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**Russian Problem: Russia's Place in the World – An Attempt at
Historical and Geopolitical Analysis**

Abstract

Despite all these internal and external challenges, the Russian Federation is still preserving its independent statehood. It has largely stabilized its borders and even achieved substantial economic progress, though this is mainly based on oil and gas exports. The present international situation of the country is undoubtedly difficult, but in my view probably more promising than ten years ago. Along with the threats and challenges, there are now some more positive and promising trends of development.

Keywords: Russia, Eurasian studies, geopolitics

I. Introduction: A Long Western Debate and Its Political Consequences

Although Russia has been part of the European system since the Westphalian Treaty of 1648, and after its victory in the Northern War with Sweden and the Nystad Treaty in 1721 started to be seen as one of the major powers on the continent, both its internal nature and its role in international politics have often suffered Western doubts and uncertainties. Along with Eastern Problem of the declining Ottoman Empire and German Problem of unification, and the political future of this country, there has also existed (though not admitted) Russian Problem which was felt in Europe for a long time, and after that also in North America. While both the Eastern and German Problems, at least in their traditional forms, belong to history, the issue of the place and role of Russia in the global international system still remains one of the major unsettled challenges of the era.

Disregarding its changing political forms and official ideologies, Russia has always been perceived by the European nations, and later by the Americans, as an “other”, strange, potentially hostile and unpredictable country. Winston Churchill expressed these things in his famous statement, calling Russia “a riddle wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma”, and similar opinions have been and still are expressed by numerous Western scholars and politicians. Even now, post-Communist Russia, where previously unknown political and

economic freedom exists, and which is largely open for foreign capital activity, is still treated as a country on probation with all sorts of suspicions and condemnations. Its general picture which is usually presented to the Western public is predominantly bleak and negative, and all its prospects are viewed as really gloomy. During the last two years, especially during and after the recent Russian parliamentary and presidential elections, the media and information warfare against this country seemed to be reminiscent of a “paradigm of Russophobic rage”¹ in Britain in the time of the Spring of the People in 1848.

II. Historical Background and the Issue’s Origins

Because of its Euro-Asian location, its continental size, its rather unusual history, and its brilliant but complex culture, Russia in fact substantially differs from the other European nations. Due to its long historical development, rich cultural background and the fact that its inhabitants, including its numerous ethnic minorities, are living in their ancestral homelands, and by and large are preserving their own historical identities, it also differs greatly from the US and similar settlers’ nations, which have been built by the Europeans in the new continents. Largely because of that Russia’s relations with the West were always prone to be full of political conflicts and misunderstanding which were apparently difficult to avoid. In

addition, there were probably three major reasons for their long standing alienation.

- 1) The first, and from an historical point of view the oldest, was isolation from Europe and Western development of the Russian lands lasting more than three centuries. The German historian Eduard Winter argued that Muscovy had left Europe when it fell under the Mongol Tatar yoke in the first part of the 13th century, but “once again became a full partner in the European association of nations” in the second part of the 15th century. At that time, it had regained its independence and the Grand Duke Ivan III’s marriage to the niece of the last Byzantine Emperor Constantine XI , Zoe Paleologue, signified Moscow’s acceptance as a European power². However, Professor Winter was too optimistic in his judgement. Russia’s route to Europe and the Western community was going to be much longer and probably still has not been completed. There were at least four other obstacles to that.
- 2) Religion. Russia was Christian but an Eastern Orthodox nation, and in contrast to Germany and Poland, it received its religion not from Rome but from Byzantium. Relations between the two major branches of Christianity, Eastern and Western, sharply deteriorated from the 11th century and even more so after the conquest of Byzantium by Crusaders in 1204. The political and

cultural implications of that were long-lasting and also had a major impact on the development of their nations and their mutual relations.

- 3) The third and probably the most important reason were Russia's geopolitics and what was related to it, the political and socio-economic situation in the country. It had always been a huge country with, relative to its size, a sparse population and a very harsh climate. Being located on the East-European lowlands, it was exposed to numerous invasions from the East and the West, and yet, in spite of all these adversities, Russia was the only non-Western and in some way non-European empire "to remain a powerful independent world historical state throughout the modern period"³. According to an American historian, "Russia accomplished this remarkable feat... because of a highly effective, durable and resourceful political system-autocracy"⁴ which allowed the Russian ruling class to pursue an alternative path to early modernity⁵. The country had not thus been a part of the West as it was established in the medieval and early modern period, and expanded after that to some other parts of Europe, such as Poland and to the newly discovered parts of the world. At the same time it was still a Christian country and in spite of its' backwardness compared with Western nations, it had a

centralized and efficient political system which enabled it to mobilise a substantial military power if needed. For those two reasons, it was difficult to treat Russia in the same way as the Western explorers treated indigenous populations in America, Africa, India or Australia. In addition, because of its geography and extreme climate, for the most part it was not practical to think about conquest and direct subjugation in the same way as for many non-Western peoples of the era.

As an outcome of that Russia was for a long time left in somewhat grey area and lacking determined legal and political status. It was neither fully accepted or an equal partner nor rejected and submitted to a direct Western control and this situation contributed to dislike and fear of Russia in Europe. The French scholar and clergyman Chappe d'Autoroche, who travelled throughout Russia in 1760, wrote that " in France people expected her to overrun our little Europe, like Scythians and Huns. Hamburg and Lubeck trembled of her name. Poland and Germany considered Russia as one of the most formidable powers in Europe⁶. However, according to French visitor Western fears of Russia were unfounded⁷. Both the country itself and its army were socially too backward and devoid of proper training and equipment to be able to present any real threat to the more developed European powers. The case of Poland and its forthcoming partition was a special one because as L'Abbe Chappe noticed "The

sovereign there was without authority and state without defence, and it was open to any invader⁸. Nevertheless such a fear still persisted for centuries and contributed to the perception of Russia as a problem. On the Russian side, the situation of long lasting social and material backwardness in relations to the Western nations was also causing fear and mistrust of the more developed, powerful and by no means friendly nations. As a result Russian relations with the West have often been tense and unpredictable and Russian Problem has continued for centuries.

III. Post-Soviet Russia's Challenges and Its Quest for Identity and Survival

Even after the collapse of the USSR and losing one sixth of its territory, half its economy and more than half its population, it is still the largest country in the world, covering 17,075,400 km². It spreads out from the Polish borders in North-Central Europe to China and the Pacific Ocean in the East, and from the Arctic Ocean to the Caucasus Mountains in the South. The geographical configuration of the country is unusual, as 25% of it is located in Europe and 75% in Asia. So overall the country has always been sparsely populated, and as an outcome of the bloody events of the wars and the costs of the socio-economic transformations, it is still in an unprecedented demographic crisis.⁹

However, Russia still has about 140 million inhabitants, 78% of whom are living in its European provinces. Being located on the Eurasian lowland and devoid of any natural boundaries, the country has been invaded many times and has probably suffered more than any other nation because of its human and material destruction, the most important of which resulted from World War II, during which Russia suffered more than 20 million military and civilian casualties. The memory of that has never been forgotten and has had an indelible impact on the Russian social consciousness, and present day Russia still needs to find its way towards internal development and its proper place in the international system.

During the last two decades, all efforts in these directions have been difficult, and there are still many impediments to reaching a more promising future. In my view there are at least three main causes for that. The first and probably the most important one is the social situation in Russia itself, where the neo-capitalist reforms after the late 1980s destroyed the social safety net which had existed before and led to enormous socio-economic gaps between the small wealthy minority and the impoverished majority.¹⁰

The level of social stratification in Russia is one of the highest in the world, and at present 30% of all the wealth of Russian households belongs to the billionaires. At the same time, according to the Federal Service for State Statistics (Rosstat), 18 million, which is almost 13% of

Russia's population, live below the poverty line, and the ratio of the average income of the most affluent to the least affluent 10% has grown from 4.5:1 in 1990 to 16.5:1 in 2012.¹¹ Although after 2000 Vladimir Putin brought some improvements to this critical situation, and his appeal to Russian nationalism and his opposition to American encroachment made a positive impression on many people in the country, the social problems aggravated by the recent economic crisis have not been solved, and this has resulted in widespread discontent and lack of confidence in the future. It seems obvious that without more hope and mobilization of social energy by the majority, the country will not be able to move forward and stand up against its external threats.

Another important new cause of internal social tension are the political aspirations of the Russian bourgeoisie (upper middle class or creative class) which was recreated during the last 20 years and now seems to be much stronger and more self-confident than 20 or even 10 years ago. These people, who are no longer scared of a return to Communist rule and are relatively secure in their advantageous socio-economic situation, do not need as much state protection as before, and are demanding more political influence and direct access to power. Although the protests and demands of the working and impoverished population and Moscow's creative class are different in nature and often not compatible, all of them are nevertheless critical

or even outwardly hostile towards the present political regime, and they represent a threat to the stability of the country.

The second major source of impediments blocking Russia's development is the shifting in its rhetoric but overall rather consistent US global policy which, as one of the leading American analysts openly admitted, "see it as their [American] best interests to slowly grind Russia into dust."¹² The collapse of the USSR has caused enormous hardship for many millions of the post-Soviet people, and in geopolitical terms has put Russia back into a similar situation to that which existed during the first part of the 17th century. The country has lost many strategically important territories, and because of the NATO enlargement that followed, has found itself in a precarious situation.

Since all the former Warsaw Pact countries have joined NATO, the Conventional Armed Forces Treaty in Europe negotiated in 1990 lost its previous meaning and the European security system turned against Russia. In addition, in 2002 US President G.W. Bush's administration abrogated the ABM Treaty, which for 30 years had provided both Moscow and Washington with certain guarantees of security and mutual survival. Keeping in mind NATO's expansion in Eastern Europe, the deployment there of anti-ballistic missiles which was approved by the Alliance's meeting in Chicago in May 2012, and the relentless propaganda and psychological warfare against Moscow which accelerated during and after the recent Russian parliamentary

and presidential elections, one might start to believe that despite the disappearance of the Soviet Union and the enormous transformations in Russia itself, the Cold War against the country has not come to an end.¹³

As a prominent American International Relations scholar and leading neorealist Kenneth Waltz noticed, “rather than learning from history, the United States repeats past errors by expanding NATO eastwards and extending its influence over what used to be the provinces of the vanquished. Despite much talk about the ‘globalization’ of international politics, American political leaders, to a dismaying extent, think of *East or West* rather than of their interaction”.¹⁴

However, although Russia was greatly weakened, it was neither occupied nor militarily defeated. Its’ still powerful nuclear deterrent remained in the hands of the country’s leaders, and together with the country’s geopolitical location, size and natural and human resources, represented a credible obstacle to American global hegemony. Among many American efforts to cut Moscow more down to size, one can only mention the support of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 and the decision of the US and the EU to separate Kosovo from Serbia. The Georgian-Russian War in August 2008 was an even bigger and a more directly bloody challenge, but it turned out to be not quite according to Western expectations. Partly because of that, and due to some other international and domestic economic causes, the then

forthcoming new President Obama's administration initiated a brand new opening to Moscow's "reset" policy towards its former Cold War rival. The new American policy brought some positive developments to both sides, and in 2009 and 2010 many experts believed that reset was "remarkably successful" and led to a "new era in their relations."¹⁵ In 2010 both countries signed a treaty, named the Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty (SORT), which would reduce their long-range nuclear arsenal, and Washington achieved Moscow's cooperation on its goals in Afghanistan and Iran. However, as the basic strategic differences between the US and the Russian Federation have remained far from being solved, the "selective cooperation" was unable to bring any major lasting results. During the last two years 2011-2012, new serious tensions have arisen between the two nations. These are now focused on the following major issues:

(a). Civil war in Syria and the Western Powers' right to intervene in the domestic affairs of the other nations under the name of "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P).

(b). The ABM deployment in Europe and probably also in the Arctic and Asia which, disregarding even their present efficiency, might in any case undermine the existing geostrategic balance of power and change the present geopolitical situation in Europe.

The third major source of challenges for Russia comes from the difficult and even rocky relations with some of its Southern and

Northwestern neighbours, the nations and ethnic groups which used to be dominated by the Tsarist Russian Empire, and after that by the Soviet Union. In recent decades the Russian Southern frontiers have been seen as the country's "soft underbelly".¹⁶ That might explain why the Georgian-Russian war in August 2008 was seen as a significant threat to the country. The unending social and political tensions in the Russian parts of Northern Caucasus represent an even more serious challenge, and the Islamic terrorist groups' attacks emanating from there are still striking deep into ethnic Russian territories. The psychological impact of their assault on the economically depressed Russian population should not be underestimated. This is also one of the major reasons for Moscow's interest in the Middle East and anxieties caused by the present growth of radical Islamism (Jihadism) in the region – particularly in Syria.¹⁷

In the North and West, Russia faces nations such as Poland and the Baltic States, which because of their historical memories, which are now skillfully used for political reasons, perceive Moscow as their traditional enemy and a threatening power. The Americans have always used that for their own purposes, and at present NATO's units are quite close to the Russian borders, and even to their former capital St. Petersburg (only 60 miles away). Relations with such neighbours are particularly delicate and require great tact and diplomatic skill in order to avoid further confrontations. Because of the US role in these

countries, President Obama's reset policy had a temporarily positive impact on Russia's Northwestern neighbours' relations with Moscow, but their further normalization might take a long time and would not be easy. As Putin himself admitted, Russia "should scare its neighbours less, but it should work to rid itself of the imperial image which prevents even Europe from cooperating with us".¹⁸ Though such a policy might be necessary, it does not by itself need to improve the international situation and security of Russia. Some of Russia's Northwestern neighbours, being confident of Western support, might look for revenge against their former hegemon, or in any case do not see many reasons to look for accommodations of still existing problems and grievances with Moscow, which would be acceptable to both sides. They might even serve as the tools of Western policy in Eurasia in relation to Russia, and as in the case of their enthusiastic support for the American attack on Iraq in the Spring of 2003, some other nations, even if such a policy does not necessarily correspond to their national interests.¹⁹

As an American analyst noticed, "Russian geography is problematic"²⁰ and incomparably worse than that of the USA. It lacks oceans to provide the barriers its huge territory from Europe, the Middle East and China. The persistent security concern, which is additionally increased by historical experience and the present military and social weakness of the country, is quite understandable. As Thomas

Graham, who was the senior director for Russia at the US National Security Council indicates, “All of Russia’s borders are unsettled today”, and this is hardly surprising as “unsettled borders have been a constant throughout Russian history which could be written as a long struggle for stable, defensible borders.”²¹ Because of that, according to another American expert, “Russian history is a chronicle of Russia’s steps to establish buffers, and those buffers being overwhelmed. The end of the Cold War marked the transition from Russia’s largest ever buffer to its smallest in centuries.”²² It is no wonder that Moscow “is terrified of being overwhelmed militarily, economically, politically and culturally”²³ and all its policies are geared toward rearrangement of its relations with the new neighbourhood, where the American and, to a lesser extent the EU political and military penetration are causing its fear and anxieties. Although the Russian Far East and even some parts of Siberia are also submitted to the growing Chinese demographic and economic penetration, which represent a challenge, they are not seen as currently representing a political and military threat to the Russian state.

During the more than one thousand years of the long Russian history, the first and most important concern of all its leaders has been and still remains their state security and its very survival, which have often been in danger. The present concerns of Vladimir Putin and his team thus seem quite normal and deeply rooted in the

historical traditions and national experience of the Russians. At the same time, however, all the present leaders' efforts are probably more difficult than those of their predecessors.

In my opinion there are at least four main reasons for that:

1. The much touted need for modernization of the country is in fact quite ambiguous, and far from being a clear concept. In addition to the unquestionable need for technological innovation and more diversified economic development, it might also require a deep social transformation, which, for at least some of its proponents, means a total acceptance of the neoliberal capitalist model and rejection of both the remnants of the previous social achievements of the Soviet period and the ancient Russian Orthodox traditions of collectivism and social solidarity. Putin, in his speech to the Duma on April 20, 2011, stated that Russia "requires decades of steady, uninterrupted development ... without either unjustified economic liberalism or, on the other hand, social demagogy."²⁴ He believes that "the main lesson to be learned from the crisis is that economic misery could be a threat to a nation's sovereignty,²⁵ which he considers to be a nation's highest value. Consequently, as he writes, "Russia is a welfare state" and "We have much higher social guarantees than countries with a comparable level of labour productivity and per capita

income.”²⁶ His social policy is to largely increase state support for all needy groups of the population, including increasing pensions, assisting families with children, and significant reduction of mortgage loan rates to 2.2% by 2018. However his defense of a “social state” has been subject to severe attacks by Russian neoliberals and the influential business class which controls a large part of the wealth of the country, including the media.²⁷ According to those people, Russia should “actively integrate into the world, not only economic but also political and military spaces, conventionally called the West, receiving at least small guarantees of the maintenance of internal stability.”²⁸ With Western support, the business class and the other parts of the upper middle class will be secure in their advantageous positions, and it will increase their economic chances for profit, while the rest of the people will need to accept their fate and their inferior social status and impoverishment. However, Russian society has a different historical background from that of American or other Western countries and is more vocal in presenting its views and demands than it used to be in the past. The interests of oligarchs, the growing but economically and politically diversified middle class that, according to some scholars includes over 20% of the population,²⁹ and the needs and

aspirations of the still relatively impoverished majority, are still not quite compatible.

The social tensions are not going to disappear easily, and a number of commentators even predict that, despite all Putin's efforts, "in its present course and mode Russia has no future"³⁰ and that a new Russian revolution is unavoidable. The fact that the Russian economy is so dependent on oil and gas exports, and thus very vulnerable to global market fluctuations, might have a negative impact on the social stability in the country.

2. One of the most negative outcomes of Russia's domestic problems is the fact that, with the possible exception of its traditional zone of influence, the country does not now have any convincing soft power in the eyes of the world community.³¹ If the Russian Empire claimed to be the protector of the Slavs and Eastern Orthodoxy as well as the transmitter of European civilization on the vast expanses of Eurasia, and the Soviet Union was, at least until the mid-1960s, seen by many as the champion of socialism and the leader of an ideological alternative to the Western World,³² during the last 20 years, the Russian Federation's foreign policy has been devoid of any deeper theoretical framework and ideological premises.³³ In the time of mass media and the internet, the bare appeal to pragmatically understood self-interest, the understanding of which might often be dubious and questionable, cannot be sufficient to win international recognition and

support. The most powerful empire in history, the US, achieved its position largely because of its enormous reserve of soft power, and similar efforts could be noticed in the cases of a number of other great states of the era.³⁴ As one of former Russian President Medvedev's advisors, Igor Yurgens admitted, "Russia has not yet formulated a unique value-based ideology similar to the Western ideology democracy and post-industrial development. Nor has it demonstrated a success story comparable to that of other BRICS countries [such as] with China, say, which has become the world factory."³⁵

Partly due to that, and partly because, typical of the early post-Soviet period, neglect and privatization and enormous theft of social properties, Moscow started looking for ways to influence the world media much later than the Americans and even some other non-Western nations.

One of the most blatant examples of the failure here was the case of the major mass-media presentation of the Russian-Georgian War in August 2008. As a prominent French scholar and a member of the board of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Jean Louis Gregorin admitted, "Everything that has been said by Georgia, the BBC and other hangers on was in fact a lie. It took a year for us, diplomats, the media, and all people who wanted to know the truth to turn the situation around."³⁶

Probably even more harmful for Moscow was the Western media's description of the last parliamentary presidential elections in Russia as a total fraud and sham, and the persistent characterization of President Putin as a "ruthless politician" who dismantled Russia's democratic and free market reform "in order to become a "totalitarian leader".

The extremely biased if not completely false propaganda which was supported in Russia itself by part of the pro-Western opposition in the country was in fact quite effective³⁷ and very detrimental for Russian interests.³⁸

In Russia there is now some reaction against it. Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, noticed that "Physical battles have been replaced by information wars. A battle for minds is in progress, from which we must not retreat,"³⁹ and some experts there are calling for Russia to "stop shying away from defending itself in the foreign press,"⁴⁰ but Moscow is still on the defensive in foreign policy matters. It does not have the strength or opportunity to formulate an international agenda; it can only participate in discussing such an agenda.⁴¹ The reason for that is not that the Russian leaders do not understand the current international agenda. They simply have not enough power now at their disposal to be more proactive or effective. At present only Americans and in the Middle East Israel can do that, and even they are not always successful.

3. The third major source of present difficulties is the fact that the geographical situation in Russia, which has always been a challenge, is now getting even worse. As Thomas Graham, who has already been quoted above, indicates, “in contrast to the past, Russia is no longer the dynamic core of Eurasia ... it is surrounded beyond the former Soviet space by states and regions of greater energy. Chinese power, radical Islamic fervor, and European prosperity are penetrating into Russia’s historical space or acting as powerful poles of attraction for former Soviet states, including regions of Russia proper.”⁴² This dramatic reversal of the former balance of power which had started during the Gorbachev era, has already lasted a generation, and a return to the traditional pattern does not seem either certain or imminent. Although in my opinion neither China in the East nor the Islamic world in the South can now create any major threat to Russian state security, it seems to be different in the West where during the last two main pillars in the European order, the EU and NATO “have moved their borders steadily eastward.”⁴³

In practice, both these organizations exclude Russia from its membership, and as even some American scholars admit, “no state would welcome the extension of an historically hostile military alliance up to its borders, no matter how often that alliance said its intentions were peaceable.”⁴⁴ In addition, NATO is led by the US, which is not a

Eurasian, but a global power, and whose strategic goals of global domination are apparently contradictory to Russian national interests.

4. The fourth reason is that, since the end of World War II, Russian-American relations have been and still remain the biggest international challenge for any of Moscow's leaders. Even according to the report prepared by the American Carnegie Endowment Center for International Peace in Moscow, though Moscow sees its immediate threats coming from the radicalization in the Moslem world in the South, "strategically, the United States is still Russia's *de facto* main political adversary.⁴⁵ Although the political and ideological differences of Soviet times have now become a question of the past, Moscow and Washington are still divided by major geopolitical and at least to some extent, some economic interests. As a consequence of that, as Professor Stephen Cohen notices, even in the early 1990s, Washington simultaneously conducted, under both the Democrats and Republicans, two fundamentally different policies toward post-Soviet Russia – one decorative and outwardly friendly and reassuring, the other a real one – a quite different winner-take-all exploitation of Russia's post-1991 weakness.⁴⁶ The American and other Western diplomats and experts might have preserved formal politeness, and especially at the beginning have not openly challenged Russian sensitivities. However, even then they started to encroach on almost all crucial issues on Russia's vital national interests. Officially, Yeltsin

was treated kindly by President Clinton (Bill and Boris). At the same time Strobe Talbott, who was President Clinton's "Russia hand", recalls the President worrying about how long they could keep telling Ol' Boris "okay, now here is what you've got to do next – here is more shit for your face".⁴⁷ Talbott also recalls how he and Clinton knew "Yeltsin's blusters in public had almost always given way to submissiveness in private."⁴⁸

In the late 1990s, as the Russian state became a bit stronger and more assertive, the attitude of the American elite, media and academia and their treatment of Russia and its problems have frequently become much harsher and more arrogant than during the old days of the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s. Moscow's apparent weakness and its lack of real means to use threats and retorts against the US provided the Americans and some of their allies with a free hand to insult and humiliate the former global competitor. As some American scholars noticed, instead of making an effort to perceive rather obvious differences of national interests between the two countries, Washington officials and the American mainstream media attributed Russian leaders' opposition to the US policy towards their paranoia or all other forms of mental deviation which were supposed to prevent them from submitting to Western demands.⁴⁹

After he came to power in 2000, Putin aspired to an alliance with the US and integration with the European Union.⁵⁰ The symbol

of that policy course was his immediate support of Washington after September 11, 2001, and its manifesto was his speech in October 2001 in the German Bundestag.⁵¹ He also made a number of strategic concessions to the US, then facilitating America's easy victory in Afghanistan and closing Russian military bases in Cuba and Vietnam. However, all his efforts were reciprocated by further NATO expansion in Russia's neighbourhood, the ABM deployment which represented a major threat to the Russian deterrent, and the launching by the West of a global strategy of regime change in "rogue states."

Moscow's present dispute with the West about the situation in Syria is not primarily about Middle Eastern geopolitics, Cold War alliances, arms sales – or even particular interests such as the Tartus naval resupply facility, which gives Russia some ability to operate in the Mediterranean, and perhaps in the Indian Ocean. All these factors might be important, but they are secondary.⁵² From a Russian policy perspective, the present Syrian issue is much like the former events in Libya, Iraq or Yugoslavia "primarily about the world order."⁵³ As Putin himself stressed in his decree issued in June 2012, one of Russia's principal foreign policy goals is "developing friendly relations among states on the basis of equality, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the primary responsibility of the UN Security Council is supporting international peace and security."⁵⁴ Consequently, Moscow

rejects foreign military intervention without a UNSC mandate, and also rejects the concept of regime change under external pressure.

Moscow does not want to allow the US to use force at will and without any external constraints, as this “might lead to foreign intervention close to Russian borders, or even within these borders.”⁵⁵

In fact all regimes except the democracies which are certified by Washington or its allies could theoretically be considered as lacking legitimacy, and the possible implications of that are quite obvious for Moscow. The persisting tensions in and around Syria are thus also an example of the struggle between the imperial unipolar vision and the resistance of the regional powers against the global imperial centre.

Though the invocation of the R2P (Right to Protect) and Western intervention even in Russia itself cannot be completely excluded, the threat of that until now has seemed rather unlikely because of the Russian nuclear deterrent, the existence of which has limited American hegemony and provides security for Russian integrity and survival. However, the forthcoming deployment of early warning components of the missile defenses in Europe, which is clearly aimed against Russia, and the early warning radar in Poland and the Czech Republic, will allow the system to “see” Russian ICBMs at the engine start stage and the first 30 seconds after launch, which was impossible until now.⁵⁶

In addition, a distinguished Professor of Political Science at the University of Kansas and former US Marine Colonel, Dale Herspring recently noticing “the shooting down of four out of five incoming missiles last week [October 2012], suggests that missile defense is about to become a reality.”⁵⁷ Professor Herspring understands Russian concerns, but as he said, “I can’t imagine any president being willing to give up such a system for the sake of US-Russian relations.”⁵⁸

Even though the ideological and systemic antagonism, which at least officially lay at the core of the Cold War, ended a long time ago, the hostility and various forms of tensions between Moscow and Washington have persisted for at least two reasons:

(a). Since the end of World War II, the US has followed and still follows the traditional British policy of preventing “a single European power center from dominating the rest of the continent, and even less Eurasia as a whole. As Thomas Graham admits: “The United States, as a matter of policy has sought to prevent the re-emergence of a threat of Soviet dimension in Eurasia,⁵⁹ and the ideological identity of potential rivals has been of only secondary importance. That is why “since only Russia could form a core of such a renewed threat, US policy has sought to limit Russian options in the former Soviet space and enhance the independence of all former Soviet states.”⁶⁰ For the same reasons, Washington has provided rigorous support to a belt of mainly newly established states across Central and Eastern Europe,

from the Baltic and the Black Sea to the Adriatic, which although formally independent, have been friendly to the United States and hostile to Russia. During the last decade, all those countries were admitted to NATO and the EU.

(b). The second reason is the fact that Russia has always been and still remains one of the richest countries in almost all natural resources, but nevertheless is still a relatively independent nation. The American and multinational corporations do not have free access to its natural resources, and whatever they had achieved during the Gorbachev-Yeltsin period was later limited and largely returned to Russian control.⁶¹

The present international status of the Russian Federation thus seems to be a precarious one, and its future is by no means certain. I would not like to suggest that a military invasion of the country is likely or even possible at present. This country is neither Iraq nor Libya, nor former Yugoslavia, and at the initial stage of the ABM deployment, its nuclear weapons still represent some deterrent to all such attempts. In addition, both its geopolitical size and general potential might make such an effort difficult to implement. I am certainly not willing to imply similar intentions to the present American administration, or even less to the UE leaders. However, as Otto von Bismarck once noticed, the main issues in politics are not intentions but potentials, and their inevitable impact on the existing

balance of power and the international system. Russia, whose nuclear deterrent would be emasculated or even just diminished, will find itself in a very different and most likely much worse situation than now. As any student of international relations knows, or at least should know, countries search for new weapons and arm themselves more often for political than directly military reasons. In addition, for a number of reasons such as the memory of the Cold War, the geopolitical location of the country, and the fact that the cultural proximity to the West of the Russian elites facilitates the use of soft power on them, the US and its allies' policy towards Moscow had always been and still remains much harsher than towards other non-Western centres of power such as for instance China or Saudi Arabia, which are far from being liberal. The forthcoming ABM deployment in Europe would certainly change the geopolitical and strategic situation in Eurasia, and the consequences of that could in all likelihood be detrimental for Russia.

IV. Future Prospects and Possible Solutions

Despite all these internal and external challenges, the Russian Federation is still preserving its independent statehood. It has largely stabilized its borders and even achieved substantial economic progress, though this is mainly based on oil and gas exports. The present international situation of the country is undoubtedly difficult,

but in my view probably more promising than ten years ago. Along with the threats and challenges, there are now some more positive and promising trends of development.

First of all, although some media alarmists report that the domestic situation in Russia is still quite difficult, it has already greatly improved. The economy of the country had averaged 7% growth in the decade following the 1998 Russian financial crisis, resulting in a doubling of real disposable income and the emergence of a new middle class. Although it was hit hard by the global financial crisis of 2008-09, it is now growing at a reasonable pace (in 2012 second quarter growth 4%; 2012 projection 3.4%) and much more quickly than the economies of all new EU members, including Poland (2012 projection 2.7%).⁶² According to some American scholars, Russia has passed through “dramatic spurts of modernization” which “have been generally accompanied by a shift in public concerns from economic survival to ‘self-expression values such as freedom of expression and ultimately political participation’”.⁶³ In the decade before the global financial crisis, the real household income increased by 140%. The average monthly wage, adjusted for purchasing power parity, exceeds \$1,000, and the improvement has spread throughout the population.⁶⁴ The proportion of Russians living below the poverty threshold, which had been determined to be an income of under \$10.80 per person/day, fell from 29% in 2000 to 13% in 2011.⁶⁵ At the same time

the new technology revolution spread throughout the country, and in 2011, 60% of households,, including 46% in the countryside, already have personal computers, up from 25% in 2005.⁶⁶

As the demographic crisis in Russia, as in other post-Communist countries, was largely caused by economic factors,, the better living conditions have brought some modest but noticeable improvement. According to the Federal Statistic Service (ROSSTAT), in 2012 Russia should achieve its first natural population growth since 1991.⁶⁷ Although the mortality level there is still quite high compared to that of the Western developed nations (Russia has been officially classified as a developing nation), and the results of the catastrophic birthrate decline of the 1990s is going to be felt for many years to come, the news about a “dying bear” now seems to be premature.⁶⁸

There are great differences among the regions, but in September 2012 the overall level of unemployment in the country was a rather low 5.2%, much below that in Poland or other European Union members.⁶⁹ Though this favourable situation is the result of the massive stimulus efforts which had been undertaken after the catastrophic 2009 economic slump, and Russia in late 2012 needs to face many serious problems, its economy is still “arguably in better health than it has ever been.”⁷⁰

The political situation in the country is also far more stable than it is sometimes presented in the Western and pro-Western media. It

is understandable that after so many violent political shocks and abrupt social transformations in its recent history, the country cannot be as stable as the well-established Western democracies and the existing regime cannot enjoy a similar level of secure institutional legitimacy. The role, position and political importance of the national leaders are therefore different there than those of their American, French or even Polish counterparts. Any serious decline in Putin's public approval rating might thus appear to be a symptom of a real systemic crisis or, as some like to argue, a death knell to the existing regime. Putin was in fact weakened during 2011 because he was losing the support of a substantial part of the business and middle class in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and the media operated by them. However, this year his approval is no longer declining.⁷¹ According to the most recent public opinion poll by the respected Levada Center, currently 67% of Russians support the efforts of Vladimir Putin as president, while 32% don't, and the rest are undecided.⁷² An absolute majority support gradual reforms and believe that there will be changes for the better in the near future.⁷³ Consequently, as an American expert noticed, it is difficult to imagine how "a collapse of regime scenario could unfold in the present environment of low unemployment, modest economic growth, high oil prices, and general stability in Putin's approval rating"⁷⁴ Russia is perhaps going through a

difficult period of modernization and socio-political re-adjustment, but it is probably in much better shape than it was before.

Secondly, due to both US internal problem and the emergence of new rising powers in Asia and other places, a number of American leading political analysts including Zbigniew Brzezinski, now predict the decline of unipolar world order and the approaching end of the Atlantic era in history.⁷⁵ Although these American predictions might be alarmist and the new rising power centres still have a long way to go in order to increase their potential, some development towards a multipolar or post-American world has been noticed.⁷⁶ In its dealings with China, the Islamic World of the future, and some other rising powers, the US will need to get some form of help and cooperation from Russia, which in fact has already been established in relations with Afghanistan, and to a lesser extent, Iran. Such needs might force the US leaders to relieve their political and ideological pressures on Russia. Although one might doubt the American leaders' willingness to restrain their imperial aspirations in Eurasia, the new situation could force them to cut down their over-ambitious plans. As Thomas Graham writes: the US and Russia are no longer two hostile superpowers locked in an ideologically-driven life-death struggle. Each must advance its interests in an increasingly non-ideological multipolar world. In such a world, intense US-Russian competition tends to play out to the advantage of third countries.⁷⁷ According to

Professor Kotkin of Princeton University, “there can be no resettling of US-Russian relations without a transcending of NATO and the establishment of a new security architecture in Europe. And without such a genuine reset, China will retain the upper hand, not only in its bilateral relationship with Russia, but also in the strategic triangle comprising China, Russia and the United States”.⁷⁸ Graham wants to believe that both countries [the US and the Russian Federation] are now reconsidering their positions.⁷⁹ Though it is now by no means certain, if it really happens, the impact of that on Russia’s Western neighbours might be of critical importance in the country’s relations with Europe and its internal development. It would provide Russia with a chance for a more economic and cultural integration with the West, which has been one of its major goals since the end of the 17th century and the reforms of Peter the Great. Because Moscow will certainly want to preserve its own identity, and because even without American inspiration, some forces that are hostile to Russia will persist in Europe, such an alliance would not be easy, but without Washington’s opposition might still be possible. In Western Europe, especially in France and Germany, there is no lack of influential forces that would welcome the prospect of close cooperation with Russia, and even the emergence of the Paris-Berlin-Moscow continental axis.⁸⁰ If put into practice, such an alliance might be strong enough to secure itself from the growing Chinese, and in the future perhaps

Islamic powers, and it would be an equal partner with the great American power. Such an alliance and a level of integration would be more possible because of the fact that Russia is now much weaker than in the past. Due to the country's demographic decline and social problems, it cannot represent any objective threat to Europe.⁸¹ According to some demographic forecasts, by 2050 its population could drop down to just 100 million inhabitants, and its share of the GDP, which in 2008 amounted to 2.3% of global, will only rise to 3.5% by 2020.⁸² Although Putin's administration plans to boost annual defense spending by 59% by 2015, according to SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), their present level is quite modest, 71.9 billion compared to the US' 711 billion, or even China's 143 billion.⁸³ Even if the projected boost of expenditures were implemented, the Russian Federation's defense budget would be less than one tenth of the US military budget.⁸⁴

Russia's apparent weakness makes even some traditionally suspicious Polish analysts willing to take seriously a prospect of cooperation and even some form of continental alliance with Russia.⁸⁵ Only time will tell whether such a project can be put into practice, but in view of the myriads of challenges facing both Europe and Russia in an era of great turbulence, it would probably be both an optimal solution for all parties involved and might bring an end to the perennial Russian Problem. However, the real chances for such a

successful development are low at present. In addition to the numerous European suspicions and obstacles, the US would certainly oppose any chance of its implementation. Washington might be forced to relax some of its pressures on Moscow, but it is unlikely that it would be willing to allow Russia to get more influence in Europe.

From Moscow's viewpoint the situations in the East and South of the country look more promising. As I have already indicated, neither China nor any Islamic power from the South is now likely to represent a major strategic challenge to Russian state security. Islamic states are too divided and overall still too backward for that. Some terrorist attacks might emanate from there and cause a lot of problems for the Russian citizens, but they cannot represent a strategic threat to the Russian state as such.

Concerning China, which is a centralized and technologically speaking relatively advanced great nation, the situation is different. China has enormous potential, but at least for the moment is too busy with its overwhelming internal problems to advance an aggressive policy towards its Northwestern neighbours. Although some parts of the present Russian Far East and Eastern Siberia used to be part of the Chinese Empire, they have never been populated by Chinese Han, and the climate in the North is quite harsh. Any such territorial change in Northeastern Asia would upset the balance of power existing there, and would probably cause a negative reaction from the other

powerful states in the neighbourhood, such as Japan and South Korea. In addition, the most important reason for the Moscow-Beijing alliance is their common fear of the American superpower, which is certainly not going to diminish.

Last but not least, after 2001 the Russian Federation started to be considered as a part of BRICS, a group of quickly developing, former peripheral nations, which also includes Brazil, India, China and South Africa.⁸⁶ Although Russia is predominantly an old European nation, it has always been seen in the past as a backward country, and a “peripheral empire”,⁸⁷ and now has no chance of being absorbed into the EU, or of being integrated into the West, though cooperation with it is possible and would be highly desirable. The Russian Federation needs to build itself up as a separate and independent power centre and other BRICS nations are in a similar position.

Just as in the case of other BRICS members, the Russian Federation’s economy is still predominantly based on the raw material and cheap labour supplies for the development of Western Europe, North America and Japan. In the 21st century the international status of a nation is determined not so much by its cultural achievements and historical background, and not even by its geopolitical location, as by its place in the global economic system.⁸⁸ Moscow has thus found some at least partly adequate partners outside the Western community to improve its international image, prestige and

importance. Although BRICS is not strictly speaking an international organization with an established infrastructure and its own administrative apparatus, nevertheless it is a new and promising form of international cooperation of states with similar, though by no means the same, powers and world views. According to Dr Nicolai N. Petro, Professor of International Politics at the University of Rhode Island who served as the US State Department's Special Assistant under President George H. Bush Sr.: "the BRICS is no longer just a random assortment of states known for their high economic growth. Largely at Russia's initiative these nations have begun to coordinate their foreign policies and promote multipolar global initiatives."⁸⁹ According to him, "in the future each will try to use its economic and political clout to promote regional stability and challenge the Western-led model of modernization."⁹⁰

As the Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Ivanovich Denisov noticed that when a year ago all BRICS countries were members of the UN Security Council, their reactions to Middle East events and their voting patterns were almost identical.⁹¹ However, both structural differences and geopolitical disparities among the BRICS partners prevent their real integration in a coherent bloc. Russia's place in the global system and the international policy of the country still remain a subject of doubt and uncertainty. The Russian Problem is still with us and all the ways to solve it seem either risky or unrealistic. The first of

them suggested by Zbigniew Brzezinski is Western enlargement to the East under US leadership and control.⁹² He even wants to create a new consultative organ for that purpose to supervise that, and believes it could be located in Kiev, the ancient capital of Kievan Rus, in order to symbolize “the West’s renewed vitality and the enlarging scope”.⁹³ However, both the present Russian political elite and the majority of the people there would probably resist that. Also it is by no means certain that the US has enough means to impose its will on Eurasia, and “because of the country’s unique history – at first separate from world power, then an overnight superpower – it has little experience of sharing power with others”⁹⁴ and finding a solution which would be agreeable to all. It seems to me that it would be more practical, but from the Western viewpoint more risky, to approach Russia in the same way as China or Saudi Arabia as a different civilization and an independent power centre. Such recognition would preclude further soft power warfare against the country and would allow it to develop according to its own traditions and at its own pace. The famous American diplomat and expert on Russia, George Kennan strongly defended such an alternative approach, even at the end of his life in his final interview with the *New York Times* on May 2, 1998.⁹⁵ Just as in the case of China, Saudi Arabia, or Pakistan, the US and its allies might and even should be able to look after their economic and security interests there, but they would let Russia go its

own way and preserve its traditional allies and zone of influence. Russian Problem for the West might thus not disappear, but become accepted as one of many challenges of the pluralistic and globalized world. It is understandable that the Americans, due to their unique history and still enormous power at their disposal, want to transform the rest of mankind to their “own image and proximity”. However, as the American scholar and journalist Paul Klebnikov noticed (he had studied post-Soviet Russia in depth and paid for that by his own life): “The American model had political, economic, social and cultural components. Could it work in a country as large and as old as Russia?”⁹⁶ According to him, “The history of the Yeltsin regime suggests that it could not”.⁹⁷

Endnotes

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² Edward Winter, Russland und Papstum, vol 1, Berlin 1960, p. 179.

³ Marshal Poe, *The Russian Moment in World History* (Princeton University Press, 2003) p. 47

⁴ Op cit, p. 70.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Francesca Wilson, *Moscow Russia Through Foreign Eyes, 1553-1900* (New York: Praeger Publisher, 1970). p. 142.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Op Cit. p.134

⁹ According to credible estimates, the total number of premature deaths that can be attributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist system is in the order of 10 to 20 million deaths in World War II. Charles Clover, "Russia: Decline and Fall", *Financial Times*, October 18, 2011.

¹⁰ "Report on Growing Wealth Inequality", *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, October 15, 2012. See also Daniel Treisman, "Inequality: The Russian Experience", *Current History*, October 2012, pp. 264-268.

¹¹ "Report on Growing Wealth Inequality", *op. cit.*

¹² Peter Zeihan, , "The Russian Problem", *Stratfor*, October 16, 2007, p 3.

¹³ The importance of propaganda and psychological warfare in international relations was indicated by the Greek-Canadian scholar Professor Dimitri Kitsikis in his masterly work: *Propagande et pressions en politique internationale*. Paris: Presse Universitaires de France, 1963.

¹⁴ Kenneth Waltz, "Globalization and American Power", *National Interest*, Spring 2000, p. 55.

¹⁵ Thomas Graham, interviewed by RIA Novosti in JRL, December 28, 2010.

¹⁶ Interview by Yevgeny Primakov in the Italian journal *Limes*, June-September 1996.

¹⁷ According to the American scholars Andrei Shleifer and Daniel Treisman, “Russian foreign policy under Putin and Medvedev has been shaped by three objectives: boosting economic growth, fostering friendly regimes in the former Soviet states, and preventing terrorism at home”, “Why Moscow Says No”, *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2011, p. 125.

¹⁸ “Conversation with Vladimir Putin”, Official Website of the Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, December 15, 2011.

¹⁹ The example was the letter issued on February 6, 2003 from the Vilnius group comprising Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Romania and Slovakia, which effectively supported US military intervention in Iraq. Even before that on January 30, 2003, Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary signed the letter of the five European members which expressed their support for a regime change in Iraq in the lead-up to the American invasion of this country. To most observers it demonstrated a total division within the EU in respect to foreign policy and attitudes towards international law.

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²¹ Graham, “Managing Russian Unsettled Borders”, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, April 18, 2011.

²² Zeihan, *op. cit.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ April 20, 2011. "Prime Minister Putin delivers a report on the government performance in 2011 to the State Duma", *http: premier.ru*.

²⁵ "Putin: economic weakness – threat to national sovereignty", *www.russiatoday.com*, April 21, 2011.

²⁶ Vladimir Putin, "Building Social Justice – A Social Policy for Russia", *Kamsamalskaya Pravda*, February 13, 2012.

²⁷ Ludmila Alexandrova, "Putin defends social state, alternative to modernization concept analysts", *ITAR-TASS*, April 21, 2011. For particularly harsh criticism see Yevgeniy Gontmakcher, "Reconstruction of Real Putin's Doctrine", *Vedomosti*, October 19, 2012.

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³⁰ Voices like that are coming from different people such as the President of the Geopolitical Academy in Moscow General Leonid Ivashov. ("Revolution in Russia is inevitable", *Forum.msk.ru* 29.03.2011) and the Chair of Russian Domestic Politics and Political Institutions Program at the Carnegie Moscow Center Lilie Shevtsova ("The Next Russian Revolution", *Current History*, October 2012). After

the recent Russian elections, the leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation Gennady Zyuganov warned that Russia “might go through revolution” (Interfax News, March 27, 2012.

³¹ Thomas Gomart, “Dva Orientira dlya Rossii”, *Rossiya v Globalnoi Politike*, vol. 8, No. 6, November/December 2010, p. 121. See also Alexandr Kramarenko, “Ideologiya Vneshnei Politiki Sovremennai Rossii, *Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizn* 8/9/2009.

³² Tatiana Panfilova, “Problemy Osmysleniya Mesta Rossii v Mire”, *Kosmopolis* No. 3/19/Winter 2007/2008, pp. 41-42.

³³ Igor Yurgens, “Political Analyst sets out ways to develop soft power”, *Rossiyskatya Gazeta*, September 16, 2011.

³⁴ Joseph S.N. Nye, jr., *The Paradox of American Power. Why the World’s One Superpower Can’t go it Alone* (Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 69-76.

³⁵ Igor Yurgens, *op. cit.*

³⁶ “Russia and France. A New Quality of Relations – International Roundtable”, *International Affairs*, vol. 57, No. 1, 2011, p. 43.

³⁷ Almost all major newspapers and privately owned media in Moscow and St. Petersburg are extremely hostile to Putin and the existing regime. See for instance the article by Steven Korn, “New Radio Liberty to Carry Its Old Mission”, *Moscow Times*, 16 October, 2012 (issue 4993) or the article by the editor of this paper Michael

Bohm, “Why the Foreign Ministry Should Keep Quiet”, *Moscow Times*, November 2, 2012. Ironically Freedom House located in Washington D.C. describes the Russian Federation as a non-free country the same as or even worse than China or Saudi Arabia.

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⁴⁰ “Russia Should Stop Shying Away From Defending Itself in the Foreign Press”, Interview by Alexei Pankin of William Dunkerley, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, October 22, 2012.

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⁴² Graham, *op. cit.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

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⁴⁸ *op. cit.*, p. 362 and various other passages in the book..

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⁵¹ Trenin, *op. cit.*

⁵² Trenin, "For Russia, Syria is not about Syria", *The Daily Star* (Lebanon), July 3, 2012.

⁵³ *op. cit.*

⁵⁴ As quoted by Jeffrey Markoff, "Why Moscow Fears Arab Unrest", *Current History*, October 2012, p. 260.

⁵⁵ Trenin, *op. cit.*

⁵⁶ Andrei Liakhov in "Would President Romney's Foreign Policy Make a Difference?" [http:// US – Russia.org](http://US-Russia.org). October 29, 2012.

⁵⁷ Dale Herspring, *op. cit.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Thomas Graham, *op. cit.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ About Russia's economic disengagement from the US, see Andrei Shleifer and Daniel Treisman, *op. cit.*

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⁶⁴ *op. cit.*

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