

Following the Path of Ozymandias

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Abstract

By the end of the second decade of the 21st century, the Russian foreign policy discourse had transformed from hard-headed “sober realism” into bizarre “values-obsessed realism.” The texts of Russia’s official strategies now appeal to such aspects of political identity as “spiritual values,” “cultural (civilizational) code,” “historical truth,” etc. Such appeals, coupled with almost eschatological rhetoric, are not uncommon in official speeches of the country’s political leadership. But this shift in political discourse cannot be explained just by the reaction to the changes in the international situation after the incorporation of Crimea into Russia. The author suggests that the reason is a change in the political leader’s mindset after staying in power for such a long time. As his powers get extended, almost any political leader begins to think in “historical” and “global” categories, viewing personnel unchangeability not as vulnerability, but, on the contrary, as proof of unique “stability” and “governability.”

Keywords: Russian foreign policy, “value realism,” memory policy, international security crisis, personalism, unchangeability of power, national security.

“France cannot be France without greatness.”

Charles de Gaulle. *Military Memoires.*

The events of February 2022 drew a line under the whole era of Russian and, probably, even world history. The magnitude of the changes is such that it would be pointless not just to try to comprehend, but even describe them. However, the historical caesura allows us to look at what has happened as a distinctive transformation of Russian foreign policy within the international context.

DISCURSIVE REFITTING

On October 18, 2018, speaking at the Valdai Discussion Club about possible use by Russia of weapons of mass destruction, President Vladimir Putin unexpectedly switched to nearly eschatological rhetoric. Having repeated the official position that a preventive strike by Russia was impossible, he noted that, if attacked, the country would be a victim of aggression, and “we will go to heaven as martyrs,” but the aggressors “will simply rot in hell, because they will not even have time to repent” under a retaliatory strike.

Despite all the reaction it evoked, this statement could still be considered a polemical technique and an emotional figure of speech, but here’s a slight problem: already in 2018, the remark about martyrs in paradise was followed by many more examples of how “sober realism” (see, for example: Heuvel, 2017) in Russia’s foreign policy, actively emphasized since the beginning of the century, had transformed into something else. Although a new version of the Foreign Policy Concept, adopted in 2016, characterized Russia’s foreign policy as “open and predictable,” it replaced its pragmatism with “the unique role Russia has played for centuries as a counterbalance in international affairs and the development of global civilization” (and, allegedly inter alia, Russia had

stopped being considered a part of European civilization). In the same year, the Information Security Doctrine for the first time emphasized “the informational impact on the population of Russia (...) in order to erode traditional Russian spiritual and moral values.” The Information Society Development Strategy, adopted in 2017, associated the future “knowledge society” with “obtaining, preserving, producing and disseminating reliable information, considering the strategic national priorities of the Russian Federation” and proclaimed “the priority of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values.” The number of various public novelties including such lexemes as “tradition,” “civilization,” “cultural dominant” or “civilizational code” increased rapidly. In 2018, the Nationalities Policy Strategy was supplemented with Paragraph 111, which stated that “modern Russian society is united by a single cultural (civilizational) code,” and the constitutional amendments adopted in 2020 augmented the constitutional discourse with such notions as “the protection of historical truth” and the inadmissibility of “diminution of the heroic deed of the people.”

Such discursive refitting can be considered quite common, at least in the past two decades. However, firstly, these processes have developed or continue to develop in countries that can hardly compare to Russia in terms of international influence or place in the global order, for example, Hungary, Poland or Turkey. And secondly, until the last round of the “crusade for values” the foreign policy of these countries was largely determined by historical dramas of the past as well. The Trianon Trauma still matters to the Hungarian political establishment; Polish historical policy has been buttressed by the specially created Institute of National Remembrance since 1998; finally, the fight against accusations of Armenian genocide and the Ottoman legacy problem have been a pressing issue for Ankara for decades. Revanchist discourse was quite in demand in Russia at first, but seemed to have almost vanished in the late 2000s and early 2010s as Russia had struck some balance in relations with the United States and the European Union (“reset,” “Partnership for Modernization”) and joined the WTO in 2012. Russia carried out a series of reforms that conformed as much as possible to the New Public Management principles—but at the same

time strongly rejected the past Soviet experience. These included not only the adoption of the Bologna educational standards and Unified State Exam practice, but also reforms in the budget sector, housing and communal services, and the health care and pension systems. The Foreign Policy Concept of 2013 designated the country as “an integral and inseparable part of European civilization,” and, like in 2008, proclaimed “the joint development of a culture of resolving differences on the basis of pragmatism” a long-term priority of the Russian-American dialogue.

It should be noted that all these steps were taken after Putin’s “historic” speech at the Munich Security Conference. Let us compare them with an excerpt from the latest National Security Strategy: “Traditional Russian spiritual, moral, cultural and historical values have been actively attacked by the United States and its allies, as well as by transnational corporations, and foreign non-profit non-governmental, religious, extremist and terrorist organizations. They are exerting informational and psychological influence on individual, group and social consciousness” (see Ukaz, 2021). Such statements seem to have wandered in from a parallel reality—which has suddenly become the only reality.

CRIMEAN AUTUMN?

The advocates of Russia’s turn towards “values-obsessed realism” have an unambiguous and even radical justification for it—Crimea. Indeed, the cooling of relations between Russia and its “Western partners,” which followed events in the irredenta and a subsequent conflict in Donbass, was, in fact, unprecedented and caused dramatic changes both in international cooperation and in diplomatic rhetoric that had probably not been so much vulgarized even in bipolar times. However, recognizing such an argument as the only explanation implies two extremely debatable consequences even for the advocates themselves.

Firstly, in this case, Russia’s foreign policy until 2014 (not since detested “Yeltsinism,” but much later) becomes extremely reactive and even shortsighted. It turns out that up until the Crimean events,

it mainly played along with the European orchestra, voluntarily and on its own initiative, under the direction of the same statesmen. And only the West's sharp game that involved the Euromaidan and the subsequent regime change, which suddenly turned out to be a surprise, led to a seeming "epiphany" and a revision of such policy. A popular remark that in the preceding years Russia was gaining strength and was not strong enough looks disputable—at least in terms of economic dynamics since many statistical indicators in 2000-2014 were much better than the current ones.

Secondly, the aforementioned cooling, albeit precipitating a deep crisis in bilateral and multilateral relations, did not cause the final burning of bridges even with Ukraine. True, trade turnover between the two countries dropped almost six-fold in six years, but Russia still remained among Kiev's top three trading partners. Amid endless rhetoric exposing the "Kiev junta's crimes," this looked if not mercantile, then somewhat ambiguous as there was neither a break of diplomatic relations nor any problems with the recognition of Poroshenko and Zelensky as presidents. Despite the exchange of sanctions, Russia's foreign trade with the EU, which had plummeted to \$130.6 billion by 2016 (Trade, 2017), approached the 2014 level in 2020 (\$218.8 billion (On Foreign Trade, 2021) and \$258.5 billion (Trade, 2017), respectively). In 2019, PACE confirmed the full powers of the Russian delegation, and two years later the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline was completed.

These are just small steps, of course, in comparison with the previous format of relations, but amid the mounting debate about a new Cold War, they look like signs of thaw, especially since "European partners" remained attractive as a tourist and emigration destination for Russian citizens. For example, in 2019, Russians made 1.3 million tourist trips to Germany (1.4 million in 2013), 1.27 million trips to Italy (0.96 million in 2013), and 279,000 trips to the UK (191,000 in 2013). At the same time, more than 167,000 Russians emigrated to Germany in 2013-2019 (a 20 percent increase since 2006-2012) (Migrationsbericht, 2020), and the number of Russians moving to Britain for permanent residence increased from 49,000 to 81,000.

Crimea did trigger a sharp aggravation in the polemics between Russia and Europe, not to mention the fact that it proved quite opportune for the American agenda. The U.S. military budget increased by more than 20 percent (from \$607 billion to \$740 billion), and there is no need even to use Richardson's model to predict its further rapid growth, as old habits die hard, especially when these expenses bring tangible financial gains to their beneficiaries. The European divergence is eloquently illustrated by Angela Merkel's statement that the Russian president lives "in another world." There is just one clarification: until recently, when the situation began to be interpreted quite unambiguously, in the absence of any "objective reality" both sides of the conflict obviously saw themselves living in different worlds.

It is hard to say who was the first to enter this race. The Russian establishment, of course, actively used the "machinations of the West" card even before the Crimean events, but the young Eastern European hawks drafted in 2004 were just as zealous in slamming Moscow's initiatives. Against the background of economic growth, these acts, however, resembled a bizarre discursive ping-pong game, in which the stakes were insignificant, but the process looked more impressive than any possible result. Neither the major plane crash near Smolensk that killed Polish top government officials, nor the problem of Russian-speaking non-citizens in Latvia and Estonia, nor the decommunization that had afflicted almost all former socialist countries caused systemic changes in Russia's foreign policy—not to mention the fact that despite the general condemnation of NATO's eastward expansion, the signing of individual partnership plans (IPAP) with Azerbaijan and Armenia (2005) and with Kazakhstan and Moldova (2006) was taken by Moscow rather indifferently.

TIRED TOYS

Several years ago, in an article for the Carnegie Moscow Center, Maxim Samorukov expertly formulated one of the main dramas of a permanent leader: "The post of head of state does not provide for further career growth, therefore, in the case of rulers who have been in power for 12-15 years, this fatigue from routine leads them to start

thinking in terms of centuries and the entire history of humankind” (Samorukov, 2015). Indeed, this state-thinking syndrome persists even if political regimes traditionally inclined to “think in terms of human history” (like Soviet, Chinese or modern Central Asian ones) are excluded from consideration. Hun Sen, who is still ruling Cambodia, has been patronizing Buddhist temples in recent decades, and has had the royal title of Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo (Lord Prime Minister, Supreme Military Commander) since 2007 (by which time he had been in power for twenty-two years). After twenty-two years at the helm, Ugandan President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni blamed the country’s troubles on “foreign homosexuals” who had been undermining “traditional values.” In the 1950s, Antonio Salazar, who had been ruling Portugal for more than two decades by that time, tried to equip Portuguese colonialism with the doctrine of lusotropicalism, for which purpose he organized a trip by its author, Gilberto Freyre, to the decaying empire. Finally, at the end of his political career, Charles de Gaulle willingly talked about greatness and renewal, harmony and necessity, as if ignoring those Frenchmen who warned each other on the streets “Cours, camarade, le vieux monde est derrière toi!” (“Run, comrade, the old world is behind you!”).

In other words, as his powers are extended, virtually any political chief is tempted to believe the famous saying: “A politician thinks of the next election; a statement of the next generation” (although the political experience of the author of this phrase, James Freeman Clarke, was confined to a congregational church at the corner of Warren Avenue and W Brookline Street in Boston). To paraphrase another (this time Russian) classic author, we can say that it is much easier to deceive oneself when one is eager to be deceived. In 2004, Vladimir Putin said that “if you work hard for seven years, you can go crazy.” But as far as the term of its own “service” is concerned, the Russian establishment is an unchallenged leader not only in the UN Security Council, but also in BRICS, and even in the G20. Moreover, he himself views such unchangeability of personnel not as vulnerability, but, on the contrary, as proof of unique “stability” and “governability,” preferring not to

notice the fact that political longevity causes policy contradictions to pile up. The impossibility of resolving them spurs discussions about “moral leadership,” “moral health” and “ideological foundations of the world order.” Even Russia’s latest proposals concerning security guarantees (actually quite specific, albeit knowingly unfeasible since they concern the sovereignty of other independent states) were preceded by rancorous comments about “non-recognition,” “disrespect,” “disregard for concerns,” and “deception.” In a word, it was another round of infinite *Kulturkampf*.

THE KAZAKH PROOF

The year 2022 instantly brought convincing arguments to show doubting citizens that “wisdom comes with years, but sometimes years come alone.” Although Nursultan Nazarbayev ruled Kazakhstan for almost thirty years, leaving it not only with the renamed capital, but also with an almost personal constitution (Constitution, 2017, Art. 91, p. 2), the usual hosannas to the “leader of the nation” and the “stability” he had created did not prevent a large-scale political crisis, when for the first time in history the involvement of CSTO peacekeepers was initiated. Unlike specific and pragmatic plans to promote regional integration or create a financial center in Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev’s latest initiatives concerned “genetic identity” as part of the patriotic Mangilik El (Eternal Country) program, “spiritual modernization” and “sacred geography” provided for in the Rouhani Zhangyru (Spiritual Revival) program, as well as other initiatives in the field of “cultural and genetic code” (Nazarbayev, 2017). Even after the formal resignation of the elbasy (leader of the nation) from some of the top government positions, many streets, cities, airports, and educational institutions were renamed after Nazarbayev, despite his “principled objection.” It turned out, however, that despite all of Kazakhstan’s convincingly proven differences from its Central Asian neighbors like Tajikistan or Turkmenistan, such “personification of stability” still lasts not for so long. Astana had never been among the outsiders in any global rankings, but this did not save the country from the natural consequences of an unintended

“value drift” that was caused by a new “autumn of the patriarch” and that upset national governance.

In the latest version of the Russian National Security Strategy, adopted in July 2021, the excessive focus on issues of “universal human principles” and “spiritual and moral guidelines,” leading, in particular, to the emergence of two new strategic national priorities at once (not only “information security,” but also “the protection of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values, culture and historical memory”), makes this strategic planning document similar to the best examples of classical literature devoted to overcoming imaginary threats. Don Quixote fought windmills, and Captain Ahab hunted white whales. Faced with a lack of real challenges after all these years, political leaders can measure their strength with a “distorted view of historical facts” or “propaganda of all-permissiveness.” After all, many Ozimandias did this all the time.

“The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

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