of Russia's opinion was a press conference held by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, on September 26, 2021. Lavrov had the opportunity to answer a number of questions about Russia's position in the wake of the US's most expressive withdrawal from the Middle East. The Russian stance on the point that the Taliban took power turned out to be more balanced than one might imagine. The minister expressed serious concerns about the possible spread of terrorism from Afghanistan to neighboring countries. He also stated that the condition for the international community's resignation from the sanctions must be the fulfillment of the promises made by the new regime. Furthermore, Russia is determined to cooperate with Turkey in Syria, as the Kremlin is concerned about the situation in Idlib. Lavrov's statements also revealed Russia's obvious discomfort regarding America's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran, which is perceived by the Kremlin as a strong Anti-American factor in the Middle East.³³

Before February 24, 2022 Russia seemed to be satisfied with the new opening of economic and political relations with its partners in the Middle East but it also acknowledged the region's instability, as the costs of installing friendly regimes and regulating new trade links seemed to be a tough burden. The image of the complexity of tasks that were supposed to be carried out in the conflicted area was not entirely balanced by the evident optimism in the official Russian rhetoric.

After attacking Ukraine, Moscow received an additional incentive to look for allies far from the Western world. The environment of the Arab states, skeptical of American policy, was perfect for this. Therefore, being under pressure from most countries, Putin sent a short message to the participants of the League of Arab States summit in November 2022. He noted that the process of forming a multipolar system of international relations based on the principles of equality, justice and respect for each other's legitimate interests is gaining momentum. He claimed that an increasingly significant role in this process is played by the Middle East and North African countries, whose total population is almost half a billion people.³⁴

³² "Lavrov zaiavil, chto RF zhdet otkaza SShA ot naviazvaniia drugim svoei modeli razvitiia," Interfax, 25 September 2021, at <https://www.interfax.ru/world/793605>, 11 October 2022.

³³ "Press-konferentsiia Ministra inostrannykh del Rossiiskoi Federatsii S.V. Lavrova po itogam nedeli vysokogo urovnia 76-i sessii General'noi Assamblei OON, N'iu-Iork, 25 sentiabri'a 2021 goda," MID Rossii, 25 September 2021, at https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/general_assembly/-/asset_publisher/lrzZMhfoyrUj/content/id/4867149, 27 September 2021.

³⁴ V.V. Putin, "Uchastnikam obshchearabskoi vstrechi na vysshem urovne," Prezident Rossii, 1 November 2022, at <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/letters/69724>, 14 November 2022.

Because of its inherent Anti-Americanism, a state under Russia's special care is Iran. Therefore, an intensification of activity in the relations between the two countries could be observed after the end of the Arab Spring, and even more so after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. What is striking about the Russian rhetoric in the time of the 'special operation' in Ukraine is the attack on the Western media, which would discredit countries that are at odds with Washington's policy. In this regard, the interests of Iran and Russia go hand in hand, as evidenced by the statement of the spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maria Zakharova, of February 13, 2023. In this statement, it was noted that Moscow and Tehran were building mutually beneficial cooperation without regard to the opinion of Westerners. According to Zakharova, deepening cooperation in all key areas is going to be continued in spite of any external pressure and sanctions. On the contrary, illegal restrictions partly even contribute to strengthening the positive trends in terms of the Russian-Iranian trade turnover: entrepreneurs discover new markets for themselves, and logistics, settlement and payment infrastructure are gradually being adjusted. All this *creates the prerequisites for further building up bilateral cooperation, primarily in the trade and economic sphere*.³⁵ In other words, we are dealing with an attempt to gradually build an alliance primarily based on economic relations. The priority in this cooperation is to build mutual exchange without regard to the opinions of the West. A special role in this process ought to be played by abandoning payments in Western currencies.

THE POST-SOVIET DEN

The fact that Russia is particularly concerned about its post-Soviet neighbors has not been a secret since the beginning of the new millennium. Even before Putin's presidency, the term 'near abroad' was in widespread use. The practical secession of Transnistria from Moldova (or the First Chechen War) provided evidence that the Kremlin, even in a situation of temporary weakness, would not ignore turbulence occurring close to its borders. After three decades, the presence of Russian soldiers in Transnistria and the Russian flag over Grozny has left no doubt about Moscow's fears and preoccupations.

Since the collapse of the USSR, it is Belarus that has been Russia's most faithful ally, despite its problematic but nearly indestructible leader. Lukashenka, however, has been accepted by the Kremlin as a partner due to his mental adherence to the Soviet civilizational paradigm and his conviction that the Belarusians are *Russians with a quality marker*.³⁶ In spite of mass demonstrations against the falsifications of the presidential election in 2020, Putin formally recognized the results and additionally expressed his doubts regarding European skepticism towards the elections. He argued that, since the

³⁵ "Otvét ofitsial'nogo predstavítel'ia MID Rossii M.V. Zakharovoi na vopros SMI o sotrudnichestve Rossii i Irana v usloviiakh sanktsionnogo davleniia Zapada," MID Rossii, 13 February 2023, at https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1853706/, 15 February 2023.

³⁶ "Lukashenko nazval belorusov 'russkimi so znakom kachestva,'" NTV, 18 January 2019, at <https://www.ntv.ru/novosti/2140127/>, 12 September 2021.

OSCE observers did not appear to monitor the elections, the position of European partners might have been decided on beforehand. The Kremlin also supported Lukashenka's suggested changes to the Belarusian constitution.³⁷ The Kremlin's approval of Lukashenka is inextricably linked to the pressure for closer integration within the Union State (specifically in the areas of financial, trade, and security policies). This is commonly perceived in the international arena (not only in the West) as an attempt by Russia to finally absorb Belarus. However, the Kremlin's official rhetoric (although still supportive of the regime and enthusiastic about the prospects of future integration) was, for a long time, quite skeptical about exaggerating the real results of the Sep 2021 negotiations between Moscow and Minsk.³⁸ This was probably due to Lukashenka's conceptual divergence: by intending to make up for the Western sanctions thanks to Russian openness, he tried to avoid losing control of his country.

Russia's nearly unconditional support for Lukashenka cannot be explained by purely economic factors. Belarus has long benefited from the mutual opening of the markets and the ability to export its chemicals, agricultural machines, and processed fuel to the Russian Federation. The major benefit, however, consists in the very low oil and gas prices offered by 'the bigger brother' in exchange for Belarus's geopolitical adherence, consequentially making the trade's profitability questionable.

The Belarusian president, despite the participation of the Republic of Belarus in the CSTO and various forms of integration of the two countries, for years avoided establishing Russian bases or groupings on the territory of his country. However, after the protests related to the 2020 presidential election, he found himself isolated, finding support only in authoritarian states such as Russia and China. This meant that, trying to avoid the tragic suspension of economic support, he decided to make concessions and, although the Belarusian forces did not support the Russian army in the invasion of Ukraine, he made the country's territory available for the needs of the Kremlin. At the end of February 2022, Russian troops launched an attack from Belarus to northern Ukraine, including the Kiev region. Russian units also fired rockets at Ukrainian cities from Belarus, including civilian objects. In early October, Lukashenka even announced the creation of a regional grouping of troops in Belarus together with Russia. Therefore, Russian forces with a significant amount of equipment were located on the territory of this country, and newly recruited reservists were trained.

In January 2023 minister Lavrov visited Minsk and in the official statement of the ministry one can read about the common position on such things as joint resistance towards Western 'cancellation culture' or illegal sanctions, further intensification of integrative processes, strengthening cooperation in the field of foreign policy planning,

³⁷ "Putin: My iskhodim iz togo, chto vybory v Belarusi sostoialis," Rossijskaja gazeta, 29 August 2020, at <https://rg.ru/2020/08/29/putin-my-ishodim-iz-togo-chto-vybory-v-belarusi-sostoialis.html>, 21 September 2021. See also "Putin usomnilsia v chestnosti nesoglasnykh s itogami vyborov v Belorussii," RBK, 21 September 2021, at <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/29/08/2020/5f4a17c99a794763b60152bf>, 29 September 2021.

³⁸ "V Kremle prokommentirovali soobshcheniia ob integratsii Rossii i Belorussii," RIA Novosti, 16 September 2021, at <https://ria.ru/20190916/1558730877.html>, 22 November 2021.

coordination of actions in relation to the EU, NATO and the Council of Europe, joint activities in the OSCE, interaction in multilateral platforms in the field of arms control and countering the politicization of international organizations.³⁹

The fact that Belarus is of extraordinary importance for Russian foreign policy was additionally signaled on February 14, 2022 (only ten days before the start of the 'special operation' in Ukraine), when Boris Gryzlov, one of Putin's most trusted people, the long-time chairman of United Russia, the 'party of power', unexpectedly became the ambassador to this country. In February 2023 Gryzlov published an article, where he openly outlined Russia's position on the conflict. While expressing his appreciation for the peace initiative of the President of Belarus, he also regretted the allegedly instrumental treatment of the Minsk agreements by Western states, which, according to Angela Merkel's suggestion, were only meant to give Ukraine time to assemble the appropriate forces. He also stated that Russia demanded the same as before, i.e. not to expand NATO to the east and to limit NATO infrastructure to the state from 1997. Gryzlov's statement is dominated by the Kremlin's determination to lead the special military operation to a successful conclusion for only its success can ensure lasting peace.⁴⁰

Other partners from the previous red empire caused much more trouble to Russian leaders. The reasons were diverse but the predominant factor lay in the conflicts between states, where the ethnic boundaries were incongruent with the map that was drawn in the Soviet time. Russian foreign ministry issued a number of statements in which it „expressed concern” about the escalation of conflicts in the region, while offering its own mediation in the peaceful resolution of disputes. This activity concerned, among others, hot spots such as the Azeri-Armenian conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh or the Tajik-Kyrgyz borderland.⁴¹ The declared fears of the Russians and their willingness to participate in conflict resolution resulted mainly from the weakening role of the Russian Federation as a patron of smaller partners in the Caucasus and Central Asia. This is evidenced, for example, by the Armenian government's doubts about the effectiveness of Russian protection due to the growing influence of Moscow's Azeris.

As a slightly further and much smaller partner in the 'near abroad' Moldova remains a country held at a much greater distance in the verbal sphere. After the great geopolitical shift embodied in the American withdrawal from the Middle East Russia's policy

³⁹ “O rabochem vizite Ministra inostrannykh del Rossiiskoi Federatsii S.V. Lavrova v Respubliku Belarus,” MID Rossii, 19 January 2023, at https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1848859/, 12 February 2023.

⁴⁰ B.V. Gryzlov, “«Upushchennyi mir»: stat'ia Borisa Gryzlova v «Rossiiskoi gazete»,” Posol'stvo Rossiiskoi Federatsii v Respublike Belarus', 22 February 2023, at https://belarus.mid.ru/ru/press-centre/news/upushchennyi_mir_statya_borisa_gryzlova_v_rossiyskoy_gazete/, 24 February 2023.

⁴¹ See “Zaiavlenie MID Rossii v sviazi s obostreniem situatsii v zone nagorno-karabakhskogo konfliktika,” MID Rossii, 4 August 2022, at https://mid.ru/ru/press_service/spokesman/official_statement/1825030/, 10 October 2022; “Zaiavlenie MID Rossii v sviazi s eskalatsiei napriazhennosti mezhdu Azerbaidzhanom i Armeniei,” MID Rossii, 13 September 2022, at https://mid.ru/ru/press_service/spokesman/official_statement/1829629/, 10 October 2022; “Zaiavlenie MID Rossii v sviazi s situatsiei na kirgizsko-tadzhikskoi granitse,” MID Rossii, 16 September 2022, at https://mid.ru/ru/press_service/spokesman/official_statement/1830048/, 10 October 2022.

toward Chişinău has not exhibited any major changes. The Kremlin traditionally supported the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova with Igor Dodon at the helm. During the 2020 presidential campaign in Moldova, Putin made it clear that it would not be possible for that country to cut itself off from Russia due to the lack of alternative markets for its products, especially for Moldovan wines.⁴² With his party, Dodon was a much more acceptable partner for Russia, if only because of the fact that this team paved the way for the re-recognition of the Russian language as a means of inter-ethnic communication in the country, in addition to the official Moldovan language.

After their opponent, pro-Western Maia Sandu's, success in the presidential elections, the Russian president sent her a note of congratulation on her electoral victory. However, in the following months, the apparent divergence of views on topics of Russian interest resurfaced. One of these eternal problems is the presence of Russian peacekeeping troops in Transnistria. In November 2020, Sandu demanded that they be pulled out and replaced with European observers. In December 2020, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov declared Russia's unwillingness to accept the proposal. During a press conference on December 17, Putin said that, in general, Russia is in favor of withdrawing the forces as soon as *the appropriate situation is ripe*. He demanded that a civilized dialogue be established between Transnistria and the main part of Moldova first, which was about to happen during president Voronin's term. However, the pressure from Western powers spoiled the communication process and *the solution of the Transnistrian issue was postponed indefinitely*.⁴³

In the winter of 2023, Moldovan-Russian relations became particularly tense when the President of Moldova, Maia Sandu, made known in her speech about alleged Russian plans to overthrow her government. In response, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued statements in which it firmly denies the existence of such intentions, and also accuses Kiev of stoking tension by spreading false anti-Russian information. A spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry called on the Moldovan authorities not to give in to provocations from the outside and to act for the benefit of their own society.⁴⁴ Zakharova's tone became increasingly critical. Just four days after addressing the rumors of the alleged coup d'état, assessing the new Moldovan government with Dorin Recean at the helm, the spokeswoman stated that Russia had repeatedly said that the Western curators of the current leadership of Moldova are confidently leading the country along the path of Ukraine and the Baltic states. She pointed to *the same templates which are applied in the process: a ban on objectionable media, persecution of*

⁴² "Putin rasskazal o zavisimosti ekonomiki Moldavii ot Rossii," RIA Novosti, 22 October 2020, at <https://ria.ru/20201022/moldaviya-1581081629.html>, 22 November 2022.

⁴³ "Putin otvetil na trebovanie «grazhdanki Rumynii» Maii Sandu vyvesti rossiiskikh mirotvortsev iz Pridnestrov'ia, Rubaltic, 17 December 2020, at <https://www.rubaltic.ru/news/17122020-putin-otvetil-na-trebovanie-grazhdanki-rumynii-mayi-sandu-vyvesti-rossiyskikh-mirotvortsev-iz-pridne/>, 12 April 2022.

⁴⁴ "Kommentarii ofitsial'nogo predstaviteli'a MID Rossii M.V.Zakharovoi v sviazi s antirossiiskimi vyzkazyvaniiami rukovodstva Moldavii," MID Rossii, 14 February 2023, at https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1853931/, 24 February 2023.

*political opponents, restriction of the scope of the use of the Russian language, attempts to falsify common history, artificial restriction of political, trade, economic and humanitarian contacts with Russia, a departure from a neutral status, which is a guarantee of sovereignty, stability and the security of the republic.*⁴⁵

THE SPECIAL CASE OF 'ANTI-RUSSIA'

However, both the political reality and the tone of statements made by Russian officials about Moldova leave no doubt that this small country is of secondary importance to Russian foreign policy. It is Ukraine (rather than Moldova) that causes real trouble for the Kremlin. It has long been obvious that without this country, the functioning of a well-constructed autarkic market in the post-Soviet area is hardly possible. The reaction of the Ukrainian people to Russia's re-unification efforts is very different from the much friendlier and understanding position represented by Belarusians. The main problem that underlay the controversy was the historical, mental, and communicational diversification of Ukraine's population. The Southern and Eastern factions of the country speak predominantly Russian and seemed to be linked to the so-called 'Russian World', rather than to the Ukrainian national idea. It is, in general terms, a clash of a nationalistic European identity with a 'unique', non-Western Eurasian civilization.

The determination of the 'Europe-oriented nationalists' led to two massive acts of opposition, which ultimately proved humiliating for Russia. The first was the Orange Revolution, which opposed the falsification of the results of the 2004 presidential election, when the leader of the pro-Russian Party of Regions, Viktor Yanukovich, was declared the winner. Mass demonstrations led to a repeat of the elections, wherein the leader of the pro-European (and nationally oriented) 'Our Ukraine' bloc triumphed. The second instance was the so-called 'Euromaidan', which was an even more serious and long-lasting rebellion conducted in response to the point that Yanukovich, who was re-elected president in 2010, ultimately postponed the signing of the association agreement with the European Union in November 2014, shortly after conducting negotiations with Putin.

In both cases, the public opinion of one faction of society became the foundation for a fundamental shift in Ukraine's foreign and domestic policy. This meant, of course, an analogous response in the Russian *Realpolitik*, as well as in the Kremlin's official rhetoric. The Euromaidan camp's assumption to power, which installed Petro Poroshenko as president in exchange for Yanukovich, who, as was to be expected, fled the country and found refuge in Russia, prompted the Kremlin to undertake an action, unprecedented at the time, of annexing Crimea. Interpretations of this act vary, but generally come down to three explanatory concepts:

⁴⁵ "Otvét ofitsial'nogo predstaviteli'a MID Rossii M.V. Zakharovoi na vopros SMI o novom Pravitel'stve Respubliki Moldova," MID Rossii, 18 February 2023, at https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1854786/, 24 February 2023.

1. Cynical realists most frequently emphasized Russia's concerns about the possible termination of the Kharkiv Pact (which extended the Russian lease on naval facilities in Crimea until 2042)⁴⁶ and, consequently, the replacement of Russian ships with American vessels in the immediate vicinity of Russian borders. The importance of Sevastopol for Russia's security is emphasized by some authors (such as Sharyl Cross) who argued that *Sevastopol provides Russia ice-free port access year-round, and the means to project maritime and other military and commercial assets into the Balkans, the Mediterranean and the Middle East*.⁴⁷ This kind of attitude probably exaggerates the importance of the location, since passing the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles is not only very unlikely for Russian vessels because of Turkey's membership in NATO, but also due to the purely practical impossibility of strategic ships of greater size passing through the straits.
2. According to some opinions, it is necessary to take into account the possibility that Russia's reaction was actually a response to the unexpected sequence of events and thereby quite spontaneous,⁴⁸ including, however, a socio-technological aspect. In other words, the Kremlin simply could not put up with the collapse of the pro-Russian (and legally elected) administration. At the same time, Putin's team felt, in a way, obliged to show determination and faithfulness to Russia's inalienable interests. The story of the Crimea was needed by the Kremlin as a small victorious war, thus distracting the attention of the population from its own economic difficulties.⁴⁹
3. The most holistic and pessimistic (and, as it turned out, most accurate) approach assumed that the Crimean performance was only an element of a broader plan that provides for the annexation of other Ukrainian territories. A military action that would repeat the Crimean scenario is rarely taken into account seriously. However, as Vladimir Sokor (one of the authors with the most critical look at Russia's position in the international system) stated: *Russia will not any time soon annex the 'DPR-LPR' outright, nor officially recognize them, nor award them some kind of status. Staging Russian elections and other political events there demonstrate to the remaining populace there that it belongs to Russia de facto*.⁵⁰ Even this opinion turned out to be too moderate; the recent history wrote its own, much more dramatic scenario.

⁴⁶ *Federal'nyi zakon ot 02.04.2014 № 38-FZ "O prekrashchenii deistviia soglasheii, kasaiushchikhsia prebyvaniia Chernomorskogo flota Rossiiskoi Federatsii na territorii Ukrainy,"* 31 March 2014, at <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201404020002?index=0&RangeSize=%D0%92%D1%81%D0%B5#print>, 9 April 2022.

⁴⁷ S. Cross, "NATO – Russia Security Challenges in the Aftermath of Ukraine Conflict. Managing Black Sea Security and Beyond," in P. Manoli (ed.), *Aftermath of the Ukrainian Crisis*, London–New York 2017, pp. 33-60.

⁴⁸ Comp. D. Treisman, "Why Putin Took Crimea. The Gambler in the Kremlin," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 95, no. 3 (2016), pp. 48 ff.

⁴⁹ Comp. D. Travin, "Zachem byl nuzhen Donbass?," *Novai'a Gazeta*, 19 October 2015, at <http://novayagazeta.spb.ru/articles/9988/>, 15 September 2021.

⁵⁰ V. Sokor, "Russian Elections in Ukraine's Donbas: Annexing People Before Annexing Territory," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 18, no. 145 (2021), at <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-elections-in-ukraines-donbas-annexing-people-before-annexing-territory/>, 23 September 2021.

The Kremlin was aware of the temporary consequences Russia is forced to endure because of its violation of international law. However, as Putin stated at the Russian Security Council's meeting on July 3, 2021, his country *does not trade with its sovereignty*. The key idea was that Russia would never yield to any pressure from Western countries. On the contrary, it intends to use the sanctions to its advantage and extract the maximum profit available from them.⁵¹

Russia's predominant narrative about the Ukrainian question does not seem to be entirely coherent. Officially, Ukrainian statehood was not questioned. However, the presence of certain territories within the contemporary Republic of Ukraine's borders was being brought under discussion. On June 21, 2017, during a session of the Valdai Discussion Club, the Russian president made a historical flashback and recalled that the territories of Eastern Ukraine were artificially attached to the newly formed Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic by the Bolsheviks (as they wanted to increase the share of the proletariat in the general population). On the other hand, Crimea, due to Khrushchev's voluntarism, became a part of the Ukrainian SSR in 1954 in a way that violated even the Soviet legislation (the transfer was not approved by the Supreme Soviet of either of the two union republics). Putin did not fail to recall that the western section of today's Ukraine (with Lviv) was part of Poland, which caused a change in its post-war borders, and thus the mass displacement of Germans.⁵²

The transfer of Crimea to Russia was and still is treated by the Kremlin as a *fait accompli*; it refuses to even put forth the topic for discussion. The lack of recognition from Western powers was obviously expected, but the Turkish position towards the Crimean question could disappoint the Kremlin. After the Turkish president (Recep Erdoğan) clearly stated at the 76th ordinary session of the UN's General Assembly that Turkey *attached great importance to the protection of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, including the territory of Crimea, the accession of which it did not recognize*, he became the subject of mass criticism from the Russian media, whose 'independent status' is commonly known. This is seen, for example, in Gevorg Mirzayan's (associate professor at the Department of Political Science at the Financial University Under the Government of the Russian Federation) commentary, from which we can learn that Erdoğan had overplayed his cards at the time and so risked potential difficulties in concluding a new contract for the supply of gas to Turkey in the following autumn. Nevertheless, Russia expressed understanding toward the Turkish position, since Erdoğan perceived Crimea as part of the 'Turkish World'.⁵³ In this way, Russian rhetoric, by making a certain concession, did not destroy the mainstream of the

⁵¹ "Putin: svoim suverenitetom ne torguem," Vesti, 3 July 2015, at <https://www.vesti.ru/article/1745116>, 20 September 2022.

⁵² "Zasedanie Mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba «Valdaï»,» Prezident Rossii, 24 October 2014, at <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860>, 21 June 2017.

⁵³ G. Mirzayan, "Turtsiia zaigralas'?" Russia Today, 23 September 2021, at https://russian.rt.com/opinion/910424-mirzayan-krym-vybory-erdogan-oon?utm_medium=referral&utm_source=lentainform&utm_campaign=russian.rt.com&utm_term=1280454&utm_content=9640344, 29 September 2021.

Kremlin's narrative: the responsibility of the Russian Federation is for the fate of the Turkish community's counterpart in the North, the Russian World.

The other face of Russia's narrative about Ukraine and the East European part of the Russian World is not turned towards which Ukrainian territories to absorb next (in a more or less violent and illegal way), but towards the country as a whole. From the 'sentimental' perspective, the Russian elite (and a vast part of the population) actually believes that Kiev is the mother city of the Orthodox Rus and that the Russian roots go back to the Kievan Duchy. That is why Ukraine, for all intents and purposes, is an integral part of the Russian World.⁵⁴

Putin, being aware of these sentiments, made a step forward and in July 2021 repeated his well-known conviction that Russians and Ukrainians are one nation. This time, his narrative took the shape of an officially published essay. Putin explained that the Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are descendants of the Old Rus (Drevnââ Rus'), the largest state of medieval Europe. Putin combined this argument with the thesis that the fragmentation of Russia was caused by the fatal weakening of the central government. It was this factor that led to the subjugation of the Ruthenian principalities to foreign nations and the destruction of the Russian nation's unity.⁵⁵ Note that he did not even use the commonly accepted term 'Kievan Rus.' In this way, Putin avoided obvious associations with the Russophobic idea that the real Rus has always been Kievan and European, whereas Russia is a Eurasian, post-Mongol monster. The general conclusion of this narrative is that Ukrainians are a kindred people, a kind of Russian group, whereas Ukraine in the shape it has recently taken is an anti-Russian project.

As Kondratenko correctly stated, Russia perceived Ukraine as a failed state, which should be reunited with the Orthodox Slavdom. The only possible way for Ukraine to preserve its territorial unity is through federalization, with a great deal of autonomy given to the Russian-speaking territories. These territorial units could be a *lever of pressure on Kyiv in case of unfair policy toward Russia*. Such a project actually boils down to Finlandization, with ultimately no hope to access NATO.⁵⁶ The possible refusal to save integrity at the expense of sovereignty may lead to a 'limited intervention', aiming at blood-letting, a final disgrace, and cumulating in the removal of the pro-Western authorities"⁵⁷

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 surprised many, but in fact the Kremlin's steps could be logically concluded from what had been said so far. Moreover, two days before the invasion in a statement concerning the situation in Ukraine Russia's foreign ministry edited a statement, in which Moscow explained a kind of 'immediate priorities' referring to its attitude towards Kiev. According to the Ministry *Ukraine*

⁵⁴ Comp. E. Turkina, "Russia-Ukraine Crisis: Value-Based and Generational Perspective," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2015), p. 185 ff.

⁵⁵ "Stat'ia Vladimira Putina «Ob istoricheskom edinstve russkikh i ukrainsev»,» Prezident Rossii, 12 July 2021, at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>, 19 September 2022.

⁵⁶ O. Kondratenko, "Ukraine as a Geopolitical Priority of the Russian Federation," *Historia i Polityka*, vol. 16, no. 23 (2016), p. 103.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

*plunged deeper into chaos and the flywheel of Russophobia began to spin more and more actively. Kyiv launched a massive offensive against the Russian language, grossly violating the linguistic, educational and cultural rights of tens of millions of Russian-speaking citizens. A church schism was provoked; moreover, a struggle was launched against the historical past of the country. Attempts to falsify history have reached unprecedented proportions – Nazi collaborators and henchmen are elevated to the rank of heroes of Ukraine. As Russian diplomats became objects of aggressive actions and even received threats of physical violence the first priority, according to the Ministry is to take care of Russian diplomats and employees of the Embassy and Consulates General. To protect their lives and safety, the Russian leadership decided to evacuate the personnel of Russian foreign missions in Ukraine.*⁵⁸ The tone of the statement left no doubt about Russia's policy toward Ukraine in the following days.

After the attack Russian foreign ministry as well as other institutions expressed multiple opinions about the events and Russia's priorities concerning her relations with Ukraine. In the beginning the purport of official statements did not differ a lot from the one presented above. However, even in the presidential address initiating the 'special military operation in Ukraine' one could see the most radical geopolitical position. Putin openly stated that Russia could no longer stand by as NATO tried to expand and bring its infrastructure closer to Russia's borders. It has already learned a lesson in its history. The Soviet Union tried to avert the war threat from Nazi Germany, but the policy of delay and withdrawal did not do any good and the state paid for it with millions of victims in the first months of the war. Another lesson was the crisis caused by the weakening of political power in the last years of the USSR and in the 1990s, which was brazenly used by Western states, supporting the centrifugal forces in Russia. The West bombed Belgrade and then unjustifiably used military force in Iraq, Libya and Syria. Therefore, Russia cannot afford to repeat this scenario and must respond to the attempts of the 'empire of lies', i.e. the United States and its allies. Russia's priority at the moment must be to protect the population of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and remove the threat from its borders.⁵⁹

In his February address to the Federal Assembly, A.D. 2023 Putin drew attention to one more priority of a positive nature, namely the need for cultural national revival of the territories seized as a result of annexation. As he stated, the development of the cultural sphere will become one of the priorities for the revival of peaceful life in Donbass and 'Novorossiya' (the Southeastern provinces of Ukraine; territories conquered by Russia as a result of the war with Turkey in the 18th century, in the Middle Ages being part of the Horde, and after its fall – of the Crimean Khanate; the Bolshevik authorities incorporated these lands into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic as they were dominated by ethnically Ukrainian farmers). As he said, *it will be necessary to*

⁵⁸ "Zaiavleniye MID Rossii," MID Rossii, 22 February 2022, at https://mid.ru/ru/press_service/spokesman/official_statement/1800036, 24 February 2022.

⁵⁹ "Obrashcheniye Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii," Prezident Rossii, 24 February 2022, at <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>, 25 February 2023.

*restore, repair and equip hundreds of cultural institutions, including museum funds and buildings, something that gives people the opportunity to feel the relationship between the past and the present, connect it with the future, feel belonging to a single cultural, historical, educational space of centuries-old, great Russia.*⁶⁰

However, the emergence of the context of international opinion, most often critical of Russia's actions, has also created some opportunities. A good example is the seemingly balanced position of China, which can be compared to the Russian rhetoric in relation to conflicts in the Middle East, and in the post-Soviet area. As the Chinese secretly feared of the weakening, and even more so the collapse of the authoritarian power in Russia, they called for a diplomatic settlement of the dispute *without the interference of third parties* in the conflict. The Kremlin picked up on these motives and added its own expectations, which were much further away from neutrality. According to a statement of Russia's foreign ministry, Russia is open to achieving the goals of the military operation through political and diplomatic means. This, however, implies the cessation of supplies of Western weapons and mercenaries to Ukraine and the return of Ukraine to a neutral non-aligned status as well as *the recognition of new territorial realities that have developed as a result of the realization of the right of peoples to self-determination, demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine*⁶¹. Shortly speaking, Russia's determination to subordinate Ukraine, depriving it of the right to determine its own geopolitical future, was clearly expressed leaving no doubt about Russia's priorities in the 'near abroad'.

THE DOCTRINAL FACTOR

In shaping the narrative of the foreign policy model, a certain role may be played by impactful political doctrines that relate to the pressure of current problems. The idea of a great Russian nation composed of three regional branches (Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian) is by no means an invention of the Kremlin but rather goes back to the Pan-Slavic doctrine of the late 19th century. The doctrine of the triune Russian nation was later put forward by A.I. Solzhenitsyn during the Soviet period. In his famous essay *Rebuilding Russia (Kak nam obustroit' Rossiiu)*, the Nobel Prize winner rejected the concept of three separate, East Slavic nations and appealed for unity.⁶² That is why one should not treat Vladimir Putin's essay on the unity of Russians and Ukrainians as an act of extraordinary expansionism. He simply expressed a popular opinion, one that is common to most Russians. In Ukraine, however, the surveys present different

⁶⁰ "Poslanie Prezidenta Federal'nomu Sobraniuu," Prezident Rossii, 21 February 2023, at <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565>, 24 February 2023.

⁶¹ "Kommentarii ofitsial'nogo predstavitelia MID Rossii M.V. Zakharovoï v sviazi s publikatsiei MID KNR «Pozitsii Kitaia po politicheskomu uregulirovaniuu ukrainskogo krizisa»,» MID Rossii, 24 February 2023, at https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1855483/, 25 February 2023.

⁶² A.I. Solzhenitsyn, *Slovo k ukrainsam i bielorusam* [fragment of his *Kak nam obustroit' Rossiju*], Moscow 1990, at <https://patryot2010.livejournal.com/307427.html>, 5 October 2021.

tendencies: according to Rating Group, only 41% of the respondents agreed with Putin, whereas 55% rejected his argument.⁶³

Since at least the beginning of the new millennium, attention has been paid to the controversial role of neo-Eurasianism, another aggressive doctrine, which preaches the necessity of 'reuniting' Russia. So far, however, it is not entirely clear whether it is actually the dominant source of influence or if it was shaped as a radical concept on the margins of real politics. It is rather easy to list a few determinants of the Kremlin's contemporary policy which are surprisingly in-line with the postulates raised by leading neo-Eurasianists, such as Aleksandr Dugin and Valerii Korovin:

- absolute hostility towards the Atlantic structures, especially the United States;
- an attempt to create a common front with China and Iran in line with the idea: 'The Rest Against the West';
- support for those forces weakening the West from the inside;
- willingness to cooperate with so-called 'Continental' Germany as a counterweight to the US;⁶⁴
- the conviction that the Ukrainian state is an American project, which ultimately needs to be terminated.⁶⁵

Some analysts, such as Anton Barbashin and Hannah Thoburn, support the belief that Eurasianism can be treated as the main inspiration for Kremlin policymakers, a belief which is (to some extent) confirmed by Russian political practice.⁶⁶ However, others, with Anton Shekhovtsov at the helm, realize that Dugin's esotericism and the Kremlin's line have begun to fall apart.⁶⁷ What seems most likely is some interaction between the two. Neo-Eurasianists were supported by sponsors set in the military sector. The influence of the doctrine was favorable to the anti-American line chosen by the Putin camp. On the other hand, neo-Eurasianism was modified as the Kremlin's policy progressed after 2000.

There are also some less intellectualistic and more 'pro-social' external manifestations of support for the Kremlin's assertive and confrontational line. An example of this is the government camp's tacit acceptance of the Just Russia (Справедливая Россия) party's strengthening by a nationalistic and socially-oriented group in the form of the 'For Truth' movement, led by well-known writer and activist, Zakhar Prilepin. He proclaims the perniciousness of pro-Western tendencies in Russia and the naturalness of Russian expansionism. As the faction program has claimed: *We live in a world where*

⁶³ See "Opros: 41% ukraintsev schitaiut sebja edinyim narodom s rossiianami, 55% s etim ne soglasny," BBC News, 27 July 2021, at <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-57984025>, based on <http://ratinggroup.ua/>.

⁶⁴ A.G. Dugin, *Osnovy geopolitiki*, 11 July 2021, at <http://my.arcto.ru/public/osnovygeo/7rest.htm>, 5 October 2021.

⁶⁵ V. Korovin, *Koniets proyekta 'Ukraina'*, Moscow–St. Petersburg 2015, pp. 37 ff., 71 ff.

⁶⁶ A. Barbashin, H. Thoburn, "Putin's Brain: Alexander Dugin and the Philosophy Behind Putin's Invasion of Crimea," *Foreign Affairs*, 31 March 2014, at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-03-31/putins-brain>, 29 July 2021.

⁶⁷ A. Shekhovtsov, "Putin's Brain?," *New Eastern Europe*, no. 4(13) (2014), pp. 72-79.

*about forty wars are fought today. All those who assure us that in the 21st century you have to solve problems in a civilized way only want our surrender. We give the concept of 'civilized' one meaning: everything that contributes to the preservation, strengthening and expansion of the Russian civilization is civilized.*⁶⁸

CONCLUSION

From the analysis above, we can easily draw the conclusion that the purport of Russian rhetoric leaves no doubt that:

1. Russia (by all means) seeks to reunify several fragments of the post-Soviet area which the Kremlin considers to be an integral part of the Russian World and to securely subordinate the 'outer crescent' around this territory. Ukraine is the most important (but at the same time, the most problematic) partner in this area. The Kremlin, still believing in the necessity of bringing all 'brothers' together, for a long time conducted a somewhat divergent, and thereby inconsistent, policy toward Kiev. By treating Southern and Eastern Ukraine as inalienably Russian, the Kremlin has made an effort to cut them off from Ukraine. In reuniting them with Russia *de facto*, Putin's team has effectively scrubbed Ukraine from Russia's fifth column, the only hope of achieving the most important goal: regaining almost all of Ukraine, including Kiev – the mother of East Slavic and Orthodox cities. The brutal invasion in February 2022 only strengthened these tendencies, demolishing Eastern Ukraine but also turning the vast majority of the Ukrainian nation against the idea of brotherhood between Russians and Ukrainians.
2. That is why the interests of Russia (as perceived by the Kremlin and the majority of the intellectual elite) unavoidably clash with the US and EU's East European policy. Both the Western partners and Russia find Eastern Europe as part of their own domain. The other territories of the post-Soviet area do not provoke such emotions: they are either entirely European (the Baltic states), Asian (Central Asia republics), or problematic and therefore more irritating than attractive (the permanently conflicted Caucasus area).
3. Russia's return to the Middle East is an act of 'geopolitical necessity' rather than a preferred vector of interest. The real objectives are concentrated on the 'near abroad'. Russia's new presence in Syria and dynamic diplomatic activities aim to perpetuate the vision of a multipolar world order.

The Kremlin's preoccupation with Greater Russia (which is quite logical, taking into account the fact that the other territories are culturally different and unable to provide a reasonable portion of a devoted or, at least, friendly population) made the originally intended good relations with the West quite problematic. To counterbalance the traditional Cold War enemy, Russia was forced to pretend that it perceived the

⁶⁸ "Predvybornaia programma politicheskoi partii «ZA PRAVDU»,» 6 July 2020, at <https://zapravdu.org/2020/07/06/predvybornaya-programma-politicheskoy-partii-za-pravdu/>, 29 July 2021.

dynamically developing China as a promising strategic partner. These officially friendly relationships embraced some limited military cooperation as well. Good relations with this country seemed to be justified by opinion polls, where the PRC (indicated by 38% of respondents) took the second position after Belarus (58%). On the other hand, the military doctrines of the state demonstrate an increasing hostility toward the US and its allies (in June 2021, 66% of Levada's respondents declared their perception of the United States as a hostile country).⁶⁹ In the situation of war in Ukraine the numbers became even more evident: according to a poll in Aug 2022 more than a half of Russian citizens believed that Russia had the strongest relationship with China (55%), which was the highest figure for the entire observation period (+10 p.p. since 2019). The second place with a small margin was taken by Belarus (49%) with India occupying the third position (22% vs. 10% in 2019), displacing Kazakhstan from the top three.⁷⁰ In other words, China, which is an international actor 'with no axiological obsessions', offers substantial exchange without even a trace of sanctions, as well as similar anti-American intentions.

These conclusions, which do not differ from the spirit of many other studies on our topic, and which give a general image of Russian objectives, do not necessarily explain the basic priorities of this policy. First of all, it is necessary to remember that the Kremlin's *Realpolitik* is exploited by the West to discredit Russia and open the European East for Western expansion. Russian foreign policy in the 'near abroad', especially after February 24, 2022, has resulted in severe sanctions and built a very unfavorable atmosphere around investing in Russia and concluding agreements with the 'angry bear'. It would be quite naive to suspect Putin's team of a lack of knowledge regarding the realities of the international system or about the condition of Russia's economy. The problem, then, is situated only partially in its limited awareness. It is much more a question of different priorities. As Andrei Illarionov correctly states, Putin's priorities are not the same as in the EU or in the US. It is not a struggle for the well-being and security of the citizens, but rather a game in which the stake is to recreate the empire with a (not necessarily) national face and to strengthen the entire friendly circle by promoting fidelity in a very decisive way that is related to the enhancement of personal wealth.⁷¹ In other words, Russia's perception is conditioned by its geopolitical obsession: the Kremlin and a substantial part of the Russian elite are ready to sacrifice well-being to secure their territorial niche.

Russia does not seem to be successful in trying to counterbalance the policies of the West, as it is experiencing growing limitations in international trade and reliable

⁶⁹ "Glavnye «druzhestvennyye» i «nedruzhestvennyie» strany», Analiticheskiy Centr Yuriya Levady, 15 July 2021, at <https://www.levada.ru/2021/06/15/glavnye-druzhestvennyye-i-nedruzhestvennyie-strany/>, 19 September 2022.

⁷⁰ "Druz'ia i nedobrozhelateli Rossii na fone spetsoperatsii," VCIOM, 31 August 2022, at <https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/druzja-i-nedobrozhelateli-rossii-na-fone-spec-operacii>, 25 February 2023.

⁷¹ See "Pochemu Putin ne Atatiurk i ne Den Siao-pin? | Grani vremeni s Muminom Shakirovym," Radio Svoboda, 15 May 2021, at <https://yandex.ru/video/preview/14431412706739747096>, 17 September 2023.

alliances instead. It seems to neglect the predominantly economic and civilizational grounds for such actions as America's withdrawal from the Middle East. On the other hand, US policies (let alone European efforts) do not have the desired effect on Russia. How could they when they lack any understanding of the simple fact that the Kremlin does not put citizens' welfare first, but instead its typically realistic fears of a military or cultural threat to its western underbelly?

Theoretically, Russia should be able to read the signals sent by the international system properly. Rose, in his famous article of 1998, correctly stated that the system's message might not be transmitted to the leaders successfully.⁷² The problem is that the world order, after the significant changes that occurred in the 2010s, cannot be described in an objective way. That is why, according to some interpretations, the West (especially the EU) underbalanced the Russian threat, whereas Russia itself perceives its previous policy in the 1990s in the same way. Note that each party achieves something according to its own perception: Russia extends its influence in terms of square miles in the game of great geopolitical powers, whereas the West and China do so in terms of far-sighted potential. What is basic, however, is the fact that without understanding the internal historical and social constraints, it would not be possible to understand just how much the Kremlin must be concerned about finding a language that would be able to explain the complexity of the world order to a people who oscillate between socialist inclinations and imperialism.

In other words, Russia's decision-making center aims to rebuild its position as a completely independent key player in contemporary international relations. It certainly tries to increase its military importance in order to blackmail other entities and impose a geopolitical role on them. However, by creating such priorities, it also aims at creating conditions for the free maintenance of authoritarianism within the state, which is combined with the domination of the Kremlin-controlled and trusted oligarchs. This would not be possible without keeping a large part of the population in the state of mobilization.

John Mearsheimer, referring to the failure of Western policy toward Ukraine correctly explained that some powers are still acting according to the realistic paradigm, which was difficult to understand by the Western liberal elites. Russia openly declared that the attempt to accept Ukraine or Georgia in NATO would be perceived by the Kremlin as a 'direct threat'. That is why trespassing the red line inevitably led to the tragedy of Ukraine, which, by the way, was clearly stated by Putin in his speech, where he explained the necessity for the 'special military operation'. Mearsheimer's conclusion boils down to the necessity to put up with Russia's fears and agree on Ukraine's neutral status.⁷³

⁷² G. Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics*, vol. 51, no. 1 (1998), pp. 144-172.

⁷³ J.J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2014, pp. 1-12. See commentary: I. Choriner, "Why John Mearsheimer Blames the U.S. for the Crisis in Ukraine," *The New Yorker*, 1 March 2022, at <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/why-john-mearsheimer-blames-the-us-for-the-crisis-in-ukraine>, 20 March 2022.

However, this theory lacks attention to the internal aspect of Russian policy toward Ukraine. It does not take into account the fact that Russia's opposition to the actions of the West may result not only from a real sense of threat and the global system's desire for balance, but also from the intention to mobilize the public, discouraged by the previous policy of the ruling camp. More importantly, however, is the question of whether the nation's pursuit of its identity should be sacrificed due to the declarations and actions of a corrupt and ineffective regime that is becoming increasingly paranoid. Saying that it does not matter whether we are really dealing with an existential threat, and that it matters only that Russia perceives it as such, may lead to concessions to any demands in the international sphere. The winner will always be the regime that turns out to be more brutal and disregarding the lives of its citizens.

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