



Russia and the Euro-Atlantic World: Bilateral Resetting or Geopolitical Reshaping

President Obama's administration has based a resetting strategy with Russia on two basic pillars. First, the fields of common interest had to be identified and – possibly – extended. These are containing Islamist threats, deterring nuclear proliferation, pushing forward with nuclear disarmament – to name just a few of them. Second, concessions to Russia's interest had to be made by Washington in order to switch relationships from tense tolerance to more or less trustful partnership. The cancellation of the AMD initiative for Poland and the Czech Republic (as the first step) and the signing of the START treaty in a format favorable for the Russian Federation (RF), (the US weapons that are to be reduced are technologically more advanced than the Russian ballistic arsenals) are the best examples of such concessions. The US government expects, in return, Russian support for key issues such as sanctioning Iran for its nuclear program and wider opening of Russian space for logistical support to US troops in Afghanistan. An important problem within the 'reset' process is the fact that the RF has no binding public obligations to fulfill its part of the deal.

It is no wonder that many observers are hesitant to consider the 'resetting' effort a success before it becomes obvious what longer-term effects this consecutive "warming up" between Washington and Moscow will have. The history of bilateral relations knows several attempts to replace confrontation with partnership, and all of them have brought controversial results – the Kennedy-Khrushchev talks in the early 1960s, the 'détente' of the 70s and the 'perestroika' of the 1980s. Each one of them reflected situational policy needs of the East and the West and failed to bring about the results expected. Even the 'perestroika', which was aimed at fundamental restructuring of US-USSR relations, ended up with an amazingly unexpected result – the collapse of the Soviet system. Proponents of present US-Russian 'reset' would loudly oppose such historical comparisons on the grounds of incompatibility between the Cold War realities and the realities of the present world. But are they really so incompatible?

It is true that present day Russia is very different from the ex-USSR both in real potential and in ideological identity. Yet, with respect to the official attitudes of mainstream political elites of the RF to the West and to the US in particular, we can detect interesting succession of views and state interests. First, anti-Americanism tends to be a key asset of state propaganda used by the Kremlin authorities both in Soviet times and today. The topics of debate are different, yet the psychological background of the event is quite the same – the NATO threat, the 'encirclement' of Russia by the West, etc.

Second, the present day state doctrines of the RF reproduce entirely the fundamental geopolitical aim of the USSR since the beginning of the Cold War - to break US engagement in the security of Europe, to weaken NATO and to promote Russian control in a security system of 'European format', which would include Russia and exclude the US. The latest



proposal of President Medvedev for a European security system does not contain any news in that respect.

Third, Russia insists on its right to use military power unconditionally in case Moscow unilaterally considers its state interests violated. The Russian–Georgian war of August 2008 is a good case in point. Even the ideological excuse for such a military action quite resembles the argumentation of the Soviet past – ‘look at Washington, they do the same thing’ (even if that’s true, it does not necessarily make Russian military actions legitimate.)

Fourth, there are obtrusive similarities in the manner of support Russia provides to rogue regimes around the world in the Soviet era and today. The ‘authoritarian alliance’ of Moscow with present day Iran, with Hugo Chavez and the remnants of the Cuban communist regime - reminds of the classical approach of the Soviet Union as a recognized leader of the ‘progressive forces’ in the world.

Last but not least, similarities in late Soviet and present day Russian approach to Europe and the West are manifest in the preserved imperial instinct to base the interests of a Great-Russian state outside the Russian borders. The well-being of Russia today is largely considered to depend upon its ability to influence, to control and extend its powers to the near abroad of young post-Soviet nations. Russian strength depends again upon its outer ‘sphere of influence’ and domination upon other nations, rather than upon domestic improvement and development. The renewed ambition of Moscow to maintain its ‘legitimate sphere of interest’ is defined by some analysts (see Ivan Krastev in “The Shape of Europe’s Future”, Open Democracy.org, April 29, 2010) as ‘finlandization’ of the post-Soviet space. “We should not be afraid of Georgia or Ukraine becoming Finland: the only condition should be that it’s the Finland of today, not the 1970s”, considers Krastev.

Is it possible to have a ‘finlandization’ process based on Finland’s status of today? Will Russia accept it? Finland is a member of the EU and an integral part of the Western community of nations – even if it does not hold NATO membership by its own choice. Will power holders in Moscow be satisfied to see Ukraine and Georgia as part of the EU (even as such a perspective is quite remote) if those countries give up their NATO membership applications? The enlargement of NATO eastwards has always been the main public argument of Russia to sustain its own ‘sphere of interest’ for security reasons. Yet the radical negative reactions of Moscow to the ‘colored revolutions’ in the post-Soviet space indicate deeper reasons for Russia’s aim to reinstall some form of control over the nations of its immediate neighborhood.

It is not NATO that’s in the center of Russia’s perception of threat, but rather the western style democracy and European model of development, which is endorsed by most post-communist nations as their own free choice. Western style democracy is the real threat, which makes it necessary for present day Russia to create a buffer zone against the proliferation of Western political and social values.



If this is true, Russian authorities will not be satisfied with ‘finlandization’, based on Finland’s status of today. Russian leaders would rather prefer to employ ‘finlandization’ based on Finland’s realities of the 1970s. And will that be enough? In a recent lecture in Kyiv, the prominent Russian analyst Dmitri Trenin speaks about a ‘New Eastern Europe’ located between Russia and the EU which possesses specific geopolitical features. Nation-building in the countries there is welcome, but could be successful only in case they maintain a special status of ‘neutrality’ between the EU and the Russian Federation (www.polit.ru, March 31, 2010). D. Trenin also underlines the basic similarities in developing a capitalist system in those countries and in Russia. The phrasing is elegant, yet the message is clear – giving up the EU path of development in favor of a ‘neutrality’ buffer zone, the New Eastern Europe will have to rely upon Russian assistance and to adopt Russian political, economic and administrative models of development. That was not claimed from Finland even in the 1970s.

Is the New Eastern Europe (and the ‘New Southern Caucasus’) part of informal preconditions to reset US–Russian – and in broader terms Russian–Euro-Atlantic relations? This is not a question from conspiracy theory but a problem within a larger context of strategic transformation in the border zone between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic space. The collapse of the Berlin Wall opened a process of democratization and modern nation-building throughout Eastern Europe. It was legitimate for any nation to freely choose its path, and democratic choice was considered legitimate and worth defending by the democratic community of nations on both sides of the Atlantic. The enlargement of NATO and the EU were just institutional consequences of this dominant paradigm within post-Cold War Europe. Some nations made it faster, while others struggled for decades. Yet geo-strategic considerations were never accepted as a legitimate obstacle to a sovereign national choice in favor of democracy and institutional affiliation within the community of the West. Is this paradigm legitimate and effective today? Has it survived NATO’s Bucharest refusal to grant MAP to Georgia and Ukraine? Was it recovered from the debris of the Russian–Georgian War of August 2008? Will it outlast the demise of the ‘Orange revolution’ in Kyiv?

In the mid-1990s the English historian Timothy Garton Ash replied to the question, ‘Where does Europe end to the East?’ ‘Europe does not end to the East’, he said, ‘It withers away’. In the beginning of this decade, there was still a consensus on both sides of the Atlantic that the opportunity to integrate into the security system of the West and to the EU should be granted to all nations in the east which manage to fulfill the criteria for membership. Later on the ‘War on Terror’ came, reducing the US attention to and presence in the East of Europe. The EU sunk in the energy business with Russia, failing to develop a strategy of common interest in balancing out Russia’s aim to achieve energy monopoly. Relations with Russia were largely nationalized, and Central and Eastern Europe were made vulnerable to Russian energy pressure. Berlin, Paris and Rome still consider this ‘business as usual’, frightened by the alternative to lose Russian supplies and to remain largely dependent upon Middle Eastern oil and gas. *Realpolitik* silently displaced policies of democratic assistance and support. Is geography becoming fate again?

The last question does not simply refer to the future of Mr. Trenin’s New Eastern Europe. It rather embraces the future of all Eastern Europe, and therefore – the definition of Europe for



the upcoming decades. Europe after 1989 was built on the presumption of common security and mutual dependence among free nations. This presumption outlaws the realities of the 19th century Great Power politics based on balanced 'spheres of influence' and reduced sovereignty for all nations that fail the test of 'Greatness'. Silently recognizing the right of anybody – Russia included – for maintaining its own 'sphere of influence' or 'near abroad' creates double standards. One set of standards for Europe proper – democratic, mutually dependent and secure, and a second set of standards – for New Eastern Europe and for the post-Soviet space, which is destined to serve as a buffer zone for Russia's revived 'greatness'. This is actually the beginning of the end for Europe. Not because of Russia – it is and will be a European country too. Not because Ukraine or Georgia will necessarily fail without European assistance. But just because when you give up a principle and a value system you inflict destruction primarily upon yourself – not upon the others.

The community of nations created in Europe after the Cold War is a powerful antithesis both to radical nationalism and to revived imperial legitimacy of the 19th century style. Russia rises to a limited project of partial imperial recovery today. Today it needs New Eastern Europe to succeed, but what will Russia need tomorrow? Turkey is an applicant country for EU membership, yet its foreign minister devotedly speaks about the 'new depth' of Turkish policies rising up to the glory of late Ottoman Empire. What if France and Germany consider Europe an insufficient project for their national interests and go their own way – for energy with Russia, for a Europe at different speeds of integration? The ghosts of 19th century *real geopolitik* are haunting a community which may fail to serve its fundamental values and principles. We may not be able to expand and to integrate overnight all nations that want to be a part of Europe and NATO, yet we have the duty to support their aspirations to become integral part of our community. This is the message of 1989.

This is no pamphlet against Russia or against resetting policies with Mr. Putin's government. From my observation point 'Sofia – Bulgaria', the Russian Federation is much more easily seen as a prospective member of the Euro-Atlantic community of nations rather than as a part of a Eurasian utopia. Andre Glucksmann is right that Russia today represents no threat – it represents a big uncertainty (Die Welt, May 5, 2010). It is much more difficult for the RF to step into the world of the 21st century than for any other post-communist country. Assisting Russian temptations to resurge its glory back to 19th century realities rather than encouraging its modern progress is against Russian interests in the first place, before being against the interests of any other country.

What we see today in Eastern Europe – 'old' and 'new' – is a process of nation building, which the Soviet Empire resisted for almost a century. All post-Soviet countries primary aim at what Western and Central Europeans achieved in late 19th – early 20th century - independent nation states. But in the context of present day Europe, post-Soviet societies aim for something more – for nation states that are independent and democratic, bound in a union of mutual trust and common purpose, which is the essence of the EU project. The post-Soviet space undergoes a historical process. It could be delayed – it could not be stopped. Resetting relations with Russia should assist this historical process and not hamper it.