RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY: THE INTERNAL-INTERNATIONAL LINK

edited by **Aldo Ferrari** and **Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti**
introduction by **Paolo Magri**

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Introduction

What drives Russia's foreign policy in Vladimir Putin's times? Why did the Kremlin decide to annex Crimea, occupy South Ossetia, intervene in Syria, or give its blessing to Nord Stream II? Which are the most important groups affecting Moscow's foreign policy decisions? And are Putin and his entourage more swayed by domestic or international developments?

More than two decades into Putin's rise as Russia's uncontested leader, many facets of the country's foreign policy decisions remain obscure, shrouded under a thin veil of vagueness and secrecy. And sure, the criteria followed by leaders and their aides in foreign policy choices may change over time and place, so that many of us looking for simple explanations will often be left wanting. However, the fascination with how Russia has been able to punch above its weight for over a decade now, being able to play its part as one of the main powers in the current international system, is well founded. The fact that we are still left in the dark over the interplay of domestic and international factors in Russia's major foreign policy decisions is therefore problematic, as the "mystery" surrounding such actions lends itself to being either romanticized or outright condemned, but often lacks objective analysis.

A case in point is the recent poisoning and, later, incarceration of Alexei Navalny, Russia's most famous opposition leader. Were it not for Moscow's sporadic but ruthless crackdowns against dissent (and, over the past year, the relentlessness with which the regime went after a specific person), it could be

argued that Navalny would not have become an international martyr, instead remaining a prominent but not too powerful opponent. Moscow's choice of a hard stance has not only dented Putin's stability at home, but appears to have undermined its own prospects at reconciliation with the West – at least in the short term. Indeed, just a few weeks before the release of this Report, G7 leaders went out of their way to condemn "Russia's irresponsible and destabilising behaviour", explicitly mentioning Navalny's poisoning and noting "with regret the deterioration in Russia's relations with Western countries".

As the Navalny affair unfolded, in February this year, another coup de theatre left foreign observers puzzled. As the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, visited Moscow, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov seized on the opportunity to label the EU an "unreliable partner", sending European diplomacy into a spin. It was the same phrase that the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, had used to label Trump's United States in 2017, plunging transatlantic relations to their lowest point in decades, and Lavrov probably knew this. Most importantly, it was unexpected. Lavrov's decision to condemn the EU arrived at one of the most delicate times in relations between Brussels and Moscow over the past few years. Russia could have leveraged Borrell's visit, coming on the heels of Navalny's incarceration, as an attempt to open a new window for dialogue with the EU. Instead, it chose to "bite" Borrell's extended hand.

These two recent cases highlight how unpredictable these decisions may appear to "untrained eyes". This Report is an attempt to do just that: to shed some light on Russia's foreign policy decision making, highlighting the links between internal and international factors, and showing how their interplay can explain (at least in part) decisions that might have been considered surprising beforehand.

Alexander Graef kicks off the discussion posing a very relevant question: to what extent do Russian foreign policy think tanks manage to have an impact on their country's

foreign policy-making process? The question of impact does not only affect Russian foreign policy think tanks, of course; as a matter of fact, it haunts most of the world's think tanks, which sometimes fail to influence policy-makers – or even to deliver their policy recommendations to them. Yet, the informal nature of Russian politics exacerbates this failure, as well as posing methodological issues for the researchers trying to analyse this issue. Graef argues that, despite the comparatively high number of Russian think tanks, few of them have real impact. Their political prominence is linked to their personal access to the president and the staff of his administration. Even in that case, being close to Putin does not automatically imply influence. Instead, the political volatility deriving from the characteristics of the Russian regime often leads to the existence of multiple interest groups within the administration.

The Russian Orthodox Church is arguably much more successful than think tanks in influencing Russian diplomacy and in its role in promoting conservatism in Russian foreign policy. The Church's bilateral cooperation with the Kremlin has been on the rise for some years now, to the point that critics argue that it became a "propaganda machine". But Alicja Curanović shows in her chapter how the Church-State relationship is more complex than it seems. She emphasises the often-unnoticed dynamic nature of conservatism in Russian politics, which has been evolving for over a decade. After a description of conservatism in contemporary Russian politics, her chapter touches upon the domestic factors affecting Russian diplomacy's conservative agenda and focuses on the Russian Orthodox Church as the "most influential conservatist lobbyist" considering four timely cases: the intervention in Syriaand the rise in Russian activities in Africa, Hungary, and China.

What about Russia's liberals? Do they still matter in today's Russia? And, most importantly, what does it mean to be a liberal in Russia? Andrei Kolesnikov notes the extreme vagueness of the term "liberalism" in Russian social life, as "liberals" are simultaneously understood as supporters of the

market economy, as Westernised citizens and people with non-traditional sexual orientations, as opponents of the government's "strong hand", and more broadly as people with democratic views. Traditionalists simply label them everything that is bad and anti-state. The author takes us on a journey into Russia's history to trace the origins of Russian-style liberalism, introducing us to centuries-long debates around Russia's identity and belonging/non-adherence to Europe. He also looks at "what is left" of political liberals currently and analyses their influence (or lack thereof) in shaping Russian policies *vis-à-vis* the West.

In the last decade, Russia has been particularly active in several theatres that were kind of neglected after the fall of the Soviet Union. Possibly, the most prominent one is the Middle East, where Russia has increased its role dramatically, especially since its military campaign in Syria in the fall of 2015. Marianna Belenkaya and Polina Vasilenko claim that, despite the abundance of analyses of the drivers and goals of Russian policies in the Middle East, the process of Russian decision-making on the Middle East remains – somewhat surprisingly – largely overlooked. They fill this gap and investigate the complex domain of Russian stakeholders on the Middle East policy track. Is there such thing as a "Middle East lobby" in Russia's political and business circles and, if so, does it really have an impact on the Kremlin's major decisions? They answer this question brilliantly through an analysis of internal institutional and personal drivers of Russian policy in the region.

Sub-Saharan Africa is another new/old endeavour of Russia's foreign policy that made headlines – especially after the Sochi Summit in 2019. According to Maxim Matusevich, Russia's expanding and deepening involvement there should be seen in parallel to Moscow's growing assertiveness and willingness to push back against Western interests and liberal values. However, contrary to the Soviet experience on the continent, this new era of Russian involvement in Africa is marked not so much by ideology but rather by a collusion between African

ruling elites and the business interests of Putin's entourage. Matusevich shows us the tools and the key people in Russia's Africa strategies, from Evgeny Prigozhin – nicknamed Putin's "chef", allegedly in charge of the private military company (PMC) "Wagner" – to Rosneft's CEO, Igor Sechin.

Decisions behind Russia's foreign policy actions are complex, often based on the interplay between internal and international dynamics. This does not mean that we should not be questioning them. However, without a deeper understanding of what shapes Moscow's foreign policy, diplomacy and de-escalation efforts are often destined to fail. As Aldo Ferrari and Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti note in their conclusions, this Report's goal is precisely to show the complexity of Russia's decision-making process beneath the surface of a monolithic, increasingly authoritarian government, in order to avoid falling into the trap of an excessive "Putin-centrism". Acknowledging the structural and short-term forces shaping Russia's actions on the world stage should always be the first step for any viable approach to the country by European policy makers.

Paolo Magri
ISPI Executive Vice President

1. Influential or Irrelevant? The Role of Foreign Policy Think Tanks in Russia

Alexander Graef

Russian foreign policy think tanks have rarely been the focus of empirical analysis. With some notable exceptions,[1] studies about domestic political players in Russian foreign policy-making either ignore them completely or mention them only in passing. This chapter draws on previous publications by the author[2] and reflects on the political influence of these institutions in light of the complexity and secrecy of the foreign policy-making process, which rarely makes it possible to identify conclusive evidence. This is true for all states, but the informal nature

[1] C. Vendil Pallin and S. Oxenstierna, *Russian Think Tanks and Soft Power*, Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI-R), August 2017; E. Bacon, "Policy Change and the Narratives of Russia's Think Tanks", *Palgrave Communications*, vol. 4, fasc. 1, no. 94, 2018, doi:10.1057/s41599-018-0148-y; I. Okunev, "Barriers to the Development of Independent Foreign Policy Think-Tanks in Russia", Training Program for Russian Policy and Opinion Makers, Policy Papers 2/11, Institut of Public Affais (Warsaw), 2011.

[2] A. Graef and A. Barbashin, *Thinking Foreign Policy in Russia: Think Tanks and Grand Narratives*, Atlantic Council, 12 November 2019; A. Graef, "Russia's RAND Corporation? The Ups and Downs of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI)", *Russian Analytical Digest*, vol. 234, pp. 5-9, 2019, DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000331035; A. Graef, "Außenpolitikexperten in Russland: Zwischen Forschung, Beratung und Propaganda" ("Foreign policy experts in Russia: Between research, advisory and propaganda"), *Russland-Analysen*, no. 372, 2019, p. 11-14; A. Graef, "Denkfabriken und Expertise. Russlands außen- und sicherheitspolitische Community" ("Think Tanks and Expertise. The Russian foreign- and security policy community"), *OSTEUROPA*, vol. 69, no. 8-9, 2018, p. 77-98.

of Russian politics exacerbates this methodological problem. Tracing and measuring the political influence of think tanks is therefore difficult.

According to the 2020 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report, Russia currently has 143 think tanks.[3] This comparatively high number follows from a broad definition of organisations in terms of their functions, namely to offer "policy-oriented research, analysis and advice".[4] Most Russian think tanks work on social, economic and financial issues, conduct opinion polls, or support the election campaigns of governors and regional lawmakers, for whom foreign policy plays no particular role. The subgroup of foreign policy think tanks is rather small and diverse in terms of institutional form, ownership and historical trajectory. These think tanks include various research institutes of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS) and entire university departments, but also state-sponsored platforms and (private) policy research institutes that either exist as non-commercial organisations (NCO) or enterprises.

By contrast, in the United States, think tanks have been traditionally understood as "nonprofit organizations" with "substantial organizational independence" from the state or single-interest groups,[5] in order to set them apart from (semi-public) administration bodies. This conception builds on the historical tradition of private funding and philanthropy in a highly competitive liberal democratic political order. These conditions, however, do not travel well to most other political cultures.[6] Even in Western liberal democracies such as Germany,

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[3] J. McGann, *2020 Global Go to Think Tank Index Report*, Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania, 2021, p. 44. According to the report Russia currently occupies the 12th place in the list of states with the largest number of think tanks following Italy (153). The United States (2203) and China (1413) are by far the states with the largest number of think tanks.

[4] Ibid., p. 13.

[5] R.K. Weaver, "The Changing World of Think Tanks", *PS: Political Science & Politics* 22, no. 3, 1989, pp. 563-78.

[6] D. Stone and M.Garnett, "Introduction: Think Tanks, Policy Advice and Governance", in D. Stone, A. Denham, and M. Garnett (Eds.), *Think Tanks across*

France, Spain and Italy, policy research and advisory institutions in foreign and security policy receive substantial parts of their funding through public grants or are even direct foundations of state agencies and political parties. Russia belongs to this state-centric tradition,[7] but its authoritarian, neo-patrimonial political system creates unique conditions.

Historical Legacy

The Russian system of foreign policy knowledge production beyond the state bureaucracy emerged historically from the 20th Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in February 1956.[8] At the time, the rise of Soviet power increasingly required high-quality analyses of the global economy that went beyond empty ideological formula predicting the collapse of Western capitalism. The establishment of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO; today the Primakov Institute of World Economy and International Relations) as part of the Soviet Academy of Sciences a few months after the Party Congress subsequently inspired the foundation of further research institutes studying the culture, politics and economies of different world regions.[9]

Nations: A Comparative Approach, p. 3; see also J. McGann, *Think Tanks, Foreign Policy and the Emerging Powers*, Springer International Publishing. Kindle-Version, 2019, pp. 1120-21.

[7] For this general differentiation between the continental and Anglo-American tradition see J.D. Kelstrup, *The Politics of Think Tanks in Europe*, London-New York, Routledge, 2016. For the situation in Italy see A. Longhini, "Foreign Policy Think tanks in the Italian Political Context: Evolutions and Perspectives", *International Journal*, vol. 70, no. 4, 2015, pp. 573-92.

[8] Politburo member Anastas Mikoyan, who for many years was responsible for foreign economic affairs, used his personal influence to directly support the foundation by pointing to research deficits and simultaneous US advances in the study of the Soviet Union. See P. Cherkasov, *IMEMO. Ocherk istorii* (*IMEMO. Historical Portrait*), Moskva, Ves' Mir, 2016, pp. 89-90.

[9] To be sure, policy advisory institutes existed before. The IMEMO became the successor to the Institute for World Economy and World Politics, which was

These included the Institute for African Studies (1959), the Institute for Latin America (1961), the Institute of the Far East (1966), the Institute for US and Canadian Studies (1967, ISKAN; today ISKRAN) and the Institute of Europe (1987).[10]

Until 1991, these institutes provided access to restricted information for selected intellectual elites and served as alternative in-system platforms for policy research and debate beyond the Communist party and the Soviet military. Nevertheless, they remained alien bodies in the Soviet foreign policy decision-making process.[11] Rather than being generators of new policy ideas, their role was, with few exceptions, limited to the public legitimation of official policies. At times, researchers also served as informal ambassadors to intellectual elites and think tankers in the West. Their role in Soviet policy-making changed only in the late 1980s under CPSU General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev.[12]

In the context of perestroika and glasnost, Gorbachev for the first time opened up broader access to operational politics, particularly for researchers at the ISKAN and IMEMO. The General Secretary's willingness to reform required both new ideas and allies against more conservative party and military elites. The intellectual exchange was also facilitated by personal

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established in 1925. In 1947, however, it was abolished after the ideas of its long-term director, Eugene Varga, about the post-war posture of the Soviet Union came into conflict with Stalin's personal views.

[10] The exception is the Institute for Oriental Studies, which was established in November 1818 in St. Petersburg, but moved to Moscow in 1950.

[11] See for example, J. Checkel, *Ideas and International Political Change, Soviet/Russian Behavior and the End of the Cold War*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1997. For a somewhat different view that focuses on the diffusion of Western political ideas over several decades see R.D. English, *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals and the End of the Cold War*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2000.

[12] For personal testimony by IMEMO researchers that attest to these changes see P. Cherkasov, "Vozvrasheniye Primakova (1985-1989 гг.)" ("The return of Primakov (1985-1989)"), *Mirovaya Ekonomika i Mezhdunarodnyye Otnosheniya*, no. 10, 2013, pp. 99-106.

relations between the academic and the political leadership. In 1985 IMEMO Director Aleksandr Yakovlev, the "spiritual father" of perestroika, moved to the Central Committee as secretary of the Department of Ideology. His successor at the IMEMO, Yevgeny Primakov, who eventually would become Russian Foreign Minister and Prime Minister, was appointed chairman of the Union Council of the Supreme Soviet in 1989.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the social and political position of these *institutchiki* – literally "people from the institutes" – changed radically.[13] The academic institutes, which were entirely state-funded, lost much of their previous funding. In the face of economic crisis, many, especially younger employees left academia and sought new employment elsewhere or emigrated altogether. At the same time, the institutional integration of the academic institutes into the overall policy process, previously organised by the CPSU, ended, and foreign policy issues largely receded into the background.

The greater degree of openness in the immediate post-Soviet era, however, also enabled younger employees of academic institutes and universities to establish contacts with the political elite or become part of this elite themselves, either as members of the State Duma or as part of President Yeltsin's administration.[14] This direct involvement in the construction of the new state, together with the limited supply of young academics, laid the foundation for the long-lasting dominance of Soviet baby boomers among Russian foreign policy experts. The shared Soviet experience between this older generation of researchers and leading Russian diplomats also provided

[13] The term *institutchiki* is not widely used in Russian but stems from Strobe Talbott's introduction to the English translation of the autobiography by long-term ISKAN director Georgy Arbatov, see S. Talbott, "Introduction", in G. Arbatov, *The System. An Insider's Life in Soviet Politics*, New York, Random House, 1992, p. xiii.

[14] Prominent examples are Alexey Arbatov, Andrey Kokoshin, Vladimir Lukin, Vyacheslav Nikonov, Yuri Ryzhov, Sergey Shachrai and Sergey Stankevich.

important social and intellectual bonds that facilitated personal exchange.

The new degree of political pluralism, however, resulted in powerful opposition to President Yeltsin in the State Duma. In 1992, parts of the wider foreign policy elites joined forces in the Council for Foreign and Defence Policy (SVOP). As a private network of academics, businessmen, military officers, diplomats and journalists, it would go on to play both a coordinative and an agenda-setting role in the 1990s. For example, the network succeeded in advancing debates about the union with Belarus, the fight against drug abuse, and the urgently needed military reform, partially because of the important political offices held by its members. Many initiatives and ideas, however, never materialised, because the political institutions lacked the capacity to act. In the "revolutionary decade", internal power struggles and Yeltsin's re-election in 1996 took priority.

Most other consulting and research groups that emerged at the time remained small and almost exclusively dependent on foreign funding and support, coming, for example, from major private US donors, such as the Ford Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the Ploughshares Fund and the Open Society Foundation, but also European foundations. Some foreign think tanks also established offices and official representations in Moscow, including the Carnegie Foundation, the East-West Institute and several German party foundations, which over time turned into important meeting points and hotbeds for intellectual debate.

Think Tanks in the Super-Presidential System

Since Vladimir Putin's rise to political power in 1999, the political situation for think tanks in Russia has changed in significant ways. External influences on Russian foreign policy-making have been systematically curtailed, while the Presidential

administration has increased its institutional clout.[15] Former veto players, such as regional governors or leaders of the political opposition, which at times played a significant role in the 1990s, have either been co-opted, lost political support, or emigrated. New elites from St. Petersburg with personal connections to Vladimir Putin have steadily replaced the old guard from the Yeltsin era.

Since 2003, the Presidential party, United Russia, has held a majority and sometimes even a supermajority in the State Duma.[16] This ensures broad legislative support for Presidential policies.[17] Likewise, the Foreign Ministry, which developed independent positions *vis-à-vis* the Kremlin in the 1990s, has been transformed into an executive organ of presidential policy.[18] However, it still remains the central point of contact for experts from the institutes of the RAS and universities, including the educational institutions subordinate to the Ministry, which train the next generation of diplomats: the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) and the Diplomatic Academy.

Within this political regime, the foreign policy-making process remains opaque even to insiders. Direct knowledge transfer happens behind closed doors and its systematic application to political agenda setting and, in particular, decision-making

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[15] See for example F. Burkhardt, "Institutionalising Authoritarian Presidencies: Polymorphous Power and Russia's Presidential Administration", *Europe-Asia Studies*, pp. 472-507, 2020, DOI:10.1080/09668136.2020.1749566.

[16] For the election results from 1993 to 2016 available in English see Interparliamentary Union, "Russian Federation Gossoudarstvennaya Duma (State Duma)".

[17] On this general trend see for example P. Chaisty, "The Legislative Effects of Presidential Partisan Powers in Post-Communist Russia", *Government and Opposition*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2008, pp. 424-53; and V. Gel'man, "Party Politics in Russia: From Competition to Hierarchy", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 60, no. 6, 2008, pp. 913-30.

[18] A. Baunov et al., "Putin i MID: kto kogo 'isportil'?" ("Putin and the Foreign Ministry: Who spoiled whom?"), *Radio Svoboda*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 10 June 2016.

depends on Presidential support. Some feedback-loops exist in the form of commissioned reports and analytical notes. Researchers at the MGIMO and the various academic institutes of the RAS frequently distribute this material among different state bodies, including the departments of the Presidential administration. Although the existence of thank-you-letters from the various state departments for specific reports testifies to institutionalised exchange, evidence of instrumental influence remains spurious. As a rule, what happens with the advice and recommendations they offer in these reports remains unknown even to the authors themselves.

For example, the Institute of International Studies at the MGIMO, which grew out of the Soviet Problem Research Laboratory for System Analysis (*Problemka*) to become the in-house think tank of the Foreign Ministry, "provides expert analyses within the research plan of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs" and guarantees "research and expert support" for the Ministry.[19] In this context, the Ministry issues an annual list of research topics which are, however, not mandatory and can be changed and expanded. Moreover, researchers at the MGIMO are free to suggest topics on their own initiative.[20] For example, from 2004 to 2012, the Institute published analytical notes on a monthly basis and also distributed them among various state institutions.[21] Some of this was commissioned work, including a report for the Russian Olympic Committee evaluating the security situation for the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi and

[19] Institut Mezhdunarodnykh Issledovaniy (Institute for International Studies), Polozheniye, Ob Institute mezhdnarodnykh issledovaniy MGIMO (U) MID Rossii (Regulation, On the Institute of International Studies MGIMO (U) MID Rossii), Prikaz no. 275, 26 May 2009, MGIMO (U) MID Rossii; and Institut Mezhdunarodnykh Issledovaniy (Institute for International Studies), Polozheniye, Ob Institute mezhdnarodnykh issledovaniy MGIMO (U) MID Rossii (Regulation, On the Institute of International Studies MGIMO (U) MID Rossii), Protokol, no. 17/20, 26 February 2020, MGIMO (U) MID Rossii.

[20] Russian expert, interview with the author, 2017.

[21] Analiticheskiye zapiski IMI [Analytical notes IMI], MGIMO, https://mgimo.ru/about/structure/period/7160/

a study about scenarios of regional developments commissioned by the Foreign Policy Directorate of the Presidential Administration.

Another access point for think tanks or, rather, for individual researchers with high academic or political standing, are the scientific, expert and public councils that have been systematically established over the past 15 years as consultative bodies of almost every state institution,[22] including the Ministry of Defence and the Federal Security Service (FSB).[23] These councils vary significantly in terms of structure, their number of members, and level of activity, but all, in some way or another, promote state efforts to create linkages with Russian society. Most of them, however, play merely a symbolic role and only imitate civil society participation in political decision-making.[24] In addition, twice a year Foreign Minister Lavrov invites a select group of about two dozen experts for a personal discussion. Membership of this Scientific Council of the Foreign Minister largely consists of leading representatives of the RAS institutes and the MGIMO, many of whom have been part of Lavrov's personal circles for decades, and sometimes even studied with him.[25]

Private think tanks, particularly those in the form of NCOs, have increasingly come under pressure from state regulation as a result of the domestic struggle for political

[22] Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii № 842 (Decree by the President of the Russian Federation no. 842), President of Russia Official Website, 4 August 2006.

[23] B. Aleksandrov, "Grazhdanskiye lyudi na Lubyanke. Pri FSB sozdan Obshchestvennyy sovet" ("Civilians at Lubyanka. The FSB has received a Public Council"), *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, no. 0 (4363), 5 May 2007; see also the website of the Public Council of the FSB.

[24] In the issue area of foreign policy the partial exceptions are the Expert Council of the International Affairs Committee at the Federation Council in the period from 2003 to 2010 and the Scientific Council of the Security Council, which now has 150 members.

[25] The list of members was provided to the author by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

legitimacy.[26] This situation worsened after the mass protests in many Russian cities in winter 2011/2012 against electoral fraud and political stalemate. In July 2012, revisions of the Russian NCO law introduced the status of "foreign agents" for foreign-funded, politically engaged Russian NCOs, which encompasses a wide range of activities, and has now been extended to private citizens as well.[27] The May 2015 law on undesirable organisations, which created the category of foreign or international non-governmental organisations that "pose a threat to the foundations of the constitutional order of the Russian Federation, the defence capability of the country or the security of the state",[28] terminated the activities of several foreign donor organisations in Russia. Consequently, some private think thanks that relied on external funding either ceased their activities or transformed into enterprises.[29]

At the same time, the Russian state substantially increased its own NCO sponsorship. The Presidential grant system, which evolved in 2006 at the initiative of the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights,[30] provides annual project-

[26] For example, in 2003 the Institute for Applied International Research, which had been founded by the Open Society Foundation the year before, shut down after the arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

[27] Federal'nyy zakon ot 12.01.1996 N 7-FZ (red. ot 30.12.2020) "O nekommercheskikh organizatsiyakh" [Federal law from 12.01.1996 N7-FZ (edited on 30.12.2020) "On non-commercial organizations], Art. 2 (6), see http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_8824/87a16eb8a9431fff64d0d78eb84f86accc003448/

[28] Federal law N272-F3, Art. 3.1 (1), see https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_139994/a2a2c3de18de17987c273111214cd45393805c36/

[29] The current list of undesirable organization whose activities are banned currently includes 31 institutions, see https://minjust.gov.ru/ru/documents/7756/. The MacArthur Foundation decided to leave Russia after the law was adopted, see "Statement of MacArthur President Julia Stasch on the Foundation's Russia Office", MacArthur Foundation, Pree Release, 21 July 2015.

[30] Stenograficheskiy otchet o zasedanii Soveta po sodeystviyu razvitiyu institutov grazhdanskogo obshchestva i pravam cheloveka (Verbatim record of the meeting of the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights), President of Russia Official Website, 20 July 2005.

related grants, whose volume has increased significantly over the last 15 years to almost nine billion roubles in 2020 (today about Euro 100 million).[31] The focus of this sponsorship, however, has been on social and religious initiatives.[32] In 2014, a private Russian think tank unsuccessfully lobbied the Foreign Ministry to set up an additional fund with an annual budget of 150 to 300 million roubles (Euro 3 to 6 million at the time) to support NCOs working on foreign policy issues.[33]

Instead, the growing political ambitions and economic potential of the Russian state have led to the creation of official state-sponsored platforms, often termed government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGO), to further consolidate the Russian expert community and promote official policies abroad. State support for these platforms comes from different stakeholders and interest groups within the wider political elite, which replicates ideological fault lines, including conservative-nationalist and more liberal forces. Hence, state sponsorship for these platforms rarely comes directly out of the state budget, as is the case for the academic institutes of the RAS. Instead, informal relations with major enterprises and political stakeholder often secure material and symbolic support. The effect of the lack of strong political institutions beyond the Russian presidency, however, is also felt among GONGOs, with some platforms enduring steep up-and-down cycles.

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[31] "Yeshche 2402 organizatsii poluchat prezidentskiye granty v 2020 godu" ("Another 2402 organizations receive Presidential grants in 2020"), *Regnum*, 15 June 2020. In addition, the distribution system has been subject to significant changes over time.

[32] In fact, the NCOs associated with the Russian Orthodox Church are among the main recipients of Presidential grants. From 2013 to 2015 alone they received more than 256 million roubles, see Tsentr ekonomicheskikh i politicheskikh reform, "Prezidentskiye granty NKO: Pooshchreniye loyal'nosti vmesto razvitiya grazhdanskogo obshchestva" ("Presidential grants for NCO: Encouraging Loyalty Instead of Developing Civil Society").

[33] E. Chernenko, "Vneshnepoliticheskiye razrabotki vzyali kurs na rubl'" ("Foreign Policy analyses set course for the rouble"), *Kommersant*, no. 76, 6 May 2014.

Overall, interactions between think tanks and the state bureaucracy continue to be based predominantly on personal relationships. It is thus difficult to speak about the political influence of think tanks *in toto* or assume steady influence of individual institutions over time. The concept of influence itself refers to diverse phenomena, including the provision of instrumental policy advice, the exertion of global soft power and diplomacy, but also the formation of domestic public and expert debate. These forms of influence are not mutually exclusive and often merge in the work of individual think tanks, while remaining analytically distinct. I will turn to these different forms of influence in the next section.

Modernisation

The ability to provide instrumental policy advice depends almost exclusively on Presidential interest, which, in turn, revolves around the management of power, the distribution of wealth among the political elite, and the generation of economic growth as an important source of political legitimacy. Hence, within the realm of foreign affairs, instrumental advice at the strategic level has been largely limited to (global) financial and macroeconomic policies. The work of the Center for Strategic Research (CSR) is a case in point. Founded in December 1999, it first developed a programme on socioeconomic policies for Vladimir Putin's Presidential election campaign that eventually came to be known as Strategy-2010.[34] After Putin's victory in the Presidential elections in March 2000, several CSR team members who had already worked with Putin at the city

[34] "Osnovnyye napravleniya sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoy politiki pravitel'stvo Rossiykoy Federatsii na dolgostrochnuyu perspekutivu - proyekt" ("The main directions of socio-economic policy of the government of the Russian Federation for the long term period – draft"); see also M. Dmitriyev and A. Yurtayev, "Strategiya-2010: itogi realizatsii 10 let spustya" ("Strategy-2010: results of its implementation 10 years later"), *Ekonomicheskaya politika*, 2010, no. 3, pp. 107-114.

administration of St. Petersburg in the first half of the 1990s joined the Russian government, where they became responsible for the implementation of the programme.

Ever since, the CSR has remained the intellectual powerhouse for the liberal-economic fraction in the Kremlin. Several former CSR Presidents and Chairmen of the Board have since either served as Ministers of Economic Development or become heads of important Russian financial institutions. In this sense, the CSR is the only Russian think tank that effectively practices the "revolving door" principle, that is, a permanent exchange of personnel between the private sector and the government. Nevertheless, the pace of CSR activities and its impact have fluctuated considerably over time, depending on the Kremlin's political agenda. For example, during Putin's second Presidential term from 2004 to 2008, the CSR disappeared from the scene by turning away from federal politics and towards regional and municipal issues.

With Putin's decision in December 2007 to endorse former deputy prime minister and former Gazprom chairman Dmitry Medvedev as his successor,[35] Russia entered another phase of (declaring the willingness for) economic modernisation. In this vision, Russian foreign policy was to serve the promotion of innovation and economic performance at home. The political self-confidence that Russia had gained after almost eight years of uninterrupted economic growth also created the conditions for new state investments and political projects. Experts and social interest groups were actively called upon to participate in the brainstorming process. Emblematic of this trend was the establishment of the Institute for Contemporary Development (INSOR) in March 2008, which was to explicitly promote the President's agenda of economic liberalisation and societal reforms.

[35] G. Tadtayev, "V. Putin nazval svoyego preyemnika" ("V. Putin announced his successor"), 10 December 2007.

President Medvedev himself became head of INSOR's Board of Trustees. The foreign policy agenda, although just one part of a broader approach, was led by Director Igor Yurgens and his deputy Sergei Kulik, former ISKAN researcher and former head of the Department for Relations with the EU in the Presidential Administration (2004-08). It focused significantly on generating stability and good working relations with the West. For example, the "Manifesto on Russia's Situation in the 21st Century," published by INSOR in February 2010, speculated on Russia's possible future accession to NATO.[36]

From the beginning, INSOR's fate was tied to President Medvedev's political success. His decision to yield the Presidency to Putin and refrain from another bid for a second term, which INSOR Director Yurgens had openly supported since 2010, also ended INSOR's role as a presidential think tank. INSOR's staff shrank substantially, while its work on domestic issues was abandoned in favour of foreign policy research, which was still considered more innocuous at the time. Thanks in part to Yurgens' contacts, the Institute remained a point of contact for foreign experts and a mediator between Russia and the West.[37]

The re-election of President Putin in March 2012 ended the proximity of INSOR and its experts to operational politics, but also heralded a change of the overall political course. Instead of opening up to Western organisations and increasing cooperation with them, especially EU and NATO, Russia intensified its ambitions for Eurasian economic integration and placed greater emphasis on state control of supposed foreign influence at home. In light of events in Ukraine since November

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[36] *Rossiya XXI veka. Obraz zhelayemogo zavtra* (*Russia in the 21st Century: Vision for the Future*), INSOR, p. 42.

[37] For example, INSOR is still one of two think tanks that represents Russia within the so-called Council of Councils – an initiative of the US Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) to connected "leading foreign policy institutes from around the world in a common conversation on issues of global governance and multilateral cooperation". The other Russian member is the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy (SVOP). See https://www.cfr.org/councilofcouncils/about-us.

2013 and Russian military intervention, recipes for economic and political reform developed by INSOR and previously by the CSR vanished from the official agenda.

However, three years later, in winter 2015, a new demand from the state for modernisation emerged. For this purpose, the CSR was re-activated and completely reorganised. The former Minister of Finance Aleksey Kudrin became central to this shift and he accepted the President's offer to join the CSR as Chairman of the Board. President Putin, moreover, signed a decree in May 2016 that established a Presidential working group,[38] divided into eight subgroups, to provide intellectual input for his Economic Council. Kudrin became the working group's co-chair, thereby establishing a direct link between the Presidential administration and the CSR.

Although Kudrin's focus during his short tenure (he joined the Accounts Chamber in May 2018) remained on socioeconomic and financial issues, the CSR began to cover foreign and security policy as well – something that IMEMO Director (now President) Aleksandr Dynkin had long campaigned for. IMEMO arms control specialists Aleksey Arbatov and General (ret.) Vladimir Dvorkin even left their posts at the Carnegie Moscow Center to make participation in this Presidential project possible. Dynkin and Kudrin were convinced that without a normalisation in relations with the West, the 3% GDP growth target, set by the CSR as the overall goal, was impossible to achieve. As a consequence, the working group of the Presidential Economic Council and the CSR were each assigned a subgroup on "External Challenges and Security", the first chaired by Dynkin and the latter by IMEMO researcher Sergey Utkin.

In the short period between spring 2016 and May 2017, when the final CSR report was submitted to the President, the Utkin group prepared several publications in cooperation with

[38] Rasporyazheniye Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii, № 122-рп (Order of the President of the Russian Federation, no. 122-rp), President of Russia Official Website, 5 May 2016.

the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), including so-called theses on Russia's foreign policy for the period 2017 to 2024. In this document, the authors, for example, suggested that the "underdevelopment of the Russian economy and its governance institutions poses a much more significant threat to the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity than realistic military threats that Russia is already well protected from".[39] Besides such strategic roadmaps, the working group also proposed institutional changes to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These are now being developed further by former CSR employees at the Centre for Advanced Governance (CPUR),[40] which former CSR deputy director Maria Shklyaruk founded in December 2018, after the Utkin group was dissolved.

Institutionalisation

The ad hoc appointment of expert groups and think tanks, which are directly funded by the Kremlin to develop policy concepts, as exemplified by the CSR and INSOR, remains largely ineffective in terms of providing sustainable societal feedback. It reflects the short-time horizons of Russian policy planning that limit strategic initiatives and prioritise the perseverance of personalist rule. By contrast, the establishment of the RIAC by degree of President Medvedev in February 2010 under the aegis of the Foreign Ministry[41] can be viewed as an attempt to institutionalise and centralise the relationship between the state bureaucracy and the expert community.

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[39] A. Kortunov and S. Utkin (Eds.), *Foreign Policy and Global Positioning (2017-2024)*, Center for Strategic Research (CSR) and Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), June 2017, p. 5.

[40] See for example *Reformy diplomaticheskikh vedomstv na fone novykh vneshnepoliticheskikh vyzovov* (*Reforms of Foreign Ministries amid new foreign policy challenges*), Center for Advance Governance (CPUR), Moscow, 2020.

[41] Rasporyazheniye Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii, № 59-рп (Order of the President of the Russian Federation, no.59-rp), President of Russia Official Website, 2 February 2010.

In the words of RIAC President and former Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Ivanov, "the Council has been created as an instrument to unite the Russian foreign policy community, and not as a bureaucratic structure or an alternative to one or another already existing organisation".[42] It thus represents a platform comparable to the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) in the United States or the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP)[43] rather than an analytical centre. In its political work, the RIAC builds on an extensive membership base of 190 individuals with high political or academic status as well as a number of Russian corporations. The former include the Press Secretary of the Russian President, Dmitry Peskov, who is also a member of the Presidium, and former officials, for example Nikolay Bordyuzha, former Secretary of the Russian Security Council (1998) and Secretary of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO, 2003-17).

This membership base represents the broad ideological mainstream of the Russian foreign policy community, whose two dominant subgroups come from the Foreign Ministry (diplomacy) and the RAS institutes or selected state universities, primarily the MGIMO. Of the 190 RIAC members, more than 60% are either (former) diplomats or academic researchers, including many university rectors and directors of the RAS institutes.[44] RIAC President Igor Ivanov integrates both professional spheres. His good standing derives from his close relationship with Yevgeny Primakov (1929-2015) that dates back to their time together at the IMEMO in the early 1970s as well as his own experience with and respect for academic

[42] V. Vorobyov, "U diplomatov poyavilsya novyy instrument" ("Diplomats received a new instruments"), *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, no. 157 (5533), 21 July 2011.

[43] I. Timofeev, "Sovety po mezhdunarodnym delam: zarubezhnyy opyt i rossiyskiy proyekt" ("International Affairs Councils: Foreign experience and the Russian project"), *Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn'*, January 2012, pp. 15-20.

[44] Individual members, Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), https://russiancouncil.ru/en/management/members/

research.[45] These personal connections ensure a direct and stable working relationship of the RIAC with the Foreign Ministry and the Presidential foreign policy directorate, which has been traditionally led by former diplomats,[46] the Presidential assistant on foreign affairs,[47] or mid-level bureaucrats working at other ministries.

Despite this proximity to political power, however, the recommendations of the Council, at least those which are publicly available, have hardly shaped the course of Russian foreign policy-making over the past decade. For example, in the first strategic outlook from 2012 that covered the development of Russian foreign policy until 2018, RIAC's leadership argued that it would be "extremely important to maintain a balance between the economic and socio-humanitarian dimensions of Russian foreign policy, on the one hand, and the security dimensions, on the other hand".[48] The authors suggested that it would be "equally important to develop inside the country the picture of the outside world as a source of opportunities for Russia and a resource for transformation".[49] The policy of "economic, political and human rapprochement with the West" should remain a priority, because "establishing and maintaining peaceful and stable partnerships" would be critical to make use of external resources for modernisation.[50]

However, the political crisis in Ukraine, Russia's military engagement and the subsequent fall-out in its relations with

[45] V. Kara-Murza, "Aleksandr Sharavin ob otstavke Igorya Ivanova" ("Aleksandr Sharavin about the resignation of Igor Ivanov"), *Radio Svoboda*, 9 July 2007.

[46] Since Vladimir Putin's rise to Presidential power the directorate has been headed by only three people, Sergey Prikhodko (1999-2004), Aleksandr Manzhosin (2004-18) and Igor Neverov (since 2018). Manzhosin (*1958) and Prikhodko (*1957-†2021) were classmates at MGIMO and were already part of the Presidential administration under Yeltsin.

[47] Since 2012 the assistant has been former Diplomat and Russian Ambassador (1998-2008) to the US Yuri Ushakov. His predecessor was Sergey Prikhodko (2004-12).

[48] "Postulates on Russia's Foreign Policy", Report no. 4, Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), September 2012.

[49] Ibid., p. 11.

[50] Ibid., p. 9.

the West put these aspirations to rest. Instead, nationalist-conservative and religious orthodox ideas, represented for example by the leadership of the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies (RISI),[51] which is financed directly by the Presidential Administration, and the private Izborsk-club – originally established as an alternative to the Valdai-club – received ideational and material support from the political leadership in order to amplify its own strategic choice,[52] at least for a short period of time. The main themes of state policy became internal stability and the maintenance of a uniform information policy towards the West and the post-Soviet space, particularly Ukraine.

RIAC's leadership, by contrast, has advocated where possible a cooperative approach instead of unconditional confrontation with the West. RIAC Director General Andrey Kortunov, in particular, repeatedly and publicly tried to explore ways to make existing clashes of interests in foreign policy manageable. Thus, within the Russian foreign policy community the RIAC,

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[51] For an analysis of RISI as a think tank see A. Graef, "Russia's RAND Corporation? The Ups and Downs of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI)", *Russian Analytical Digest*, vol. 234, 2019, pp. 5-9, DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000331035.

[52] Despite common enmity to liberalism, the RISI leadership at the time and the members of the Izborsk-Club represent different ideological groups. See for example the following article by former RISI researcher Petr Multatuli, who criticises the pro-Soviet attitudes among Club members: P. Multatuli, "Rediska naoborot ili Kuda vedët Izborskiy klub?" ("The wolf in sheep's clothing or where is the Izborsk-Club leading?"). The politically most prominent member of the Izborsk-Club is Sergey Glazev, former advisor to President Putin (2012-19) on Eurasian economic integration. In addition, former Deputy Prime Minister and current Director General of Russia's Space Agency Roscosmos, Dmitry Rogozin, although he is not a formal member, has supported the Club and contributed to publications. The foundation of the Club has also been facilitated by former Minister of Culture (2012-20) and now presidential aide, Vladimir Medinsky. In 2015 the Izborsk-Club received a presidential grant of 10 million roubles (about €150,000 at the time). See F. Rustamova, "Grantȳ ot Putina dadut za propagandu Russkogo mira i bor'bu s pedofilami" ("Putin's grants are given to 'Russian world' propaganda and the fight against paedophiles"), *RBC*, 8 December 2015.

similar to the CSR, represents mostly those interest groups that emphasise the primacy of domestic modernisation (as the precondition for great power status) over foreign policy goals related exclusively to Russia's great power posture. In line with the growing strategic competition with the United States and the European Union, these positions have once again retreated into the background. Nevertheless, such views arguably provide important within-system correctives for more security-focused and isolationist positions that are prominent in some fractions in the Kremlin, the Russian military and the intelligence agencies.

Global Soft Power

Besides concrete policy research conducted by the CSR and INSOR, the Presidential Administration has supported institutions that help to promote Russian views globally. Apart from the RIAC, the Valdai Discussion Club is a prime example of this endeavour. In essence, the club serves as the international mouthpiece of Russia's foreign policy elite, but it also enables its members to participate in global debates with foreign interlocutors. In contrast to the RIAC, Valdai speaks dominantly for the leadership of the SVOP and the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs at the Higher School of Economics, with "Greater Eurasia" as the key idea driving Russian foreign policy.[53]

The Valdai Discussion Club originally emerged from the international conference "Russia at the Turn of the Century: Hopes and Realities", organised by SVOP and the Russian state news agency RIA Novosti in Veliky Novgorod, near Lake Valdai, in September 2004.[54] The event was the brainchild of

[53] On the evolution of the concept see D.G. Lewis, "Geopolitical Imaginaries in Russian Foreign Policy: The Evolution of 'Greater Eurasia'", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 70, 2018, pp. 1612-1637.

[54] F. Lukyanov, "Vechnyye tsennosti avtarkii" ("The eternal values of autarky"),

Svetlana Mironyuk, then editor in chief at RIA Novosti, but Karaganov, at the time the SVOP chairman (and now honorary chairman) actively engaged in its intellectual conceptualisation. The conference culminated in a meeting of 39 participants from Germany, France, and the United Kingdom with Putin at his state residence in Novo-Ogaryovo.[55]

In the four years following the conference, the Valdai Discussion Club institutionalised itself as an annual debating platform focusing on the participation of international experts and the facilitation of meetings with Russian officials, including the Russian President. In September 2005, 45 foreign and 22 Russian experts met in the city of Tver, 150 km northwest of Moscow. The conference under the title "Russia as a Political Kaleidoscope" included meetings of foreign experts with Foreign Minister Sergej Lavrov, Defence Minister Sergej Ivanov, Presidential Deputy Chief of Staff Vladislav Surkov, and President Putin. In 2006, the multi-day conference moved to Moscow and Khanty-Mansiysk, and in 2007-08 it took place in Kazan and Rostov-on-Don.

In 2009 the club began to supplement its annual autumn meetings with international events on Russian politics and international relations in cooperation with foreign partners. For example, in 2009 Valdai hosted conferences in London and Amman, and in 2010 events were organised in Berlin, Shanghai, Beijing, and Valletta. Working groups on the future of US-Russia relations were held at Harvard University and in Moscow and Boston from 2010 to 2012, and were co-sponsored by various US foundations, including the Carnegie Corporation, the Open Society Foundation, and the MacArthur Foundation.

Gazeta.ru, 9 September 2004.

[55] This meeting unexpectedly turned into the first Presidential press conferences after the Beslan school siege in North Ossetia, where over 300 people were killed after Islamic militants occupied a school, taking pupils and teachers hostage. See I. Gordeev, "Osmyslenie Beslana" ("Comprehending Beslan"), *vremya.ru*, 8 September 2004.

Despite the Presidential administration's informal support of Valdai, the change in political winds after Putin's re-election in March 2012 took the organisation by surprise.[56] In December 2013, Valdai's co-founder Svetlana Mironyuk was unexpectedly fired from RIA Novosti, which itself was abolished by presidential decree to make way for the Rossiya Segodnya state news agency under the leadership of Dmitry Kiselyov.[57] Two years earlier, the presidential administration had objected when Mironyuk began her Master of Business Administration (MBA) at the University of Chicago. She said she was advised that a Russian state media administrator of her seniority should not travel to the United States to receive an education.[58] After that, she clashed repeatedly with Mikhail Lesin, a Putin aide,[59] and Alexey Gromov, first deputy chief of staff of the presidential administration, about the role and purpose of state media.[60]

The transformation of RIA Novosti to Rossiya Segodnya and the replacement of Mironyuk with Kiselyov, whose views on media and state propaganda differed considerably from the progressive bureaucrat's, led to Valdai's reorganisation. The club decided to split from RIA Novosti. Instead, the RIAC, the Higher School of Economics (HSE) and the MGIMO were brought in

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[56] This turn of events also illustrates the complexity of foreign policy, where strategic questions are often the product of normative decisions about ends or the result of external factors that are to some extent beyond control. The famous saying "events, dear boy, events", which is often attributed to former British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan (1894-1986) as an answer to a journalistic question about what could blow government off, is an apt description of this situation.

[57] Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii № 894 (Decree of the President of the Russian Federation, no. 894), President of Russia Official Website, 9 December 2013.

[58] Y. Taratuta, "Svetlana Mironyuk: ‚Ya tochno znayu, chto nikogda bol'she ne budu rabotat' na gosudarstvo'" ("Svetlana Mironyuk: I know for sure that I will never again work for the state"), *Forbes*, 30 October 2015; and "Rasbor Poleta" ("Reviewing life"), *Ėcho Moskvy*, 30 March 2015.

[59] Lesin was found dead in a DC hotel room in November 2015 in suspicious circumstances.

[60] Y. Taratuta (2015).

as new partners. The Foundation for Development and Support of the Valdai Discussion Club, which had been established in March 2011, subsequently took over the management of the club's projects. In parallel, Valdai's organisational procedures and agenda were reformed. What had, according to one Valdai expert, been a "tourist office with an intellectual-propagandist odour"[61] turned increasingly into an analytical centre.[62]

The 2014 relaunch also broadened Valdai's publication activities and multiplied its outreach platforms. The bi-monthly reports, which had been published since winter 2009, became more numerous and comprehensive. Since October 2014, the organisation has also published short analytical articles, the "Valdai Papers", authored by Russian and international experts. Moreover, short video interviews with conference participants were introduced as a new multimedia format. In addition, the number of participants at the annual meetings of the Valdai Discussion Club and the scale of the event itself has been continuously increasing.

Conclusion

The political prominence of think tanks and their ability to influence decisions in Russian foreign policy are closely tied to their personal access to the President and the staff of the presidential administration. The examples of the CSR, INSOR and RIAC and even the Valdai Discussion Club, although originally a societal elite initiative, show this in similar ways. Proximity to state power alone does not necessarily imply influence, however. Instead, the personalist, neo-patrimonial character of the Russian regime creates political volatility that points to the existence of multiple interest groups within the administration. It also explains the ad hoc appointment of

[61] Valdai expert, Interview with the author, 2017.

[62] S. Podosenov, "Valdayskiy klub zhdet perestroyki" ("Valdai Club awaits reforms"), *Gazeta.ru*, 21 July 2014.

expert groups and think tanks, which are directly funded by the Kremlin for the short-term development of policy concepts.

In the past decade, the main conflict among political elites has been between proponents of economic and socio-political modernisation on the one hand and advocates of internal stability and great power ambitions on the other hand. In addition to substantial ideological divides, the competition evolves along different electoral bases. In this context, Russian foreign policy think tanks affect operational policy decisions merely in times of domestic crisis, if at all. Even here, however, the main focus is on improving the level of implementation of pre-existing goals.

The strategic direction of foreign policy lies exclusively with the President and a small decision-making elite within the Kremlin, whose members, for the most part, are personal friends and long-term confidents of Vladimir Putin, often with intelligence backgrounds. This elite, to which Sergey Lavrov as a life-long professional diplomat remains an outsider, includes the Secretary of the Security Council, KGB veteran and former Head of the Federal Security Service (FSB) Nikolai Patrushev, and the Minister of Defence, Sergey Shoigu, but also managers and owners of vital (state) enterprises, like Putin's childhood friend Arkady Rotenberg, co-owner of the Stroygazmontazh (SGM) group (the largest construction company for gas pipelines and electrical power supply lines in Russia), his former KGB colleague in Dresden Sergey Chemesov, who heads the State Technology Corporation Rostec and Igor Setchin, the CEO of Rosneft and in the early 1990s Putin's Chief of staff as first Deputy Mayor of St. Petersburg.

Russian foreign policy think tanks, with the exception of the CSR under Kudrin, who also used to work with Putin in the St. Petersburg City Administration, lack personal relations to this inner circle, but they still provide important platforms for intellectual exchange and also assume functions that otherwise would be left to political parties. Thus, expert debates sometimes set the limits of what is politically possible and serve

the Kremlin as an information channel for the semi-publicly testing of policy proposals.

This is also necessary because of the lack of institutionalised, socio-political groups with their own expertise and state-independent sources of funding. In addition, politically well-connected experts perform public diplomacy tasks, particularly in foreign policy, by acting as intermediaries between Moscow and foreign states. However, as the conflict with the West has intensified in the wake of the war in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, it is primarily the demand for public legitimation of state policy rather than expert analysis which has increased.

2. Domestic Lobbyists and Conservatism in Russian Foreign Policy

Alicja Curanović

This chapter seeks to highlight the nexus between domestic dynamics and conservatism in Russian foreign policy, looking particularly at the Russian Orthodox Church because of its ability to successfully influence Russian diplomacy and its role in promoting conservatism in Russian foreign policy. The aim is to show the complexity of the Church-State relationship that, despite what Kremlin supporters claim, is not perfectly harmonious. At the same time, the Church is also no propaganda machine, as many of its critics argue. The chapter explores the conservative narrative of the Church and the State in foreign policy and the modes of bilateral cooperation. The goal is also to emphasise the often unnoticed dynamic nature of conservatism in Russian politics, which should not be seen as static, but as a developing process that has been underway for over a decade.

After a description of conservatism in contemporary Russian politics – origin, content, development – the chapter moves briefly onto the domestic factors that can impact the conservative agenda of Russian diplomacy before focusing on the most influential conservatist lobbyist, the Russian Orthodox Church. And then, after exposing the reasons for the Church-State rapprochement, we will discuss the main points of the conservative narrative supported by the Church and the Kremlin, and their modes of cooperation. To illustrate

the complexity of their mutual dependency in advancing conservatism in foreign policy, four cases are analysed: Syria, the rise of Russian activity in Africa, Hungary and China.

Conservatism in Contemporary Russian Politics: Main Characteristics

What is often labelled as a "conservative" or "moral turn" in Russian politics refers to the visible tendency of the ruling class to declare its commitment to traditional values as a foundation of Russian identity and political action.[1] Indeed, the notion of traditional values (or "spiritual keystones" – *dukhovnyye skrepy*) has become central to the new conservative narrative in the Russian public sphere. No officially approved interpretation of this notion exists yet, but top officials – including Vladimir Putin, Dmitry Medvedev and Sergey Lavrov – have often publicly referred to traditional values. First and foremost, they understand traditional values as core norms treasured by world religions,[2] which means aspects like faith, justice, solidarity, the family and patriotism.[3]

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[1] P. Robinson, *Russian Conservatism*, Ithaca-London, Northern Illinois University Press, 2019; M. Laruelle, *Beyond Anti-Westernism: The Kremlin's Narrative about Russia's European Identity and Mission*, Ponars Eurasia Policy Memo, no. 326, 2014; W. Rodkiewicz and J. Rogoża, "Potemkin Conservatism. An Ideological Tool of the Kremlin", *Point of View*, no. 48, 2015; A. Ferrari, "Russia. A Conservative society?", in A. Ferrari (Ed.), *Russia 2018. Predictable Elections, Uncertain Future, ISPI Report*, Milano, ISPI-Ledizioni, 2018. K. Bluhm and M. Varga, *New Conservatives in Russia and East Central Europe*, London-New York, Routledge, 2018; D. Uzlaner and M. Suslov, (Eds.), *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes and Perspectives*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2019.

[2] *Vladimir Putin: Moral'nyye tsennosti ne mogut byt' nikakimi drugimi, krome religioznykh* (*Vladimir Putin: there are no other moral values but religious ones*), Russian Orthodox Church, 19 December 2007; *Mobilizatsiya chelovecheskogo kapitala — obshchaya zadacha gosudarstva i Tserkvi* (*To mobilise the human capital – this is a joint assignment of Church and state*), Russian Orthodox Church, 30 October 2014.

[3] *Vystupleniye Prezidenta Rossii V.V. Putina na torzhestvennom akte, posvyashchennom 10-letiyu Pomestnogo Sobora i intronizatsii Svyateyshego Patriarkha Kirilla* (*The Speech made*

In looking at the origins of this trend, a distinction should be made between the conservative turn in domestic affairs and that in foreign policy. Despite being interrelated and mutually influencing, they do develop autonomously and target different goals. Domestically, in 2009, the United Russia political party embraced conservatism as its official ideology. However, most experts agree the turning point came with the mass protests against the disputed elections in 2012.[4] Demonstrations in Moscow and other parts of Russia undermined Putin's legitimacy as he began his third presidential term and his personal popularity hit a historical low (app. 60%). In 2012-13, a conservative narrative was formulated by top officials.[5] It was accompanied by several legal acts, such as the blasphemy law (2013), the ban on propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations (2013) and the ban on using profanity in the arts and media (2014). These regulations were labelled as social conservatism. The new narrative has also gradually left an imprint on cultural policy, education and patriotic upbringing.[6] Appointed in 2016 as the Deputy Chief of staff in the presidential administration, Sergei Kiriyenko has toned down the conservative narrative. Nevertheless, it remains part and parcel of Russian public discourse. The latest changes to the Constitution – i.e. mentioning God, the traditional definition of family and traditional values – confirm this.[7] The Kremlin

by Vladimir Putin on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of Church Council and the enthronement of Patriarch Kirill), Russian Orthodox Church, 31 January 2019.

[4] M. Laruelle (2014); N.N. Petro, "How the West Lost Russia: Explaining the Conservative Turn in Russian Foreign Policy", *Russian Politics*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2018.

[5] The attention of the international audience was caught by Vladimir Putin's speech at the Valdai Forum in 2013. *Zasedaniye mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba «Valday»* (*The Meeting of the Valdai Club*), 2 April 2014; A. Ferrari (2018), pp. 40-41.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ob avtorskoy stat'ye Posla Rossii v BiG P.A.Ivantsova v gazete «Glas Srpske» ot 18 iyulya 2020 (About the article of the Ambassador of Russia in Bosnia and Hercegovina P.A. Ivantsova in the magazine "Glas Srpske"), President of Russia Official Website, 20 July 2020.

initially turned to conservatism to consolidate its base and delegitimise the opposition.[8] Subsequently, conservatism fuelled by post-Crimean patriotism became more of an official posture not just of the Kremlin but also of the state bureaucracy.[9] Today, the conservative narrative in domestic affairs helps preserve the political *status quo* and fragile social stability by promoting a pro-regime sense of patriotism.

For foreign policy, references to distinct civilisations that should protect their traditional values appeared as early as 2008, when Sergey Lavrov called for "returning to core values of world religions which provide the foundation for human solidarity".[10] Conservative tones emerged in Russia's foreign policy as a reaction to the lack of proper recognition from the West which, in Russia's view, failed to treat the country respectfully as an equal partner. Instead, the West saw Moscow as a Cold War loser that should accept the *Pax Americana* and adapt to the standards of liberal democracy accordingly. From a Russian perspective, the West and its policies after 1991 aimed at limiting the country's sovereignty, as Putin bitterly pointed out in his Munich speech in 2007.[11] In short, the conservative turn in foreign policy was motived by the goal of restoring Russia sovereignty and standing.

[8] M. Laruelle (2014).

[9] A. Melvil, *Kak konservativnyy povorot v Rossii sootnositsya s konservatizmom v Evrope i SShA* (*How does the conservative turn in Russia relate to conservatism in Europe and US*), Russian International Affairs Council, 11 October 2018.

[10] "Lavrov vystupayet za ukrepleniye nravstvennykh nachal v mirovoy politike" ("Lavrov stands for moral foundations in international politics"), *Interfax Religion*, 23 October 2008.

[11] Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, President of Russia Official Website, 10 February 2007.

The "colour revolutions" were the trigger.[12] The Kremlin saw the coming to power of pro-Western political parties as a result of social protests in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2005) as the West meddling in an area it considered as a Russian sphere of influence, one of the crucial attributes of a major power. What's more, the "colour revolutions" revealed the attractiveness of liberal democratic ideas, which motivated thousands of people to challenge corrupt governments. The Kremlin concluded that soft power should not be underestimated and that the global rivalry had gained a normative-civilisational dimension.[13] The conservative turn in foreign policy provided Russia with its own normative vision of the global order and narrative. It is important to stress the new conservatism's counter-hegemonic edge. This was born from the ruling elite's concern with regaining the sovereignty threatened by Western dominated global processes. In foreign policy, Russian conservatism advocates a return to the Westphalian system of sovereign states, with a special role for the major powers.[14] At the Valdai Forum in 2019, Putin talked about the XIX century Concert of Europe as an important reference point for a new world order. He said:

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[12] "Colour revolutions" refer to the series of mass protests in former Soviet republics which resulted in a change of the government and sometimes led to regime change, *inter alia* in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova. "Colour revolutions" refer to the series of mass protests in former Soviet republics which resulted in a change of the government and sometimes led to regime change, *inter alia* in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova.

[13] This has been reflected in the content of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation. In the document issued in 2008 it is said: "It is for the first time in contemporary history that global competition is acquiring a civilisational dimension which suggests competition between different value systems ... A religious factor in shaping the system of contemporary international relations is growing, *inter alia*, as regards its moral foundation. This problem cannot be resolved without a common denominator that has always existed in major world religions".

[14] J. Østbø, "The Sources of Russia's Transgressive Conservatism: Cultural Sovereignty and the Monopolization of Bespredel", in I. Anisimova and I. Lunde (Eds.), *The Cultural is Political: Intersections of Russian Art and State Politics*, Bergen, Slavica Bergensia, 2020, p. 14-36.

"today the time has come to talk about the global concert … only sovereign states can build truly respectful and pragmatic, i.e. predictable and solid relations".[15] Conservatism draws attention to the non-material aspects of sovereignty, first and foremost distinct identity, culture and values. It defines Russia's cultural sovereignty in civilisational terms. As Putin stated, "Russia's sovereignty and national security depend decisively on preserving and strengthening the spiritual foundations…".[16]

The new conservative narrative in Russian foreign policy can be summarised in a few points: (1) Russia is a distinct civilisation, which must follow its own tradition and values in order to prosper; adopting the Western model would undermine the country's sovereignty; (2) this is true also for other major powers/civilisations with their own values; therefore, (3) the most natural world order is civilisational polycentrism (or civilisational multipolarity), in which distinct civilisations follow their own paths of development in accordance with their traditional values; (4) traditional values are embedded in world religions and provide the basis for distinct civilisational identities; (5) the dominance of one civilisation is unnatural and presents a threat; (6) hence one of the greatest challenges to global stability is the dominance of the Western normative agenda – aggressive secularism and hyper liberalism promoted as universal values; (7) Russia is ready to protect traditional values, stands for civilisational pluralism and resists, with likeminded countries, the normative pressure of the West; (8) at the same time, Russia declares its support for all people who live in the EU or the US who cherish traditional values. The conservative narrative has become a platform for Russia to bring together countries that are not comfortable with the dominant liberal narrative. Russia's conservatism undermines

[15] Zasedaniye diskussionnogo kluba «Valday» (The Meeting of the Valdai Club), President of Russia Official Website, 3 October 2019.

[16] *Privetstviye Prezidenta RF V.V. Putina uchastnikam XXIII V semirnogo russkogo narodnogo sobora* (*Vladimir Putin welcomes the participants of the 23d World Russian People's Council*), Russian Orthodox Church, 18 October 2019.

the West's symbolic power and exploits the "cultural wars" between liberals and conservatives in Western societies.

Many Russian conservatism experts suggest distinguishing between its different types.[17] This chapter focuses on foreign policy and hence on the State/official brand, i.e. present in the ruling elite's rhetoric. Even within this sphere, one can see narrative changes. Contemporary Russian conservatism should be viewed as a process rather than a static ideological programme. The abovementioned points provide a framework, but the accents have been shifting. The starting point was *civilisational pluralism* or *civilisational polycentrism* juxtaposed with the unipolar liberal order of the West. The vision of the Russian state/civilisation standing for its own sovereignty and the rights of other civilisations to follow a distinct path was soon strengthened by the concept of *traditional values* shared by world religions. Since one of the most notorious cases of Western normative pressure concerned *human rights*, Russian diplomats voiced the need to question the monopoly of the liberal interpretation of the concept and opted for approaching human rights in accordance with tradition. The Russian conservative stance later shifted to *protecting Christians*. The most recent development is the issue of the *traditional family* and the topic of *remembering World War II*. The former – previously limited to domestic debate – is an example of how home-grown conservatism can influence foreign policy. The case of World War II resurfaced in 2019 on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the great victory. In the "conservative" interpretation, Russians won because they were ready to sacrifice their lives which, in turn, was possible because traditional values survived in the nation. Treasuring the memory of Russia's heroic role in WWII is crucial to Russia's civilisational sovereignty. Within the new narrative, the great victory of 1945 together with traditional values form two pillars of the post-Soviet Russian identity.[18]

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[17] P. Robinson, "Russia's Emergence as an International Conservative Power", *Russia in Global Affairs*, no. 1, 26 March 2020.

[18] *Vystupleniye Svyateyshego Patriarkha Kirilla na otkrytii XXVIII Mezhdunarodnykh*

Furthermore, the commemoration of 1945 is presented as a foundation of post-Soviet regional identity. At the 2020 Valdai Forum, while talking about the former Soviet republics, Putin explained: "we are people of one cultural space. We share history and the victory over Nazism".[19]

Before taking a closer look at the domestic-foreign affairs nexus, it is worth examining whether (or to what extent) the conservative turn in Russian politics is a planned and carefully executed Kremlin strategy.[20] An instrumental approach is noticeable with the ruling elite, especially when it comes to social conservatism. Suffice to say that divorced President Putin is said to have illegitimate offspring with at least two different women. However, there is evidence to argue against dismissing conservatism as a temporary propaganda tool. To begin with, it is a process, a developing narrative in Russian politics, observable for over a decade. This process is unfolding in reaction to internal and international factors. Taking 2008 as a starting point helps to remind us how Russia was different back then in terms of its political system and international standing. For instance, Dmitry Medvedev became President in 2008 and, if we can trust Mikhail Zygar's analysis, it was not obvious Putin would be Head of State in 2020.[21] Taken aback by the protests in 2012, the Kremlin sought to strengthen its legitimacy by fanning anti-Western resentment. The annexation of Crimea, the war in Donbas and as a result the growing tensions with the West provided no incentives for the ruling elite to step back from conservatism. On the contrary, the spike in post-Crimean nationalism combined with the besieged-fortress syndrome kept conservatism attractive.[22] With the recent changes in the

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Rozhdestvenskikh obrazovatel'nykh chteniy (*Patriarch Kirill's Opening Speech at the 28th International Christmas Lectures*), Russian Orthodox Church, 27 January 2020.

[19] Zasedaniye diskussionnogo kluba «Valday»…, cit.

[20] W. Rodkiewicz and J. Rogoża (2015).

[21] M. Zygar, "All the Kremlin's Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin", *Public Affairs*, 2017.

[22] A. Kolesnikov, *Russian Ideology after Crimea*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 22

Constitution, conservatism has received a new rank – something most experts would not have easily foreseen back in 2012. It does not seem the Kremlin planned such an outcome from the outset. The current state is rather a result of a developing situation. Even if the conservative turn was originally conceived as a tool for domestic affairs to deal with a legitimacy crisis, in recent years it has become entrenched in the public sphere. Several state institutions have been engaged in promoting the conservative agenda, e.g. the Commission on Public Diplomacy, Humanitarian Cooperation and Maintenance of Traditional Values at the Civic Chamber, the Interfaction Group in Defence of Christian Values of the Russian Duma, the Russian Association for Defence of Religious Freedom and the Council for the Implementation of State Policy in the Sphere of Protecting Family and Children. Finally, the human factor should not be neglected – the shift towards conservatism could also be connected to the ruling elite growing older.

When it comes to foreign policy, the conservative understanding of and the belief that Russia is a distinct civilisation is part of the Russian elite's worldview.[23] At the same time, the cause of protecting Christians is being instrumentalised to legitimise Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict.[24] In general, the conservative agenda advanced at home has added credibility to Russia's international image of a country protecting traditional values. The next section examines the nexus of domestic and foreign policy.

September 2015.

[23] A. Clunan, "Historical aspirations and the domestic politics of Russia's pursuit of international status", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 47, no. 3-4, 2014.

[24] D. Adamsky, "Christ-Loving Warriors: Ecclesiastical Dimension of the Russian Military Campaign in Syria", *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 67, no. 6, 2020.

Domestic Dynamics and Conservative Agenda of Russian Diplomacy

When thinking about the most common ways domestic factors can influence diplomats' actions, three scenarios come to mind: (1) when decisions in foreign policy are a result of bargaining among political parties; (2) when actions in the international arena aim to redirect public attention away from domestic problems or, on the contrary, when foreign policy aims to address the population's social mood; (3) when domestic actors have successfully influenced foreign policy.

In Russia, the first scenario is of negligible importance since the main political parties have been virtually turned into an administrative resource of the Kremlin. The second scenario, connected to social expectations, came to the forefront in the initial phase of the conservative turn in foreign policy. The Kremlin referred to anti-Western resentment and the nostalgia for being a global power shared by many Russians. As the sociologist Boris Dubin noted, the steady rise in anti-Western feeling and support for Russia to follow an autonomous development path was observable as early as the mid-90s.[25] Today, most Russians do not oppose the conservative narrative,[26] but this does not mean they are fervent supporters of it. As Lev Gudkov rightly noticed, most people are first and foremost practical in their world view. They just want to survive, so they adapt to the dynamics of an increasingly oppressive political system.[27] Such a high level of social tolerance is partly a result of the State's efforts to present conservatism as an expression of Russian patriotism. Intellectuals and residents of big cities not employed in the public sector tend to be the most critical

[25] B. Dubin, "The West, the Border, and the Unique Path: Symbolism of the 'Other' in the Political Mythology of Contemporary Russia", *Russian Politics and Law*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2002.

[26] A. Ferrari (2018), p. 48.

[27] L. Gudkov, *Eto ne konservatizm! Eto nevroticheskaya reaktsiya* (*This is not conservatism! This is a neurotic reaction!*), Levada-Center, 26 February 2014.

of conservative ideas. This is an influential but, nevertheless, a minority group.

Since political competition is limited and passive social approval seems stable, the third scenario, i.e. the home-based lobbyists of conservative ideas, needs exploration. It would seem there are three groups of potential actors: (1) individuals, (2) institutions, (3) and traditional religions. Today, the *milieu* of Russians who advance conservative ideas has numerous different facets: intellectuals (e.g. Boris Mezhuev, Mikhail Remizov, Aleksander Dugin, Yegor Kholmogorov), politicians (e.g. Vladimir Yakunin, Natalia Poklonska, Yelena Mizulina, Natalia Narochnitska, Vladimir Medinsky, Valentina Matvinienko), businessmen (e.g. Konstantin Malofevev, Aleksei Komov) and artists (e.g. Nikita Mikhalkov).[28] Film director Nikita Mikhalkov likes to boast about his personal role in introducing Putin to Ivan Ilyin's philosophy.[29] However, it is hard to assess the real impact of any of the mentioned individuals on the actions of Russian diplomats. Top Russian officials, including Putin or Lavrov, have publicly referred to the representatives of XIX century conservatism, like Dostoyevski, Berdyaev or Ilyin. The activities of "conservative" institutions also have little visible impact on foreign policy. Think tanks such as the Institute of National Strategy or the Izborsk Club, social institutions like the St. Basil Fund or St. Andrei Fund, the Foundation for National Values Protection or mass media like the internet TV *Tsarygrad* focus more on the domestic audience.

The third group of actors is traditional religions. In Russia, this category refers to Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism. Their noticeable role in the conservative turn is due to the Kremlin's interpretation of traditional values as religious values. Within this framework the support of traditional religions legitimises the State's conservative agenda. The Russian Orthodox Church stands out among religious

[28] P. Robinson (2019), p. 183-214.

[29] M. Eltchaninoff, *Inside the Mind of Vladimir Putin*, Hurst, 2018.

institutions representing the traditional religions of Russia. Its position and relationship with the Kremlin are discussed in detail below.

Russian Orthodox Church: Specifics and Relationship with the State

While talking to Vladimir Putin in 2020, mufti Ismail Berdiev suggested Russian diplomats should launch a legislative initiative to ban blasphemy globally. Putin praised the idea and promised to urge the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) on the matter.[30] While it is too early to say if this initiative will actually happen, it could serve as an example of the influence of traditional religions of minorities on the foreign policy conservative agenda. Yet, this seems a rare case. Fundamentally, the Russian Orthodox Church is the main partner of Russian diplomacy in advancing conservative ideas internationally. First, because this is the Church with which most Russians identify. A 2019 survey by the Levada Centre found over 80% of respondents said they were Orthodox Christian.[31] Sociologists emphasise such numbers should be read as a declaration of a national identity rather than an intimate relationship with God since 40%, as Lev Gudkov notes based on the data, do not believe in God.[32] The Church's position is strong at home. It has its own mass media (e.g. TV *Spas*) and a formidable infrastructure, especially after the adoption of the 2010 legal act sanctioning the return of religious property nationalised after 1917. More importantly, in the context of foreign policy, contrary to other traditional religions the Russian Orthodox Church has a considerable

[30] Vstrecha s predstavitelyami religioznykh ob"yedineniy (The Meeting with the representatives of religious organisations), President of Russia Official Website, 4 November 2020.

[31] The Annual Report by Levada-Center, *Obshchestvennoye Mneniye* (*Public Opinion*)*-2019*.

[32] L. Gudkov, *Eto ne konservatizm! Eto nevroticheskaya reaktsiya* (*This is not conservatorism! This is a nevrotic reaction*), Levada-Center, 26 February 2014.

capacity to act beyond Russian borders. Its canonical territory includes all the former Soviet republics, except Armenia and Georgia, as well as Mongolia, Japan and China. Apart from its material base, the Church has a long tradition of international activities.[33] It has its own network of contacts cultivated by well-experienced hierarch diplomats from the Department for External Contacts. This department was headed by Kirill before he became patriarch in 2009. On the 10th anniversary of Kirill's enthronement, Orthodox authors published articles presenting the patriarch as the most important contributor to the new Russian conservatism.[34] Although this is an exaggeration, many experts acknowledge the Church's rise and especially the period since Kirill's enthronement as one of the catalysts for the conservative turn.[35]

More than two decades since the fall of the USSR, the Church and the State remain close. When asked about their relationship, both parties name two fundamental principles: (1) non-interference and (2) cooperation in selected areas, especially education and social service (prisons, hospitals, orphanages).[36] Foreign policy is also an important part of this partnership. Contrary to popular belief, in this tandem the Church is neither merely the Kremlin's instrument nor the skilful user of State resources for its own purpose. Trying to frame this relationship as "who uses whom" misses the point about the complex nature of the State-Church entanglement in today's Russia.[37]

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[33] A. Curanović, *The Religious Factor in Russia's Foreign Policy*, London-New York, Routledge, 2012.

[34] *Episkop Balashikhinskiy Nikolay. Bogoslovskiye otvety Patriarkha Kirilla na vyzovy sovremennosti* (*Bishop of Balashkhinsk Nikolai: The Theological response of patriarch Kirill to the contemporary challenges*), Russian Orthodox Church, 26 August 2019; *Vremya Patriarkha Kirilla* (*The Time of Patriarch Kirill*), Russian Orthodox Church, 31 January 2019.

[35] P. Robinson (2020); A. Ferrari (2018), p. 34.

[36] *Mitropolit Volokolamskiy Ilarion: Sila Evropy dolzhna zaklyuchat'sya v nravstvennom sterzhne evropeyskogo obshchestva* (*Bishop Hilarion: The strength of Europe should come from the moral core of European society*), Russian Orthodox Church, 17 September 2019.

[37] T. Köllner, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Russia: Beyond the Binary of Power*

In foreign policy, three modes of cooperation can be identified. The two parties work hand in hand because (1) they share interests based on common views, (2) the Church has successfully elevated its agenda to the level of State diplomacy (lobbying) and (3) the Church has adapted its stance to the State's position. The first of these seems particularly important. The fact the Church and the Kremlin have a similar view of many issues paves the way for smooth cooperation in the international arena.[38] Both parties agree on the fundamental importance of Russia regaining sovereignty and its status as a major power – a state-civilisation with distinct values and development path. They perceive the post-Soviet space as a sphere of Russian special interest and criticise the West for its aggressive policy. The Church and State are of one mind about the moral and material twilight of the West. In an interview with the *Financial Times* in 2019 Vladimir Putin said: "traditional values are more stable and more important to millions of people then the liberal idea which, in my opinion, is just about to die".[39] Russian diplomats supported by the Russian Orthodox Church present their homeland as a moral power standing for justice and equality, and a protector of the weak, especially persecuted Christians. Russia is the guardian of traditional values and a proponent of civilisational polycentrism. As Sergey Lavrov stated at the Christmas Lectures in 2018: "Relying on the ideas shared by world religions, showing respect for sovereignty and cultural-civilisational pluralism of nations, for their right to choose their own path of development – these are the most

and Authority, New York-London, Routledge, 2020.

[38] In 2010 patriarch Kirill participated in consultation at the Russian Ministry Foreign Affairs on what values should make the foundations of Russian foreign policy. Patriarch proposed justice, responsibility and openness. *Mitropolit Volokolamskiy Ilarion: Sokhraneniye edinstva mnogonatsional'nogo prostranstva, nazyvayemogo Svyatoy Rus'yu, yavlyayetsya odnoy iz glavnykh zadach Svyateyshego Patriarkha* (*Bishop Ilarion: Preserving the unity of multinational space called Holy Rus is one of the main tasks of the Patriarch*), Russian Orthodox Church, 5 February 2014.

[39] Interv'yu gazete The Financial Times (The Interview for The Financial Times), President of Russia Official Website, 27 June 2019.

important hints to find the answers to the most pressing challenges".[40] This conservative framework makes it possible to put together even some of the most opaque puzzles, such as seeing a connection between the acceptance of LGBT rights and "colour revolutions". According to Sergey Naryshkin, Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service, allowing communities to accept the LGBT ideology weakens them and creates fertile ground for a "colour revolution".[41] Similar ideas have been expressed by philosopher Aleksandr Shchipkov from the Synodal Department of the Moscow Patriarchate, adviser to the Chairperson of the Russian State Duma and a member of the Civic Chamber. He saw the Black Lives Matter movement as another type of a "colour revolution" prepared by an aggressive urban liberal minority.[42] Both men agreed that, in the long run, LGBT ideology leads to "colour revolutions" and the erosion of national sovereignty. The recent migrant crisis in the EU has been seen by the Russian Orthodox Church because of hyper liberalism that neglects the need to preserve national values and tradition – the Christian identity of Europe, in this case.[43]

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[40] *Vystupleniye Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V.Lavrova na otkrytii XXVI Mezhdunarodnykh Rozhdestvenskikh obrazovatel'nykh chteniy, Moskva, 24 yanvarya 2018 goda* (*The Opening Speech of Minister of Foreign Affairs S. Lavrov at the 26th International Christmas Lectures*), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 24 January 2018.

[41] *Vystupleniye Direktora Sluzhby vneshney razvedki Rossiyskoy Federatsii S.E.Naryshkina na 10-y mezhdunarodnoy vstreche vysokikh predstaviteley, kuriruyushchikh voprosy bezopasnosti, na temu «Ob obespechenii natsional'noy bezopasnosti i ustoychivogo sotsial'no-ekonomicheskogo razvitiya gosudarstv v usloviyakh rosta «gibridnykh» ugroz», Ufa, 18 iyunya 2019 goda* (*The Speech of the head of the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation, S. Naryshkin at the 10th international meeting of high representatives responsible for security 'On strengthening national security and stable socio-economic development of states in the face of hybrid threats'*), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 28 June 2019.

[42] *Bankrotstvo grazhdanskoy religii SShA* (*The Bankruptcy of civil religion in the US*), Russian Orthodox Church, 2 November 2020.

[43] *Doklad mitropolita Volokolamskogo Ilariona na mezhdunarodnom forume khristianskikh zhurnalistov «Khristianstvo v sovremennom mir* (*Bishop Hilarion's paper 'Christianity and the today's world' presented at the international forum of Christian journalists*), Russian

Orthodox Church and Russian Diplomats Advancing the Conservative Agenda: Modes of Cooperation

The three mentioned modes can be observed in the way the State and the Church advance the conservative agenda together in the international arena. *Shared views* drive this cooperation. The latest example is the aforementioned narrative of *remembering World War II* in connection with traditional values.[44] The Russian Orthodox Church has also *successfully lobbied* ideas, such as *human rights*. The Church addressed this issue in 1999[45] and in 2008 the Bishops' Council adopted the "Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights". Next, the Church's agenda was supported by Russian diplomacy at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) where a draft of the resolution "Promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms through a better understanding of traditional values of humankind" was prepared in 2009.[46] In 2011, the abovementioned resolution was issued by the UNHRC[47] and at the 67th session of the UN General Assembly, in September 2012, Russia confirmed

Orthodox Church, 6 September 2019.

[44] The Russian Orthodox Church and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared as their goal at the OSCE and the Council of Europe to promote in one package "protection of traditional values, guaranteeing socio-economic and cultural rights, protection of national minorities and children as well as fight against neofascism and falsifying of history". *Kommentariy Departamenta informatsii i pechati MID Rossii v svyazi s predstoyashchim uchastiyem Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v neformal'noy ministerskoy vstreche OBSE e* (*The Commentary of the MFA Department of Information in regard to the S. Lavrov's attendance to the informal meeting of the OSCE*), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 7 July 2019.

[45] K. Stoeckl, *The Russian Orthodox Church and Human Rights*, London-New York, Routledge, 2014, p. 214.

[46] The resolution was presented by the Russian representative and adopted with no votes of support from Western countries (26 for, 15 against, 6 abstained).

[47] Human Right Council (HCR), *Promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms through a better understanding of traditional values of humankind*, 18 March 2011.

its commitment to the moral interpretation of human rights.[48]

Another example of the Church's successful lobbying is making *protecting Christians* a key point in Russia's foreign agenda. Sergey Lavrov often talks publicly about Christians persecuted all over the world, including Europe. He is concerned about the rise of aggressive secularism and the growing problems European Christians face while manifesting their religiosity.[49] However, the joint efforts of the Church and Russian State are most noticeable on the issue of Middle East Christians. In 2011, the Moscow Patriarchate initiated Resolution 1957 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe "On Violence against Christians of the Middle East". Two years later the Russian Duma's Interfaction Group in Defence of Christian Values issued an appeal to other members of parliament of European countries to support Christian minorities in the Middle East.[50] On 14 November 2014, the Russian State Duma issued a declaration "On the grievance and mass violation of the rights of religious and ethnic minorities in connection with the deterioration of the situation in Syria and Iraq".[51] A declaration "On protecting the Christians of the Middle East and Northern Africa" resulted in a common initiative brought by Russia, the Vatican and Lebanon to the UNHCR in 2015. A joint statement "Supporting the Human

[48] *Pozitsiya Rossiyskoy Federatsii na 67-y sessii GA OON* (*The Position of Russia at the 67th session of the UN GA*), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 4 January 2020.

[49] "Khristianam na Zapade vse trudneye otstaivat' svoi prava – Lavrov" ("It is getting more and more difficult for Christians in the West to stand for their rights – Lavrov"), *Interfax Religion*, 3 March 2015.

[50] *Zayavleniye deputatov Gosudarstvennoy Dumy FS RF - chlenov Mezhfraktsionnoy gruppy v zashchitu khristianskikh tsennostey o tragicheskom polozhenii khristian v Sirii* (*Statement by the Members of the Russian State Duma from the Interfaction Group in Defense of Christian Values on the tragic situation of Christians in Syria*), Russian Orthodox Church, 23 April 2013.

[51] *Vystupleniye Svyateyshego Patriarkha Kirilla na otkrytii III Rozhdestvenskikh Parlamentskikh vstrech* (*The Opening Speech of Patriarch Kirill at the 3rd Christmas Parliamentary Lectures*), Russian Orthodox Church, 22 January 2015.

Rights of Christians and Other Communities" has been signed (thus far) by 65 states.[52]

The latest step in the Church's lobbying is the traditional understanding of a *family*, which is gaining visibility in Russian foreign policy. In 2015, Russia and 17 other countries established the Group of Friends of the Family (GoFF) at the UN[53] to "reaffirm that the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State".[54] Sergey Lavrov reassured: "in the Council of Europe or the OSCE we stand for traditional values, for the family, especially in the face of undermining the God sanctioned understanding of the family and imposing the neoliberal position which destroys moral foundations of any civilisation, including Europe".[55] The Russian foreign office juxtaposes the traditional family dominant in the former Soviet republics with the crisis of family values in the West.[56] The traditional family is presented as a key traditional value and a defining feature of post-Soviet regional identity. Finally, the issue of the traditional family also attracts institutions from Western countries, like the World Congress of Families whose representatives have been developing close relations

[52] *Vystupleniye ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na zasedanii Soveta Imperatorskogo pravoslavnogo palestinskogo obshchestva* (*S. Lavrov's public statement at the session of the Council of the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Association*), Russian Orthodox Church, 3 November 2012.

[53] GoFF gathers Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Kuwait, Libya, Malaysia, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Turkmenistan, Yemen, Zimbabwe, and Belarus. No Western country is a member of the group.

[54] *Statement of the Group of Friends of the Family in New York*, 4 February 2020.

[55] *Vystupleniye Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V.Lavrova na Vserossiyskom molodezhnom obrazovatel'nom forume «Territoriya smyslov», Solnechnogorsk, 15 avgusta 2019 goda* (*S. Lavrov's speech at the Russian Educational Youth Forum 'Territory of Senses' in Solnechnogorsk*), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 15 August 2019.

[56] *Doklad Ministerstva inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii "O pooshchrenii i zashchite semeynykh tsennostey na prostranstve SNG"* (*The Lecture by Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia 'Support and Protection for family values in the CIS territory'*), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 30 April 2020.

with the Russian conservative *milieu*, including the Church.[57]

Advancing the conservative agenda is not only about shared views and the Church's lobbying. The State can also use the conservative narrative for its own purposes and the Moscow Patriarchate *adapts* to this course. Sometimes the Church pays the price for this alignment – this is, to some extent, the current situation in Ukraine where a part of population increasingly perceives the Orthodox Church as an executor of the Kremlin's agenda. However, the Church can also see the Kremlin's new narrative as an opportunity. The vision of the multipolar world order came from politicians, but the Church emphasised its civilisational dimension.[58] The Moscow Patriarchate played an important role in developing the idea of *traditional values*, which is crucial for distinguishing between civilisations and legitimising *civilisation pluralism* – today the flagship concept of the conservative narrative in Russian foreign policy.[59] Even the aid delivered to Italy during the 2020 pandemic was presented as a result of Russia's faithfulness to true Christian values.[60]

In 2020 referring to "traditional values" has become a means to mark a country's position in relation to the Russian and Western normative agenda. Declaring commitment to traditional values and civilisational pluralism has become a way of signalling a desire for rapprochement with Moscow. The latest example is President Rodrigo Duterte who at the Valdai Forum in 2019 criticised the *Pax Americana*, and stood

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[57] K. Stoeckl, "The Rise of the Russian Christian Right: the case of the World Congress of Families", *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2020; K. Stoeckl, "The Rise of the Russian Christian Right: the case of the World Congress of Families", *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2020.

[58] A. Curanović (2012), p. 133-138.

[59] B. Mezhuyev, "Civilisational Realism", *Russia in Global Affairs*, no. 4, 2018.

[60] *Vystupleniye i otvety na voprosy SMI Ministra inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii S.V. Lavrova v khode press-konferentsii po itogam peregovorov s Pervym zamestitelem Predsedatelya Pravitel'stva, Ministrom inostrannykh del Respubliki Serbii I.Dachichem, Belgrad, 18 iyunya 2020 goda* (*Statements and reactions to questions of S. Lavrov at the press conference on the results of the talks with the MFA of Serbia, I. Dachich*), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 18 June 2020.

for the principle of sovereignty and civilisational pluralism.[61] It is no coincidence that, at the same time, the President of the Philippines invited Orthodox Christian missionaries to his country.[62] The Moscow Patriarchate's activity has risen, and the Philippines were included in the newly established (2018) Patriarchate Exarchate of South East Asia. The Duterte cases illustrates that the Church functions as a parallel and complementary diplomatic channel for the Russian conservative narrative and it is perceived by foreign actors as a semi-official representative of the Russian State. Importantly, the Church also has its own international agenda, which focuses on other religious institutions. Four cases will be examined to highlight the complex mechanisms behind the Orthodox Church and the Kremlin's relationship when it comes to the conservative agenda.

The Common Conservative Front of the Church and the Kremlin in Four Case Studies: Syria, Africa, Hungary, China

One of the Kremlin's stated reasons for its engagement in *Syria* is the need to protect the Christian minority.[63] This is also a priority for the Church. A closer look at this case reveals all three modes of State-Church cooperation. Both parties

[61] Presidential Communications Operations Office, Presidential News Desk, Speech of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte at the Plenary Session of the Forum of the Valdai International Discussion Club, "World Order Seen from the East", 4 February 2020.

[62] *Mitropolit Volokolamskiy Ilarion: Razryv s Konstantinopolem ne povredil ni Russkoy, ni Ukrainskoy Tserkvi* (*Bishop Hilarion: Breaking apart with Constantinople did harm neither to Russian nor Ukrainian Orthodox Church*), Russian Orthodox Church, 15 October 2019.

[63] *O XXIV zasedanii Rabochey gruppy po vzaimodeystviyu MID Rossii i Russkoy Pravoslavnoy Tserkvi* (*About the 24th session of the working group for cooperation between MFA and the Russian Orthodox Church*), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 3 December 2019.

agree that Russia – as a major power – cannot be passive in the Middle East. Thus, there is a shared vision. The Moscow Patriarchate adapted to the Kremlin's decision to intervene militarily in Syria. The Church legitimised it by calling it a "holy war" and a moral duty.[64] At the same time, the Kremlin embraced the role the Church called for, i.e. the protector of Christians. Vladimir Putin and Sergey Lavrov regularly meet with representatives of Eastern Churches – patriarch of Antioch and Jerusalem as well as Syriac communities from Syria and Iraq. Russia provides Christian communities not just with diplomatic support but also humanitarian aid.[65] This, in turn, has an impact on the position of the Russian Orthodox Church within Orthodox Christianity. Contrary to other ancient patriarchates, the Moscow Patriarchate is the only one which can currently rely on the capacity of the State (which also happens to be a major power) and whose President presents himself as an Orthodox Christian. This is definitely not the case of the main rival, i.e. Patriarchate of Constantinople, that is located in Istanbul and cannot expect any diplomatic support from the Turkish authorities. In the current unstable Middle East, the Patriarchate of Antioch's survival depends on Russian help. As the representative of Antioch stated while paying a visit to the Russian military base in Syria: "Russia is more than a friend to us. She has always come to our rescue. If it weren't for Russia, there wouldn't be any Christians here, there would be no Syria…".[66] Hence it should come as no surprise the Patriarchates of Antioch and Jerusalem did not support

[64] *Protivostoyaniye Rossii terroristam IG nazvali v RPTs "svyashchennoy bor'boy"* (*The Russian Orthodox Church called Russia's fight against terrorists from ISIS a "holy war"*), RIA Novosti, Religion and Worldview, 30 September 2015.

[65] A. Curanović, "The Russian Orthodox Church, Human Security, Migration and Refugees: Concepts, Strategies and Actions", in L. Leustean (Ed.), *Forced Migration and Human Security in the Eastern Orthodox World*, London-New York, Routledge, 2019.

[66] *Voyskovoy khram VMF Rossii v Tartuse posetil iyerarkh Antiokhiyskogo Patriarkhata* (*Bishops of the Patriarchate of Antioch visited the Church at the Russian military base in Tartus*), Russian Orthodox Church, 1 June 2019.

Patriarch Bartholomew's (Constantinople) decision to establish the Orthodox Church of Ukraine independently of the Moscow Patriarchate. Meanwhile, the Patriarchate of Alexandria sided with Constantinople. For the Church it meant opening a new front in *Sub-Saharan Africa,*[67] which is our second case.

The Russian Church has recently improved relations with other African Christian communities – the Ethiopian Church and Coptic Church in Egypt. In 2017 the bilateral Commission for Dialogue with the Coptic Church was established and two years later a similar body was set up for the Russian Orthodox Church's contacts with the Ethiopian Church.[68] Both institutions are to raise awareness about the prosecution of Christians.[69] The Russian Orthodox Church's declarations are supported by the Russian MFA whose head, Sergey Lavrov, has been reassuring about Russia's commitment to the cause of African Christians.[70] The Church, in turn, is part of the new Russian diplomatic offensive in Africa. The Church's representative is a member of the Social Council at the Secretariat of the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum.[71] It is worth noticing the conservative tones that were evident at the Russia-Africa summit. The participants declared the need to

[67] *Mitropolit Volokolamskiy Ilarion: My sokhranyayem obshcheniye so vsemi arkhiyereyami i svyashchennosluzhitelyami, kotoryye ne priznayút i ne priznáyut «legitimizirovannykh» Konstantinopolem raskol'nikov* (*Bishop Hilarion: We keep relations with all archbishops and priests who have not recognised schismatics "legitimated" by Constantinople*), Russian Orthodox Church, 25 December 2019.

[68] *Sostoyalos' tret'ye zasedaniye Komissii po dialogu mezhdu Russkoy Pravoslavnoy Tserkov'yu i Koptskoy Tserkov'yu* (*The Commission for Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Coptic Church has gathered for the third time*), Russian Orthodox Church, 4 June 2019.

[69] *Sostoyalos' pervoye zasedaniye Komissii po dvustoronnemu dialogu s Efiopskoy Tserkov'yu* (*The Commission for bilateral dialogue with the Church of Ethiopia has gathered for the first time*), Russian Orthodox Church, 28 January 2019.

[70] "Lavrov podtverzhdayet namereniye Moskvy podnimat' vopros o zashchite khristian v mire" ("Lavrov confirms Moscow's intention to address the need to defend Christians all over the world"), *Interfax Religion*, 3 March 2015.

[71] *ARD i partnerstvo Rossiya-Afrika* (*ARD and Russia-Africa Partnership*), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 5 November 2020.

respect "the civilisational identity of each nation and its path of development".[72] Church-State cooperation in Africa is a case of shared interests translating into two individual agendas targeting, respectively, countries and religious institutions with the conservative narrative as the symbolic platform bringing all the parties together.

The *Hungarian case* shows how the Church adapts and supports State efforts but also how the non-Russian conservative narrative goes along with the Russian one. The bilateral rapprochement between Budapest and Moscow, which has been taking place since Viktor Orban became the Prime Minister, was originally about pragmatic projects, e.g. nuclear energy or gas supplies.[73] Recently, however, it has also gained a normative dimension. During Vladimir Putin's official visit to Budapest, on October 30, 2019, Viktor Orban and his guest met with the heads of Christian Churches in the Middle East. Later in November, also in Budapest, a second conference took place on the problem of the persecution of Christians. It was organised as a common initiative of the Hungarian and the Russian MFAs. In his speech at the conference Bishop Hilarion, the Head of the Department for External Contacts, complimented Viktor Orban on his braveness to defend Christianity and stand for tradition in secular Europe. He also praised the new Hungarian Constitution and wisdom shown in the policy towards migrants who might be a threat to Christian identity.[74] In other words, Hilarion applauded Orban's political creed. The Prime Minister of Hungary naturally has his own political agenda and uses the appeal to protect Christian values

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[72] *Vystupleniye Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V.Lavrova na ekonomicheskoy konferentsii "Rossiya-Afrika"* (*S. Lavrov's appearance at the economic conference "Russia-Africa"*), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 20 June 2019.

[73] Z. Végh, "Hungary's 'Eastern Opening' policy toward Russia", *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, vol. 24, no. 1-2, 2015.

[74] *Vystupleniye mitropolita Volokolamskogo Ilariona na II konferentsii v zashchitu khristian v Budapeshte* (*Bishop Hilarion's Appearance at the 2nd conference in Budapest on protecting Christians*), Russian Orthodox Church, 29 November 2019.

as an excuse to oppose the EU's migrant policy.[75] Inviting Middle East hierarchs to Budapest legitimises Orban's image as a defender of the faith. At the same time, it pleases the Kremlin, which can show its conservative agenda is gaining international support. The Moscow Patriarchate has played a part in the Kremlin's dealings with Budapest and paid tribute to Viktor Orban, who otherwise has not been mentioned by the Church hierarchs. In return, the Hungarian host has acknowledged the leading role of Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church in protecting Christians around the world.[76]

The fourth and final case is *China*. Here the Kremlin and the Moscow Patriarchate share concrete interests. China is perceived as the crucial partner in balancing Western domination. The Kremlin wants a multilevel strategic partnership, while the Church is concerned with reviving Orthodox Christian communities.[77] The Chinese authorities approach the Russian Orthodox Church as a representative of the Russian State. When Patriarch Kirill paid a visit to China in May 2013 (he arrived on a plane of the President of the Russian Federation), he was received with the honours reserved for heads of state. Two years later President Xi Jinping met with Patriarch Kirill during his official visit to Russia. During these meetings, the patriarch talked about the traditional values shared by the two countries.[78] This is an important detail because ideological issues are normally absent during Russian-Chinese diplomatic meetings. Meanwhile the Moscow Patriarchate can – due

[75] S. Walker, "Orbán deploys Christianity with a twist to tighten grip in Hungary", *The Guardian*, 11 January 2020.

[76] *Sostoyalas' vstrecha predsedatelya OVTsS s gossekretarem Kantselyarii prem'yer-ministra Vengrii* (*The meeting between the head of the Department for external contacts of the Moscow Patriarchate and State Secretary at the office of Prime-Minister of Hungary took place*), Russian Orthodox Church, 29 November 2019.

[77] A. Lukin, "State policies towards religion and the Russian Orthodox Church in China", *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2017.

[78] *Svyateyshiy Patriarkh Moskovskiy i vseya Rusi Kirill vstretilsya s Predsedatelem Kitayskoy Narodnoy Respubliki Si Tszin'pinom* (*Patriarch Kirill met with the President of China Xi Jinping*), Russian Orthodox Church, 8 May 2015.

to its specific profile – afford to promote an ideological, i.e. conservative message. What's more, the Church is engaged in the Russian-Chinese Working Group for Contacts and Religious Cooperation (since 2009) and participates in the Russia-China Friendship Committee for Peace and Development.[79] In this case, we see shared interests as well as the Church's role of a parallel channel for the conservative narrative. Interestingly, the traditional values formula turns out to be broad enough to allow the Church to build a normative bridge with a communist country that officially espouses state atheism.

Conclusion

In terms of the three scenarios of domestic factors influencing foreign policy – i.e. political bargaining, attempts to influence social expectations and domestic actors' efforts – the first one can be omitted in Russia due to the weakness of the political parties. The undemocratic nature of the Russian political system also reduces the role of social expectations, although it does not eliminate them entirely. The notion of civilisational sovereignty resonates with the majority of society, which wants Russia to manifest its independence from the West and act as a sovereign power in the international arena.[80] Russians do not oppose the conservative narrative, although society does show signs of fatigue with ideologies in general.[81] In a way, social support is greater for the conservative agenda in foreign policy, which feeds on anti-Western resentment, than for social conservatism

[79] *Rossiysko-kitayskiye konsul'tatsii po kontaktam i sotrudnichestvu v religioznoy sfere sostoyalis' v Moskve* (*Russian-Chinese consultations on cooperation in the sphere of religion were held in Moscow*), Russian Orthodox Church, 8 June 2011.

[80] *Rossiya bez Belorussii* (*Russian without Belarus*), Levada-Center, 21 January 2020.

[81] T.N. Yudina, Yu.N. Mazayev, and S.V. Babakayev, "Dinamika politiko-ideologicheskikh oriyentatsiy naseleniya Rossii v postsovetskiy period" ("The Dynamics of the political-ideological inclinations of the population of Russian in the post Soviet period"), *Vestnik Rossiyskogo universiteta druzhby narodov*, Seriya "Sotsiologiya", vol. 20, no. 3., 2020, pp. 589-590.

at home. Among the various actors spreading conservative ideas, the Russian Orthodox Church is the most effective. It is able to influence the official narrative in foreign affairs and act in the international arena.

Addressing the effectiveness of the Russian conservative agenda in foreign policy, Paul Robinson doubts Russia is an international conservative power.[82] One could disagree in the sense that even the above-discussed cases provide us with evidence to argue the conservative narrative is a success of Russia's diplomacy, becoming a part of Russia's trademark in the international arena. Moscow has managed to introduce a new counter-hegemonic narrative, which challenges the dominant liberal order associated with the West. Furthermore, the narrative not only draws a dividing line between the West and "the Rest" but it resonates with the already existing divisions in Western societies. The conservative narrative can be viewed as a part of Russian soft power.[83] The attractiveness of Russian conservatism has been well surmised by Nikolai Simeonov Malinov, the head of the Bulgarian Movement *Russophiles*: "We are united, first and foremost, by the wind of change, which has been blowing recently from Russia. This is the idea of traditional values, the idea of multipolar order and the idea of a strong sovereign state. These ideas are changing the world for the better".[84]

The narrative heralded by Russian diplomacy is used by other actors to win favour with Russia as well as to advance their own agendas. This is the case with Duterte, Orban and leaders of European far right movements. China, which is the main partner for both the West and Russia, seems to pay less attention

[82] P. Robinson (2020).

[83] V. Keating and K. Kaczmarska, "Conservative soft power: liberal soft power bias and the 'hidden' attraction of Russia", *Journal of International Relations and Development*, vol. 22, 2019.

[84] Priyëm po sluchayu Dnya narodnogo edinstva (The Banquet on the occasion of the Day of National Unity), President of Russia Official Website, 4 November 2019.

to traditional values in foreign policy but it welcomes the vision of civilisational pluralism. The conservative narrative also plays a part in the Russian policy towards its neighbourhood. It offers a new identity of the post-Soviet region with two pillars – conservative values and the great victory of 1945.[85]

The institutionalisation of social conservatism in domestic affairs has added credibility to Russia's foreign agenda. It is possible the established international image of a "conservative force" has started to provide incentives for Russian politicians to drive the conservative agenda at home. This is an issue worth investigation further. The acknowledgement by external actors of Russia's role as a guardian of traditional values might reinforce Russia's self-understanding in this direction.

The current situation in Russia, i.e. the economic difficulties and social dissatisfaction, reflected in the fall of the President's personal popularity (from 70% after the annexation of Crimea to 59% in 2019),[86] presents a challenge to the ruling elite. The petrified political system increasingly resorts to the stick rather than carrot, especially after the protests supporting Aleksei Navalny. In the face of the awaited succession of power, the political leadership cannot afford social upheaval or daring reforms, which could spark clashes within the ruling camp. The conservative narrative is used to promote pro-regime patriotism and preserve the *status quo* at home. As for the Russian Orthodox Church, it seems that since the protests in 2012 the Church has punched the Kremlin's card, for better and worse. Needless to say, the Moscow Patriarchate is highly motivated to advance the conservative agenda. Having introduced God into the Constitution, the next goal for the Church is to limit access to abortion.[87] In foreign policy, conservative ideas have turned

[85] Zasedaniye diskussionnogo kluba «Valday» (The Meeting of Valdai Club), President of Russia Official Website, 22 October 2020.

[86] *Pochemu vo vremya pandemii reyting Putina stal rekordno nizkim* (*Why did the rating of Putin's popularity fall record low during the pandemic*), Levada-Center, 4 June 2020.

[87] Russia is said to have one of the highest rates of abortion in the world. However, as Russian demographer Victoria Sakevich points out "in Russia, the

out to be successful. For all these reasons it is safe to assume the conservative agenda will remain part of Russian politics in the coming years.

official statistics include not just induced abortions, but also miscarriages, and the latter's share of the total number of abortions is rising. In 2017, miscarriages accounted for about 39 percent of abortions registered in clinics operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Health. As a result, the Russian abortion level is inflated compared to other countries, where the official statistics usually record only legal, artificially induced abortions […] If we consider only induced abortions (without miscarriages), today's Russia is not much different from countries with similar birth rates. We are very close to the level of abortions reported by Sweden, France, New Zealand, etc". V. Sakevich and M. Lipman, "Abortion in Russia: How Has the Situation Changed Since the Soviet Era?", *Point and Counterpoint*, 12 February 2019.

3. The Liberals and Liberalism in Russia: Who is Dead, Who is Alive?

Andrei Kolesnikov

There is no term in Russian social life that is more vague and at the same time more intuitively understandable than "liberalism". Its vagueness manifests itself in the fact that "liberals" are simultaneously understood as supporters of the market economy and strict budgetary policy, as Westernised citizens and people with non-traditional sexual orientations, as opponents of the government's "strong hand", and more broadly as people with democratic views. A prevalent viewpoint among conservative sectors of society, and one pushed by propaganda, holds that such people do not value tradition, do not believe in the main historical myths, have a cosmopolitan worldview, and undermine the foundations of thousands of years of Russian power and history. Furthermore, they do not recognise the annexation of Crimea as legitimate.

In the eyes of traditionalists, the term "liberal" epitomises all that is bad and anti-state. Secret "liberals" are entrenched in the Kremlin,[1] they still determine the economic policy of the state. They ruined the USSR and continued to ruin the country with their reforms. This explains why not only Yegor Gaidar, the architect of the radical transformation of the economy after the fall of the Soviet Union, and Anatoly Chubais, the father of

[1] This vision is typical, for instance, to the Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov, Vstrecha s rukovodinrlyami frekciy v Gosudarstvennoy Dumye (Meeting with the leaders of the fractions of the State Duma), 17 February 2020.

Russian privatisation, but also Boris Yeltsin, the man who gave them political cover, are all considered liberals. They opened the country to the West and engaged in the "sale of the motherland", letting Western capital into Russia. They borrowed institutions from the West and wrote the Constitution at the behest of the West, especially the Americans.

In the end, many politicians, including Vladimir Putin[2] and Sergey Lavrov,[3] acknowledged the crisis or even death of liberalism. In doing so, they qualified – and quite rightly so – the current regime in Russia as anti-liberal.

Naturally, this public mass discourse lacks detail and nuance, not to mention a scientific approach. And there is no room for sophisticated disputes about how republicanism differs from liberalism,[4] or about "illiberal democracies" (to my mind this term is an oxymoron, since the absence of liberalism also excludes democracy – we do not consider Hitler's regime, which came to power through the democratic institution of elections, to be a democracy).

Surprisingly, all the talk of the post-Soviet years about "liberals" and liberalism repeats old and even ancient clichés. At the end of *perestroika* and at the beginning of Russian reforms proper, most of the talk was about "democrats"; as a slur and an umbrella term, "liberal" only appeared in the late 1990s, and took hold in mass discourse with the appearance of social media. Nevertheless, arguments about liberalism versus traditionalism have gone on for decades, if not a century or more. Let us consider as an example the debate between the liberal Lodovico Settembrini and his opponent Leo Nafta in Thomas Mann's *The*

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[2] "Vladimir Putin says liberalism has 'become obsolete'", *Financial Times*, 28 June 2019.

[3] "Lavrov schitaet, chto zapadnaya liberalnaya model razvitiya teryaet svoyu prvlekatelnost" ("Lavrov argues that the Western liberal model of development is losing its attractiveness"), *TASS*, 12 April 2019.

[4] O. Kharkhordin, *Respublica, ili Delo publiky* (*Respublica, or Public Case*), Saint Petersburg, Izdatelstvo Evropeyskogo Universiteta v Sankt-Peterburge (European University of Saint Petersburg), 2020.

Magic Mountain, which, in turn, demonstrates the universality of this kind of debate. Or the conversations of five Russians "in the garden of one of those villas that, huddled at the foot of the Alps, look out into the azure depths of the Mediterranean Sea" in Russian philosopher Vladimir Soloviev's last work, *Three Conversations on War, Progress and the End of World History* (1900)[5], where a "Politician" depicts the modern perspective and a "General" embodies the traditional one. These kinds of conversations are taking place today both in kitchens and in public debates. Although more than a century has passed, the arguments of the disputants are similar because, in essence, we are talking about a constant process of confrontation between modernisation and archaicism in Russian society and the state.

In addition, these debates have invariably revolved around the arguments about Russia's belonging/non-adherence to Europe, the influence of Asia, the extent to which Russian civilisation is unique and its *Sonderweg* (special path). Everything that the "Politician" talks about in "Three Conversations" can be put into the mouth of today's average liberal: "Our homeland, naturally, experiences the influence of the Asian element much more than other European countries, which is our whole imaginary identity ... the real essence of the adjective Russian is the European. We are Russian Europeans, just as there are English, French and German Europeans".[6]

The Basic Tenet of Liberalism

The Russian liberal has long been a two-pronged creature, and this has manifested itself over the decades. On the one hand, Russian liberalism was something special. The emigrant publicist Nikolai Osipov wrote in the Munich almanac *Mosty* (*Bridges*) in 1959 about the main features of Russian liberals of

[5] Solovyev V.S. Sochineniya v 2 t. T.2, *Mysl*, Moscow, (Solovyev V.S. Collected works in 2 volumes. V.2), 1990, p. 635.

[6] Ibid., pp. 697-698.

this specific kind: "Not bourgeois individualism was at its core, not Adam Smith, not the slogan of free trade, but humanity and the people".[7] And at the same time, the Russian liberal was both entrepreneur and reformer, above all economic (what was called Manchester-type liberalism): "Only businessmen could raise the era of great reforms, and in the combination of idealism, high culture and great practical acumen they expressed the type of Russian liberal".[8] Russian liberalism finally took shape by the end of the XIX century, even though the liberal journal *Vestnik Evropy* (*European messenger*) in 1895 attributed the absence of bourgeois liberalism in Russia to the absence of bourgeoisie in the Western European sense of the word.[9]

The type of liberal who believes, in today's terms, in authoritarian modernisation from above emerged in nineteenth-century Russia. "The basic dogma of liberalism" (N. Osipov) of this statist type proceeded from the following assumption: "Reforms can be carried out only through the union of the autocracy and the liberal minority of society against the interests and desires of the majority of that society".[10] All attempts at reforms in the XIX century were based on this logic, which included compromises, half-reforms, and failures that turned into counter-reforms.[11] The dilemma of the despotic reformer has been known since the XVIII century. It is the problem of Catherine II – how to maintain autocracy and a hierarchical social system, while at the same time carrying out reforms and imposing education?[12]

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[7] N. Osipov, *Credo reusskogo liberalisma - Iskusstvo kino* (*The Creed of Russian Liberalism - Art of Cinema*), 1992, no. 2, p. 7.

[8] Ibid., p. 8.

[9] J.H. Billington, *Ikona y topor. Opyt istolkovanya istorii russkoy kultury* [(*The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretative History of Russian Culture*), Vintage Books, 1970], Moscow, VGBIL, 2011, p. 444.

[10] N. Osipov, *Credo russkogo liberalisma - Iskusstvo kino* (*The Creed of Russian Liberalism - Art of Cinema*), no. 3, 1992, p. 13.

[11] A. Kolesnikov, *Caught Between Reform and Revanche: Russia's Struggle to Modernize*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 2016.

[12] J.H. Billington (2011), p. 233.

This is the classic problem of modernisation and the archaicism that opposes it, of modernisation goals and conservative ways of achieving them. It is a trap into which Russian reforms and the Russian liberals who promote them have been falling for centuries, not decades. Mikhail Speransky, the great reformer of the early XIX century, spoke about it: "What a contradiction: to desire sciences, commerce, and industry and to thwart their most natural consequences; to wish the mind to be free and the will to be in shackles … for the nation to wax prosperous and yet not to enjoy the finest fruits of its wealth – liberty".[13] Outstanding Russian demographer Anatoly Vishnevsky wrote in his work *Sickle and Ruble*: "Whatever part of the changes we undertook, in each case, after a short period of success the instrumental goals of modernisation came into irresistible conflict with conservative social means, further progressive changes were blocked, modernisation remained unfinished, came to a dead end. Ultimately, this led to a crisis of the system and required a complete reform".[14]

The Trap of Authoritarian Modernisation

The first post-Soviet Russian reformers had no time to consider what type of liberalism they belonged to, and Yegor Gaidar's ideology implied a combination of political democracy and economic liberalism. Gaidar has always been an opponent of authoritarianism and back in the 1994 warned of its dangers for the development of Russia.[15]

But attempts at modernisation under Vladimir Putin, including the reformist "program of German Gref" (named

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[13] R. Pipes, *Russky konservatizm I yego kritiki. Issledovanye politicheskoy kultury* [(*Russian Conservatism and Its Critics: A Study in Political Culture*), New Haven, Yale University Press, 2006], Novoye Izdatelstvo, Moscow, 2008, p. 115.

[14] A. Vishnevsky, *Serp i rubl. Konservativnaya modernizatsiya v SSSR* (*Sickle and ruble: Conservative modernization in the USSR*), Moscow, O.G.I., 1998, p. 418.

[15] Y. Gaidar, *State and Evolution. Russia's Search for a Free Market*, Seattle, The University of Washington Press, 2003.

after a member of Putin's team at the time, who is now the CEO of Russia's top bank Sberbank) in 2000, were grounded in this "basic tenet of liberalism", which eventually turned into a trap. Boris Yeltsin's team assumed that by choosing Putin as their successor, they would preserve the legacy of the first President, while liberals hoped that they could actually manipulate the new Head of State and he would implement structural reforms that had not been completed in the 1990s. The problem was that many liberals neglected democracy, believing that a pragmatic economic approach was more important than a values-based approach. This was manifested, in particular, in the debate within the liberal right-wing Union of Right Forces over whether or not to support Putin in the 2000 presidential election. The slogan of the liberal right at the time, "Kirienko to the Duma, Putin for President!" created the illusion of Putin's controllability. Sergei Kiriyenko, Prime Minister in 1998 for a brief period before the financial meltdown, became one of the liberal leaders, about whom it was said that only the wall was more right than him. This did not prevent him from subsequently serving in various positions during the Putin administration and ending up on the sanctions list in connection with the poisoning of Alexei Navalny.[16]

Hopes of authoritarian modernisation were to fail more than once during the Putin administration: liberal economists wrote reform plans that did not involve the political sphere, and therefore their programs either failed to be implemented, or, having been implemented, were later replaced by counter-reforms. Typical in this sense was the short semi-liberal period of Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, whose modest achievements, including in the field of political liberalisation, were completely disavowed by Putin beginning in 2012. During Medvedev's period, the think-tank Institute of Contemporary Development (INSOR) worked on a permanent basis. At a time when the liberal party, the Union of Right Forces, failed twice in

[16] We will return to this topic separately and consider Kiriyenko's case.

parliamentary elections and was close to self-destruction, liberal thought proper moved to INSOR – the emphasis was placed on modernising all spheres of life on the basis of a liberal approach.

The announcement in September 2011 that Putin and Medvedev would swap places, which meant that the hopes of consolidating the trend of normalising Russia, i.e. moving the country closer to the normative model of Western democracy were in vain, provoked protests by the advanced urban classes in 2011-2012. By that time, liberal economists had prepared the "Strategy 2020", a blueprint for economic modernisation reforms for Putin's next term. The authors of the program received government awards, but the political vector shifted toward counter-modernisation, authoritarianism, and technocratic rather than liberal economic policies.

At that time, it still seemed that the so-called "systemic liberals" entrenched in the Finance and Economy Ministries and in the Central Bank were not only able to serve as a filter for various kinds of *dirigiste* economic projects, but also to maintain a liberal economic policy, pushing through elements of a modernisation agenda. But as early as the beginning of the political freeze and the suppression of civil society and political opposition in 2012, it became clear that authoritarian modernisation within the type of authoritarianism that Putin has built is impossible in principle. The political Ice Age froze economic reforms and contributed to the primitivisation of economic policy – the basic outline of Russian-style state capitalism was born. "Systemic liberals" were unable to oppose the union of the state and big capital, including the omnipotence of the so-called "Orthodox Chekists"[17] – descendants of the security services, armed with a traditionalist extreme right-wing

[17] This is a special term for the circle of Putin's cronies, who, on the one hand, came from the special services, and, on the other hand, are the fierce adherents of the Orthodox Christianity, or rather a politicised version of it that implies extreme right-wing views. Among them, for instance, the Security Council Chief Nikolai Patrushev, the Head of Roctech state corporation Sergei Chemezov, the Head of Rosneft Igor Sechin, and many others.

ideology and who occupied the most important positions in major companies. In the system of crony capitalism, "systemic liberals" could only play a technocratic role. Even then, during Putin's (formally) third term, a dilemma arose: either retain the autocratic circle in power or modernise. Naturally, the authoritarian state establishment leaned toward the former option.

Deadlocks of Practical Liberalism

Nevertheless, since every new presidential election engendered the false hope of a possible restart of modernisation, by 2018 some of the same people who had prepared Medvedev's programs and the "Strategy 2020" had united under the roof of the Centre for Strategic Research (CSR, where the "Gref program" was written) to draft a modernisation agenda for Putin-2020.

The work was headed by the last of the active liberals, former Finance Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Kudrin. His position in the Putin establishment was and is unique because of his friendly relations with the President, which date back to their days working together in the St. Petersburg city hall. On the one hand, the President is confident in Kudrin's human decency and reliability as a cautious and non-radical person. On the other hand, Putin needs him as a counterweight to the ultra-conservative wing in his entourage and as the informal "curator" of a balanced budget policy. Nevertheless, for years if not decades Putin has refrained from appointing Kudrin as Prime Minister, because such a decision would upset the ideological balance in the elites and signal the beginning of modernisation reforms. Neither of these is desirable for the President, so at first, after leaving his post as Finance Minister in 2011, Kudrin engaged in fundraising for civil society organisations and founded the Committee for Civil Initiatives (CGI). This structure allowed him to position himself as an independent but extremely influential expert

advising the government. In addition, his authority allowed him to "raise" money for a variety of civil initiatives and to found the annual large-scale United Civil Forum (OGF). As Head of the CGI and Curator of the OGF, Kudrin remained the only bridge between civil society and the government. As the political regime tightened, his activities became increasingly undesirable, and project funding gradually dried up. That is why the preparation, under Kudrin's aegis, of a new modernisation program at the CSR (work began in 2016) was, in fact, his last chance to influence a change in the vector of development in the country, at least in the economic and social spheres.

The CSR held first-class diagnostic seminars, which were put together by the best economists, demographers, specialists in spatial development, health care, and education. Working groups prepared proposals, each in their own field. And, as has always been the case in previous attempts to prepare these kinds of programs, the experts were inspired by the opportunity to influence government policy. However, unlike the teams that worked with German Gref (who, after working on the reform program, became the Minister of Economic Development in 2000), Igor Yurgens (who headed INSOR), Yaroslav Kuzminov and Vladimir Mau (the rectors of the Higher School of Economics and the Academy of National Economy, who led the preparation of the "Strategy 2020"), many of those experts who worked at the CSR were sceptical about the outcome of their efforts. That is, they did not believe that Putin would implement this program.

And this is what happened as a result. The program became entertaining reading for the ministries and departments. The regime continued to move toward increasingly authoritarian practices. The CSR became a regular economic think tank, and Kudrin himself became Head of the Audit Chamber, an influential body that serves as a platform for criticising the government's wrong moves in the economy and finance but does not, however, determine economic policy.

The Putin Trap: Former Liberals as Hostages of the System

One name stands out on the EU's October 2020 sanctions list against Russia, issued over the poisoning of opposition politician Alexei Navalny. It's a name once associated with the development of liberalism and democracy in Russia, and the name is Sergey Kiriyenko, President Vladimir Putin's First Deputy Chief of Staff responsible for domestic policy. The man who was once lionised by the West as a "young reformer" has now landed on a European sanctions list.

Kiriyenko's nickname back in the spring of 1998, when he was unexpectedly promoted from Energy Minister to Prime Minister, was Kinder Surprise, because of his studious baby face and his sudden appearance on the political stage. He was 35, though he looked younger, and was a close associate of Boris Nemtsov, who was then First Deputy Prime Minister (and would many years later be assassinated a stone's throw from the Kremlin after years in opposition). Kiriyenko was entrusted with the task of weathering the financial crisis that was looming in Russia in 1998, and then accelerating economic reform.

The young Prime Minister showed himself to be capable of working 24/7. But it wasn't enough, and just a few months later, in August 1998, the Russian government defaulted on its debt and the crisis forced Kiriyenko out of government.

He remained in politics, however, and became one of the leaders of a new liberal centrist party, the Union of Right Forces (SPS). The driving forces behind the party were the architects of Russia's liberal reform: Anatoly Chubais, Yegor Gaidar, and Boris Nemtsov.

SPS tried to enlist the new Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, as an ally, confident that he would be able to modernise the country and ensure that liberal economic reforms were completed.

During his short stint as Prime Minister, Kiriyenko had made a fateful choice. He appointed Putin Head of the Federal Security Service (FSB, a successor agency to the KGB): Putin's

first truly important position in his progression to Russia's future autocrat.

Putin did not forget this, and repaid Kiriyenko, first by making him his envoy to the important Volga Federal District. Later he entrusted Kiriyenko with Rosatom, the vast and powerful state corporation responsible for the nuclear industry, including the nuclear weapons complex.

Putin singled out Kiriyenko from all the liberals, apparently considering him an efficient technocrat. In addition to Kiriyenko's impressive capacity for hard work and detail, he was known for his interest in *aikido* – a traditional Japanese martial art and spiritual discipline – and for his adherence to "methodological ideas", inspired by the Soviet philosopher Georgy Shchedrovitsky. Social engineering was the young politician's strength – and perhaps also his weakness, for what is a socially constructed reality in which there is methodology, but no substance?

Kiriyenko's appointment as First Deputy Chief of the Kremlin's administration in 2016 was greeted with something approaching rapture in Russia's liberal circles: it was seen as a sign of a thaw in domestic policy. His predecessors responsible for political manipulation were Vladislav Surkov, known as the Kremlin's grey cardinal and infamous for his sophisticated, dirty provocations, and Vyacheslav Volodin, who coined the phrase "Putin is Russia, and Russia is Putin". Kiriyenko was supposed to bring more subtlety and precision to political management.

Together with the new Chief of Staff, Anton Vaino, he embodied a rational and technocratic counterweight to the crude and authoritarian methods of the *siloviki* (security services) faction in power. Among other tasks, Kiriyenko set about establishing a mechanism for selecting Russia's new technocratic elite: politically loyal and not independent, but well versed in the latest managerial trends.

But the Kremlin technocrats proved unable either to change the direction of domestic policy or to successfully lobby for the above-mentioned economic reform program drawn up

in 2017-2018 by Alexei Kudrin. Instead, economic policy amounted to the inefficient financing of the "national projects" – spending on development targets identified by Putin – while domestic policy gradually degenerated from subtle manipulation into the crude use of force.[18]

Unsurprisingly, Kiriyenko's liberal leanings mean nothing under a harshly authoritarian regime, and his technocratic efficiency has simply been deployed in the war against civil society and the political opposition.

Colourless technocrats took the place of the liberals, who under President Dmitry Medvedev until the return of Putin in 2012 represented a counterbalance to the *siloviki*. But the liberals who remained in power themselves turned into technocrats, often just to stay in power. The author of the ambitious 2000 reform program, German Gref, escaped into the sphere of the high technologies – a very comfortable reservation. The Head of the National Bank Elvira Nabiullina has to eliminate the consequences of the Kremlin's geopolitical and political tricks harmful to the economy and the ruble exchange rate. The most influential "systemic liberal", Alexei Kudrin, as Head of the Accounting Chamber, has the right to criticise economic policy. But he has to be tremendously careful – just like the representatives of old liberal teams, who still have a chance to control modern economic education in the best universities of the country by making compromises.

The excuse they comfort themselves with is very similar to the logic of the liberal advisers of the Soviet general secretaries: "We are better off here than someone else". But the Russian authoritarian regime has reached the stage where these arguments do not work. The regime simply uses them as technocrats, and they have no influence on the political course, which is becoming noticeably harsher. And they become accomplices of Putin's *siloviki*.

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[18] "Russia: Arbitrary arrests and overcrowded prisons following Navalny protests", *Deutsche Welle*, 5 February 2021.

It's unlikely that Kiriyenko had anything to do with the plan to poison Navalny. Most likely, it was the work of the security services.[19] In any case, there are other people in the Kremlin who are responsible for political operations, such as first Deputy Chief of administration Alexei Gromov, yet he was not included on the sanctions list. But in justifying its sanctions against individuals in that specific case, however, the EU supported the view that Kiriyenko shares responsibility for the poisoning of Navalny.[20]

Kiriyenko could have become the leader of liberal reforms and played one of the key roles in the country's transformation into a completely new and democratic Russia. Instead, he has become one of the many hostages of Putin and his system. This is how Putin's system works: through collective responsibility for everything undertaken.

Who Is a Liberal Today?

Today, the centre-right version of liberalism does not exist in the form of a party. And the "system liberals" are either discredited or play the role of ordinary technocrats, and even the degree of their influence on government policy is declining – it is very difficult to qualify Mikhail Mishustin's cabinet as "liberal".

One of Russia's oldest parties, Yabloko, is more of a centre-left version of Russian liberalism. The party still has fairly strong regional branches, but is not represented at the federal level. The party's ability to ally with other political forces is traditionally weak (this has held true throughout post-Soviet history), and it is torn by internal contradictions. It is objectively difficult for the party to work in an environment of Putin's authoritarianism in which it is still more or less the only legitimate democratic force on the legal political scene,

[19] "'Bellingcat' lead investigator publishes database on travel history of FSB operatives implicated in Navalny poisoning", *Meduza*, 31 December 2020.
[20] Official Journal of the European Union, L 341, vol. 63, 15 October 2020.

and is more inclined to compete with other informal political forces than to enter into an alliance with them. This is especially true of Alexei Navalny's organisational structures, toward which Yabloko has a traditionally wary attitude.

In the political field, Navalny's structures and civil society itself represent a conditionally liberal discourse.[21] Civic organisations, while not aiming to fight for power, have nevertheless rapidly become politicised in recent years. And civil protests are increasingly political in nature. They are not simply about restoring one's constitutional rights, from environmental to electoral. Protests of this kind are increasingly – and especially so after Alexei Navalny's return to Russia and his arrest – anti-Putin in nature.

It is clear that broad civic protest cannot have a unified and clearly defined ideology. Here it is important to note that it is necessary to distinguish between the protest of the political opposition and civil society. When defending political rights, these protests may coincide, as was the case in the summer of 2020, when Khabarovsk rose against the arrest of Governor Sergei Furgal. But in the proper sense of the word there was no opposition on the streets. The protest could be assessed as liberal, since its basic purpose was to restore electoral rights and protect the choices once made by the citizens, but it is unlikely that participants themselves would have identified as liberals. In other words, these kinds of protests (not to mention the rallies in defence of Navalny that swept the country in January and February 2021) are intuitively rather than doctrinally liberal.

In a similar vein, Navalny and his staff and supporters could be considered liberal in the broad sense of the word: the ideas of restoring rights, rejecting the authoritarian vector of Russia's development, and implementing a program of modernisation are liberal and democratic. The nuances come later (for example, when discussing the more leftist or more rightist points of Navalny's economic ideas and statements), but in

[21] Navalny, despite all the racism accusations that suddenly began to emerge, has not appealed to Russian nationalism for a very long time.

a situation of direct confrontation between the authoritarian regime and civil society, which joins the political opposition, this does not matter yet. Moreover, the authorities themselves label everything that opposes them – from Navalny to NGO-foreign agents – as "liberals". The boundaries of the term have been expanded, but this is happening precisely because of the radical confrontation between the authorities and civil society.

It should be noted that the people who are prepared to self-identify as democrats and liberals have a very clear-cut worldview and distinctive projective thinking; that is, an understanding of what the future of Russia should look like. Navalny uses this kind of goal-setting, starting from a negative agenda: showing the shortcomings of Putin's system, he always explains that there will definitely be no such thing in "beautiful Russia of the future".[22] In August 2020, the Carnegie Moscow Center together with researchers from the Levada Center conducted several focus groups in order to understand how people with different political views see the future of Russia.[23]

In addition to "loyalists" and "traditionalists", we analysed the ideas of "liberals". They turned out to be surprisingly clear, even though we were talking to respondents from Moscow and Yaroslavl (the middle-size Russian town) who were ordinary people, not ideologues or politicians.

"Liberals", unlike the other two camps, see the solution to societal problems in limiting the state. Its role is to "set the rules of the game", ensure equality before the law and justice, guarantee security, and alleviate the plight of the poor and needy. In the economy, the state must "leave business alone", "give people the opportunity to earn, and show initiative". And to do this, the state must protect private property, including through fair trials for businesses and people.

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[22] This is the main Navalny's expression, which is describing his vision of the Russian future: "Together, we will certainly build the Beautiful Russia of the Future", in *Navalny's Campaign of 2018. How it was*, Navalny 2018.

[23] A. Kolesnikov, A. Levinson, and D. Volkov, *How Proponents and Opponents of Political Change See Russia's Future*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 14 January 2021.

"Liberals" advocate fighting monopolies (such as Gazprom, Rosneft and Sberbank) and privatising large enterprises. The ultimate goal is seen as increasing competition and ensuring long-term economic growth. Socialist-like income redistribution is out of the question.

In politics, according to "liberals", Russia needs competition and pluralism, and a regular rotation of power (and not a monopoly on power, as it is now), which are provided through multiparty, free and fair elections. This requires anti-corruption investigations and a free and independent media. Unlike the other two ideological groups, the "liberals" expressed dissatisfaction with foreign policy. In their view, it is necessary to make friends with the West, pursue a less aggressive policy, adopt and jointly develop technologies, and engage in international competition.

However, as far as the social sphere is concerned, the views of the "liberals" largely coincided with those of the other two ideological groups. Most agreed that the Russian state should have more social obligations to its citizens, not fewer.

It should be noted that this group of respondents was recruited not only on the basis of liberal and democratic views, but also on the basis of such criteria as having voted in the referendum in the summer of 2020 against the nullification of Vladimir Putin's presidential terms. In other words, liberal views primarily imply the rejection of Putin's model of development and of the irremovability of power.

It is difficult to determine in quantitative terms what percentage of the population consists of citizens with conditionally liberal, democratic, pro-Western, and modernising views. Sociologists tend to put that figure at 12-15% of respondents. And these people are not represented in parliament, parties and government bodies in principle. There is no federal parliamentary party that expresses their views. The new small parties that do emerge from time to time, most likely with the Kremlin's blessing, avoid identifying with liberalism. At the same time, parties with a left- or right-wing radical

identity willingly build their worldview on fighting liberals and what is considered a manifestation of liberalism.

This is a paradoxical situation: liberalism is not in power and is not represented in the parties and governing bodies. But the Kremlin, the systemic left-wing or ultra-right opposition, and the traditionalists by conviction build their policy on the basis of combating liberalism. The authorities are systematically destroying pockets of liberalism by declaring civil society organisations (e.g. Memorial, the Moscow School of Civic Education, Transparency International-R) foreign agents. This paradoxically acknowledges their social and intellectual strength and the fact that normal everyday life and the market economy are built on liberal foundations.

The Putinism Trap

It is believed that young Russian diplomats, the future foreign policy elite, are free of both pro-Putin and pro-Western views.[24] This means that, like young diplomats in Soviet times, they "waver with the general line", as they used to say in those days. Now the "general line" requires not just loyalty, but hyper-loyalty. Not to mention the fact that today a good Russian diplomat is obliged by his post to be hostile to the West. So, there is no liberalism in this field: the loyalist approach has nothing in common with a liberal or at least pragmatic view. Had circumstances been different, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, as a carrier diplomat, would now be pursuing a policy of maximum openness to the West. But foreign policy is a continuation of domestic policy by other means. The political system has become authoritarian. Accordingly, the behaviour of the diplomatic corps serving it has changed along with the system. What is seen as a pragmatic approach in foreign policy is turning into isolationism, and consequently, into economic

[24] K. Liik, *The last of the offended: Russia's first post-Putin diplomats*, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 19 November 2019.

problems. Hostility costs Russia considerable financial losses due to the EU and US sanctions and missed business and cooperation opportunities

The elites – economic, political and especially foreign policy – cannot, under present circumstances, be the drivers of even minimal modernisation steps: they are busy serving the counter-modernisation and archaisation of politics. The generational turnover in the elite and its "technocratisation" is not a guarantee against further stagnation in the economy and the continuation of the counter-modernisation vector in politics. There is no one to initiate change from above – digitalisation replaces it in official discourse, but digitised stagnation is even more hopeless than an undigitised one. Yet for all the ineffectiveness of policies, including economic policy, the political regime has the resources to maintain the loyalty of the part of the population that depends on the state. How long this resource will last is another matter.

Many of the professionals currently in power could certainly work for the state and society in a hypothetical transit from today's authoritarian model to a softer one with liberal and modernising elements. But to predict now when and how this transit will take place and who – indicated by name – will accompany it, is practically impossible.

Monsieur Jourdain, Moliere's character, did not know that he was speaking prose for years. Similarly, the average Russian does not know that they owe modern domestic services, the availability of food in the stores, and the ability to travel abroad to liberalism. Understanding of this can be achieved through a change in state policy and a change in social attitudes. This needs to happen in synchronicity. There are no signs of such synchronisation. And under President Vladimir Putin there will be none.

4. The Czars of Russian Middle East Policies

Marianna Belenkaya, Polina I. Vasilenko

Ever since Russia launched its military campaign in Syria in the fall of 2015, there has been no shortage of analyses of the drivers of Russian policies in the Middle East, speculations over Moscow's motives for its engagement in the Syrian war, and forecasts for where it all will eventually end up. At the same time, the topic of Russian decision-making on the Middle East remains – somewhat surprisingly – largely overlooked and under-researched. Meanwhile, in order to get a better sense of Russian priorities in the turbulent region, understand its policy patterns and separate interests of the state from those of different groups or individuals, one has to look into the complex domain of Russian stakeholders in the Middle East. This isn't an easy task given the fog of secrecy that often surrounds Russian decision-making processes in general, and especially in the Middle East. Intuitively, in Russia's top-down system, all roads lead to Kremlin.

However, the Kremlin does not adopt major decisions in a power vacuum: as this chapter will show, the actors that seek to influence it, or at least have its ear, are many. They differ in the scope of their power, the level of access to the President, the amount of resources they can spend on executing policies and the types of political message they carry when and if the Kremlin decides to channel a decision through them. But they all also carry into the Kremlin a different agenda – usually something they care about, each for their own reasons. The Kremlin may then run its policy through these different agendas or may seek

to reconcile them in a holistic approach, depending on the issue and the overall game plan (or the lack of thereof).

This chapter aims to present a different perspective than most studies of Russian MENA strategy. Rather than looking at the history of Russian presence in the Middle East, analysing its relations with regional governments and presenting yet another account of the evolution of its policy in the region, this study looks at internal institutional and personal drivers of Russian policy. On the basis of open sources and discussions with fellow analysts and policy-makers in Russia, the chapter seeks to present a vision of the actual making of Russian foreign policy in the region.

When in Russia Do as the Russians Do

When talking with Russian experts about lobbying, one often hears the following: "The best lobbyist is Sechin",[1] as the Meduza website wrote several years ago in its study of lobbying activities. Igor Sechin is the Chairman of the Management Board of the largest oil company in the Russian Federation, Rosneft, and these words mean that the top managers of the companies deal with state officials best of all. However, people who are familiar with this type of activity noted in the Meduza article that this was an incorrect approach. "Whoever can visit the president is no longer a lobbyist, but a player. Lobbyists are second-level players by default".[2]

There is no fixed concept of "lobbyism" in Russian legislation. Several attempts to pass an appropriate law regulating lobbying activities have failed. However, it is hard to deny its existence.

[1] T. Bekbulatova, "Ih ne vidno, no oni reshayut voprosy Kak rabotayut rossijskie lobbisty, dzhiarshchiki i 'reshaly' - posredniki mezhdu biznesom i gosudarstvom" ("They are not visible, but they solve the issues. How Russian lobbyists, GR-managers and "decision makers" - intermediaries between business and the state work"), *Meduza*, 21 December 2017.

[2] Ibid.

Recently, there has been an increase in the number of specialists dealing with GR ("government relations"),[3] which in Russia is often equated with lobbying, as well as consulting companies. But these channels mainly serve the domestic agenda, lobbying primarily the interests of local players either within Russia or in rare cases abroad.

Generally speaking, the concept of "lobbying" is vague and concerns mostly informal agreements and implicit instruments of influence. Yet in the domestic political sphere, lobbyists are known, while in the field of foreign policy formation, it is more difficult to single out the channels for promoting interests.

Russia, on the one hand, uses the opacity of its ties with the Middle East countries because in the Middle East personalised, non-institutional politics often leads to more productive outcomes that when carried out through traditional channels. On the other hand, "grey areas" leave room for speculation, such as the rumours swirling around Russia when the US Defence Department's inspector general for counterterrorism operations in Africa claimed that the United Arab Emirates was financing Russian Wagner Group mercenaries.[4]

Who Is Who in the Foreign Ministry

As the face of Russian foreign policy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs could be seen as one of the institutional lobbyists. Additionally, ministry officials who hold the Middle East portfolio are distinguished by a high level of professional training and knowledge of the language, which increases their importance in the eyes of foreign colleagues.[5] As noted

[3] GR-managers build interactions between businesses and political institutions. In Russia, it is believed that the tasks facing GR are much broader than those set by the lobbyists, but in fact they perform similar functions.

[4] A. Mackinnon and J. Detsch, "Pentagon Says UAE Possibly Funding Russia's Shadowy Mercenaries in Libya", *Foreign Policy*, 30 November 2020.

[5] A. Lund, *Russia in the Middle East*, Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 2019, p. 41.

by Russian expert Nikolai Kozhanov, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is not really a decision-making structure, but rather is "a postal service that receives incoming messages from other countries and delivers them to the right address".[6] This may be an oversimplified view of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, since it is the agency that both puts up Russia's Foreign Policy Concept and puts forward major tactical proposals for the rest of the policy-making community. The role of other institutions interacting with other states and non-state actors and their influence in making a specific foreign policy decision may differ depending on the situation. For example, the Middle Eastern agenda, which is perceived by Russia as part of its national security strategy due to objective reasons (the war in Syria, the spread of radicalism, etc.), requires broad involvement of the military and intelligence agencies and thereby increases their share in the decision-making process. In case of OPEC+ and oil price regulation, the Ministry of Energy plays a significant role in shaping Russia's foreign policy course. But whoever plays the role of Middle Eastern lobbyists in Russia, be they political institutions or corporations, still has to act in accordance with national interests and the top-down agenda. Therefore, all other lobbyists will be "secondary" in relation to the Kremlin, which limits their influence *a priori*.

As diplomatic sources emphasise, foreign policy is set by the President himself, who is advised primarily by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and representatives of other departments, including the special services responsible for combating terrorism, an important issue for the Middle East. The Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, General of the Army Oleg Syromolotov, who has been in this position since March 2015, supervises this agenda. In 2000-04, he was Deputy Director of the Federal Security Service (FSB), Head of the Counterintelligence Service, and in 2004-15, he took over as Chief of the FSB Counterintelligence Service.

[6] Ibid.

Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, former ambassador to Israel and Egypt, as well as Head of the Department of the Middle East and North Africa in 2002-05, is responsible for Russian relations with the Middle East and Africa, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and other international Muslim organisations, interaction with Russian Muslim organisations, and issues pertaining to the Middle East peace process since June 2011. In January 2012, he was also appointed Special Presidential Representative for the Middle East.

It is important to stress that Russia's Middle East and North Africa Department (MENAD) traditionally covers all the Arab countries, including North Africa and Sudan, as well as Israel. At the same time, Turkey has always been within the remit of the Fourth European Department (4ED), which also deals with countries such as Albania, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, Cyprus, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Croatia and Montenegro. Iran is under the jurisdiction of the Second Asian Department (2AD) along with Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Issues related to the Iranian nuclear program, as well as all non-proliferation portfolios, are supervised by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov.

In 2015, Alexander Lavrentyev took over the newly created post of the Special Presidential Representative for the Syrian Settlement, which is not formally associated with either the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Ministry of Defence. The international media mentioned him for the first time in December 2015 in connection with his trip to Israel.[7] "He carries out shuttle diplomacy in the countries of the region, in the countries that are involved in the process of political settlement", – Putin's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said about Lavrentyev's mandate.[8] According to him, Lavrentyev was

[7] B. Ravid, "Russian Envoy Secretly Visits Israel for Talks on Syria", *Haaretz*, 27 December 2015.

[8] "Peskov rasskazal o naznachenii Gryzlova, 'sekretnom' Lavrent'eve i 'citatnike

appointed special envoy about a few weeks before the visit of the Russian President to Iran, which took place on November 23, 2015. Lavrentyev's public activity began with the launch of the "Astana format" (Russia-Turkey-Iran) on Syria in January 2017.

From the very beginning of the Astana process, Sergei Vershinin, who at that time held the post of Director of the Middle East and North Africa Department, worked with Lavrentyev on behalf of the Foreign Ministry. He has been in this post since 2005; in 2011 he was nominated Special Representative of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation on the Middle Eastern Settlement, and in March 2018, he took up the post of Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. Vershinin is responsible for Russia's relations with international organisations, but for over two years, he continued to oversee the Syrian settlement together with Alexander Lavrentyev. Some kind of "Middle East diarchy" emerged for the first time when two deputy ministers – Mikhail Bogdanov and Sergei Vershinin – became responsible for the same country together. The issue was resolved in the fall of 2020, when the entire Middle East was again under the supervision of Mikhail Bogdanov. Back in 2018, Alexander Kinshak, Director of the Middle East and North Africa Department, a former Russian ambassador to Syria, had come to Lavrentyev's aid. Since October 2020, he has also held the newly-created post as the ministry's special envoy for Syria. Another new position – the special presidential envoy for developing relations with Syria – was created in May 2020 and given to the Russian ambassador to Syria, Alexander Efimov, who is responsible for resolving bilateral issues related to economic activity. As informed sources explain, this makes it possible to "rein in" and streamline the work of Russian companies in Syria.

Putina"' ("Peskov spoke about the appointment of Gryzlov, 'secret' Lavrentyev and 'Putin's quotation book'"), *Moskovskij Komsomolets*, 28 December 2015.

A number of prominent diplomats specialising in the Middle East were joined by Deputy Permanent Representative of Russia to the UN Vladimir Safronkov, who in July 2020 took over as the Foreign Ministry's special envoy for Middle East settlement. He represents the Russian side in bilateral and multilateral contacts, including within the framework of the Middle East Quartet of international mediators.

Beyond the MFA: Special Envoys, Rossotrudnichestvo and RAS

While the envoys' powers are not clearly defined, their functions are similar to those of their counterparts in the West. In the Russian context, it is worth mentioning two interesting cases, which while no longer current still highlight how the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was able to maintain control over the foreign policy agenda, including the role of an intermediary between business and politics. The first case concerns Mikhail Margelov, who, being the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Federation Council (upper house of parliament), served as the President's Special Representative for Sudan from 2008 to 2011, and was the President's Special Representative for Cooperation with African Countries from 2011 to 2014. In 2014, Mikhail Bogdanov, in addition to the Middle East portfolio, took over the African one as well, becoming the "Presidential Special Envoy for the Middle East and Africa".

The second case concerns the activities of Lev Dengov, who appeared in the media in August 2017 as the head of the Contact Group for intra-Libyan settlement. In an interview for *Kommersant* newspaper, Dengov said that the Contact Group was created on the initiative of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the State Duma.[9] The Group's activities were

[9] "V Livii my ne hotim associirovat'sya ni s odnoj iz storon konflikta" ("'In Libya, we do not want to be associated with any of the parties to the conflict', interview with Lev Dengov"), *Kommersant*, 3 August 2017.

supervised by Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov and Duma deputy from Chechnya Adam Delimkhanov. The latter was authorised to work in the Libyan office by the State Duma Chairman Viacheslav Volodin. A new group emerged shortly after the detention of the Russian tanker "Mechanic Chebotarev" in Libya in September 2015 to negotiate the release of the sailors. Dengov claimed to have had business interests and contacts in Libya since 2008. The Head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, supported the work of the new Group. For almost three years, Dengov's Group maintained contacts with various political forces in Libya, but primarily with the Government of National Accord in Tripoli. There were talks about business projects, which made it possible to refute the accusations against Moscow that it had placed all its bets in Libya on field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, who controlled the east of the country. In early 2020, Lev Dengov disappeared from the information agenda as suddenly as he had appeared. Coincidence or not, but from that very moment Russia actively joined Turkey in discussing political settlement issues in Libya. Moreover, representation was at the level of the presidents, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence. At the same time, Moscow's contacts with all parties to the Libyan conflict have been preserved, but have already been carried out only through the Foreign Ministry, while various interest groups have been helping to organise visits, including those on the "Islamic line".

A few words should be said about "Rossotrudnichestvo", the federal agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, compatriots living abroad, and international humanitarian cooperation. As the name implies, the agency's priorities are the former republics of the Soviet Union, because it is regarded as the heir to a network of cultural centres and friendship societies that have existed since Soviet times in dozens of countries. Many of them closed, but in the Middle East, they managed to stay functional in Egypt (Cairo and Alexandria), Syria and Lebanon. There are also Rossotrudnichestvo centres in Palestine,

Iran, Israel and Turkey. Yevgeny Primakov, Jr. (grandson of the Soviet diplomat Yevgeny Primakov), who was appointed Head of Rossotrudnichestvo in June 2020, breathed new life into the agency's work. He is familiar with the Middle East thanks to his work as a TV correspondent and his membership in the State Duma Committee on International Affairs, where he actively developed contacts with Qatar, Palestine and Syria. He also actively worked with the latter two countries as the founder of the non-profit organisation Russian Humanitarian Mission. Yevgeny Primakov can be considered as the developer and face of the new "soft power" approach of Russia's humanitarian policy. "Our foreign and defence policy is extremely successful, but we need not only to win diplomatic battles and wars, but also to be able to win the hearts and minds of people: the Russian bear must smile at the world. But you need to smile so that you can see all his teeth", he said in an interview for *Kommersant* before his appointment. According to him, "the country's authorities understand this well, but there is a certain administrative inertia". The activities of Rossotrudnichestvo, which in March 2020 received the unofficial name "Russian House",[10] include such issues as innovation and assistance to international development, promotion of Russian culture in the world, public diplomacy, support of compatriots abroad, strengthening the position of the Russian language, education and science, and preservation of historical and memorial heritage. In the future, it also plans to promote the interests of Russian business abroad.

The role of the scientific community in strengthening contacts with the Middle East is also noteworthy. The flagship for the studies of the Middle East is the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. In August 2020, an Arabist and Islamic scholar, Alikber Alikberov, took over as the director of the Institute, while the former director, Academic of

[10] Previously, "Russian House" was the unofficial name of foreign cultural centres, now it is the name for the entire umbrella organisation.

the Russian Academy of Sciences Vitaly Naumkin, became its scientific advisor. In fact, Naumkin oversees all the Middle East projects of the Institute and its contacts with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; unofficial contacts between Moscow and Arab politicians pass through him. Naumkin is a member of the Scientific Council under the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Scientific Council under the Security Council, and Chairman of the Scientific Advisory Council under the Ministry of Justice. In 2006, on the recommendation of the Russian government, the UN Secretary General included him in the High Level Group established to bridge the gap in understanding between Western and Eastern civilisations (UN project "Alliance of Civilisations"); since 2016, he has also served as Senior Political Advisor to the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy for Syria. In 2015, he moderated two Inter-Syrian Consultative Meetings in Moscow, and in 2011 and 2019 Inter-Palestinian Meetings in Moscow.

From Syria to Libya or the Ministry of Defense Goes into Politics

The beginning of the Russian military campaign in Syria marked a turning point in Russian policy in the Middle East. Russia has become a very influential player that can no longer be ignored.

At the same time, the role of the security forces in Russian foreign policy has grown significantly (this process began not with Syria, but after the start of a military conflict in eastern Ukraine). Maria Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva, Senior Adviser at the Foreign Policy Planning Department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, emphasises that after the start of the military operation in Syria, representatives of the Russian Ministry of Defence began to play a more active role in multilateral negotiation platforms, and it was the joint efforts of the two departments that strengthened Moscow's line in the Syrian "dossier". "The successes" on the ground "were fully

used and capitalised by Russian diplomats and the military in the International Syria Support Group, Lausanne, Astana and Amman formats", she notes.[11]

According to sources close to the Ministry of Defence, the role of security forces in foreign policy, including in the Middle East, is "instrumental".[12] It is literally "the continuation of politics by other means". The only question is which instrument the President chooses in each specific case. This does not exclude individual initiatives, but one way or another, they are all set by directives from above. Sources rule out any independence in the actions of the Ministry of Defence.

The crucial role of the president in decision-making processes was especially evident when Vladimir Putin, together with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, intervened in person several times to resolve issues related to the ceasefire in Syria, even though the main work on preparing meetings and marking maps has been carried out by the Russian General Staff of the Armed Force. It is this structure that manages the military operation in Syria under the leadership of the Chief of the Main Operations Directorate of the General Staff of the RF Armed Forces – First Deputy Chief of the General Staff Sergey Rudskoy.

The military oversees humanitarian assistance to Syria and the return of refugees, and undertakes a peacekeeping mission that includes the process of reconciliation on the ground and more global political negotiations. In particular, the Russian Khmeimim airbase periodically hosts meetings between Kurds and representatives of Damascus. It was the Ministry of Defence, together with the Syrian authorities, who were the main organisers of the conference on refugee returns and Syrian reconstruction, which took place in November 2020 in Damascus. Thereby, the military department monitors literally

[11] M.S. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva, *The Syrian Crisis in the Context of Transforming the System of International Relations*. Dissertation for the degree of Ph.D., MGIMO University, 2019, p. 305.

[12] Author's interviews.

everything, including actions on the battlefield, humanitarian issues and business.

In this regard, the efforts of the "Astana format", which was launched in 2017, are noteworthy. This format makes it possible to build bridges between diplomatic and security representatives of Russia, Turkey and Iran, the Syrian authorities and the armed opposition. Another important channel are the constant meetings in the 2 + 2 format between Russia and Turkey, both at the level of foreign ministers and defence ministers and lower-ranking specialists from both ministries.

The format tested in Syria was successfully used in Libya. Moreover, the Ministry of Defence contributed to the myth that the commander-in-chief of the Libyan National Army, Khalifa Haftar, has become Russia's henchman. This myth was born in 2016, when the field marshal visited Moscow twice, and grew after the Russian aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov entered Tobruk in January 2017. On board the ship, Haftar held a video session with Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoygu. For Haftar it was an opportunity to demonstrate his power and influence within Libya, and for Moscow to test the waters. However, Moscow has always remembered Haftar's longstanding ties with the United States and the CIA.

After Libya, the Ministry of Defence turned to Sudan and the Central African Republic. It resulted in the signing of an agreement between Moscow and Khartoum on the creation of a logistics centre for the Russian Navy in Sudan, as well as the dispatch in December 2020 of "instructors for training the CAR army" and assistance during the presidential elections.

Among other things, military-technical cooperation is also an important factor in deepening Russia's relations with the Middle East. In many ways, this builds successfully on the USSR's legacy, which received a boost during the war in Syria. All Russian military exports are centralised and go through Rosoboronexport. Since 2017, the CEO of this state corporation has been Alexander Mikheev. The share of exports of Russian military products to the countries of the Middle

East and North Africa over the past five years has been at least US$6 billion per year,[13] or about 50% of total exports. The main recipients of Russian weapons in the region are Egypt, Algeria and Turkey. Rosoboronexport is part of the structure of Rostec, a state corporation established in 2007 to assist in the development, production and export of high-tech industrial products for civil and military purposes. Sergey Chemezov has led it from the outset. Previously, he headed Rosoboronexport for three years.

Special Question

In the context of events in Libya, Syria, the CAR and other countries, PMC Wagner and businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, known as "Putin's chef", are also in the spotlight. Opposition media often publishes investigations into this matter in Russia. The Fontanka website first wrote about the Wagner Group in October 2015, two weeks after the start of the Russian military operation in Syria.[14] The Bell website summarises the data: the idea of creating a PMC was invented by the General Staff. The creator of the world's first legal PMC, Eeben Barlow, became a consultant back in 2010, but the project began only a few years later.[15] "The idea to make the St. Petersburg restaurateur Yevgeny Prigozhin responsible for financial and economic issues was born in the General Staff, according to The Bell's interlocutors close to the Ministry of Defence. Just after 2010, he began to build his business, supplying food for state needs", the newspaper notes, adding that Prigozhin was familiar to Putin since the early 2000s.

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[13] "Russia's military exports to Middle East and North Africa hit $6 bln", *TASS*, 21 February 2021.

[14] D. Korotkov, "'Slavyanskij korpus' vozvrashchaetsya v Siriyu" ("Slavic Corps' returns to Syria"), *Fontanka*, 16 October 2015.

[15] "Chastnaya armiya dlya prezidenta: istoriya samogo delikatnogo porucheniya Evgeniya Prigozhina" ("A private army for the president: the story of Yevgeny Prigozhin's most delicate assignment"), *The Bell*, 29 January 2019.

The Kremlin avoids making public statements about the Wagner Group. Therefore, Russia has never recognised the presence of the military in Libya. President Putin spoke most frankly on this topic in early 2020 during a press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel: "If there are Russian citizens there, they do not represent the interests of the Russian state and do not receive money from the Russian state".[16]

In December 2018, answering a question about the activities of various military companies at a press conference, President Putin replied:

Everything must remain within the law, everything. We can ban private security firms altogether, but once we do so, I think you will be flooded with petitions demanding to protect this section of the labour market. Almost a million people are employed there. If this Wagner group breaks any laws, the General Prosecutor's Office will go ahead and give it a legal assessment. About their presence in foreign countries, if they comply with Russian laws, they have every right to work and promote their business interests anywhere in the world.[17]

Business First or Oil First?

Companies in the energy, food supplies, and military-industrial sectors with interests in the Middle East drive Russian policy in the region. The main players in this area have not changed for 20 years, although some companies have adjusted their interests.

The restoration of Moscow's ties with Arab countries began in the early 2000s after the election of President Vladimir Putin, but the main ideologist of the pivot to the East was Yevgeny

[16] "Putin prokommentiroval soobshcheniya o rossijskih naemnikah v Livii" ("Putin commented on reports of Russian mercenaries in Libya"), *RIA Novosti*, 11 January 2020.

[17] Vladimir Putin's annual news conference, "Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia", 20 December 2018.

Primakov, who headed the Russian Foreign Ministry in 1996, served as Prime Minister from 1998 to 1999, and from 2001 to 2011 was the Head of the Chamber of Commerce.

In 2000, Igor Ivanov, the successor to Yevgeny Primakov as Foreign Minister, first applied the practice of direct interaction between Russian diplomats and business in the Middle East. During his visit to Algeria, he was accompanied by a delegation of Russian businessmen, who also joined the work of the joint Intergovernmental Commission. Back then it was an innovation, now it has become standard practice.

The main business projects of Russian companies in the Middle East in the early 2000s were concentrated in Iraq. Russia actively participated in the Oil-for-Food Programme, established by the UN in 1995 to provide assistance to the population affected by the sanctions. The share of Russian companies in the purchase of Iraqi oil was 30-40% of the total volume of Iraqi exports. In 2000 alone, taking into account the directive on the priority of Russian companies adopted by the Iraqi government, the volume of signed contracts was US$1.2 billion.[18] However, it is worth noting that Russian businessmen often competed in Iraq not with foreign players, but with each other.[19]

The sanctions in force during the time of Saddam Hussein prevented the implementation of large-scale projects – for example, the development of the West Qurna field by the Russian oil company Lukoil. According to Iraqi authorities, in mid-2000, the UN sanctions committee froze Russian-Iraqi contracts worth about US$1 billion.[20] Players in Iraq, including Russian companies, not only earned, but also lost hundreds of thousands of dollars. Moscow paid much attention

[18] M. Belenkaya, "Vostok - delo dolgoe. Kak Rossiya vozvrashchaet utrachennye pozicii v arabskih stranah" ("The East is a long business. How Russia is regaining its lost positions in Arab countries"), *Kommersant*, 5 October 2019.

[19] M. Belenkaya, "Bagdad prityagivaet delovyh lyudej" ("Baghdad attracts business people"), *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 22 September 2000.

[20] Ibid.

to the problem of lifting sanctions on Iraq, although it would be wrong to completely reduce this issue to defending business interests only. Both then and now, Moscow, in principle, opposed sanctions pressure and power scenarios in resolving foreign policy issues.

It is noteworthy that after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, Russia managed to retain most of the contracts in Iraq, which is a matter of special pride not only for entrepreneurs, but also for diplomats. And so far, their joint work is bearing fruit. During an official visit to Iraq in October 2019, Sergey Lavrov was accompanied by a business delegation for the first time in several years. In particular, Iraq was visited by such notable persons as Gazprom Neft CEO Alexander Dyukov, Soyuzneftegaz Chairman of the Board Yuri Shafrannik, representatives of Rosneft, Technopromexport and the Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation.[21] At present, Lukoil and Bashneft actively work in Iraq.

The role of Rosneft in Iraq and in the Middle East in general should be discussed separately. In 2017, Russia, represented by Rosneft, became the largest foreign investor in Iraqi Kurdistan. From February to September, several agreements were signed with the Kurdish government – for the purchase and sale of oil, geological exploration, and the development and management of a large regional transport system with a capacity of 700 thousand barrels per day with a planned expansion to 950 thousand barrels per day.[22] The signing of the contracts took place against the background of Erbil's preparations for the referendum on the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan (held on September 25, 2017). At the same time, the latest contracts for

[21] M. Belenkaya, "Sergeyu Lavrovu prishlos' slegka polavirovat'. Glava MID RF posetil Bagdad i vpervye - Kurdskuyu avtonomiyu" ("Sergey Lavrov had to maneuver slightly. Russian Foreign Minister visited Baghdad and for the first time – Kurdish autonomy"), *Kommersant*, 8 October 2019.

[22] M. Belenkaya, *Razdelennyj Kurdistan. Kto osvoit i kak prodast neft' Kirkuka* (*Divided Kurdistan. Who will develop and how to sell Kirkuk oil*), Carnegie Moscow Center, 20 October 2017.

exploration work on five oil blocks were announced two days after Baghdad had carried out an operation against the Kurds in mid-October to liberate Kirkuk.

The Kurdish media interpreted Rosneft contracts as support for the independence of the Kurds, while the official position of Moscow (and there is no reason to doubt it) was and remains in support of the territorial integrity of Iraq. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had to respond to the accusations of the Iraqi federal authorities regarding the signing of contracts between Rosneft and Erbil which by-passed Baghdad. As a result, these contracts became one of the most striking examples of why the actions of Russian state corporations should not always be directly linked to the Russian foreign policy course. Igor Sechin noted that the implementation of projects in the Middle East is one of the company's strategies to strengthen its presence in the region.[23]

There is another chapter in Rosneft's history in Iraqi Kurdistan. Experts regarded the negotiations between the company and Erbil on a project to build a gas pipeline from Iraqi Kurdistan to Turkey with a throughput capacity of 30 billion cubic meters per year as a potential competitor for Gazprom's Blue Stream gas pipeline to Turkey, whose capacity at that time was 16 billion cubic meters. However, in general, companies try not to work in the same market, so as not to compete with each other. Consequently, now Gazprom primarily works in Turkey, while Rosneft implements projects in Iraq, Lebanon and Egypt.

Nowadays, another driver of cooperation with the Middle East is nuclear energy. The state company Rosatom actively works in Iran, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates. In addition, negotiations are underway on cooperation with Saudi Arabia, Algeria and other countries of the region. In 2013, Rosatom won a tender for the construction of a nuclear power plant with Jordan, but then Amman abandoned the project, considering it too expensive. As a result, in 2018, an agreement

[23] "Rosneft' sozdala dochku dlya operacij po hraneniyu nefti i nefteproduktov v Livane" ("Rosneft created a subsidiary for oil storage operations and oil products in Lebanon"), *Neftegaz.RU*, 27 May 2020.

was signed on the development of a project for the construction of a small modular reactor (SMR) of Russian design in Jordan, which satisfied both parties.

Business Circles: Unlikely Allies

Back in the early 2000s, there were attempts to coordinate and systematise foreign policy and business activities abroad and promote Russian business interests. Thus, Yevgeny Primakov initiated the creation of the Russian-Arab Business Council (RABC), which was considered a joint brainchild of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the General Union of Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture of the Arab countries. Under the auspices of the Council, bilateral councils were created, chaired by heads of companies interested in developing ties in a particular country. The Permanent Head of the Russian-Arab Business Council is a major shareholder and Chairman of the Board of the Russian investment holding company Sistema, Vladimir Yevtushenkov. In fact, the activities of the bilateral councils and of the RABC were not very effective, although the Council officially acts at the state level as a platform for extensive contacts with Arab countries. It is under the RABC signboard that Arabia-Expo exhibitions are held every few years (the last – 4th exhibition – was held in 2019 in Moscow). During this event, Russian and Arab businessmen meet, while business councils and sometimes sessions of Intergovernmental Commissions take place. The President, Foreign Minister and Sectoral Ministers invariably send greetings to the participants, thereby emphasising the high level of the events and their importance.

In organisational matters, RABC interacts with the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Ministries that work with Arab countries (in particular, the Ministry of Energy, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of North Caucasus Affairs, which existed until January 21, 2020). However, the main partner for the RABC is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Another attempt to structure business in the Middle East, primarily in the Gulf countries, was the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), headed by CEO Kirill Dmitriev. RDIF was established in 2011 at the initiative of the President and Prime Minister, which allows the Fund to communicate directly with the presidential administration. RDIF has created joint projects with the UAE sovereign wealth fund Mubadala, the sovereign wealth fund of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Public Investment Fund (PIF), and the investment fund of the Kingdom of Bahrain Mumtalakat. At the same time, outside the framework of investment projects, RDIF focused primarily on Saudi Arabia, as a result of which the Russian-Saudi Economic Council was created. Thus, RDIF has followed the RABC's path in an attempt to become the central player representing Moscow in the kingdom.

Amid the coronavirus pandemic, RDIF has extended its contacts with the Middle East beyond the Gulf monarchies. In addition to the fact that Russia was able to expand the geography of clinical trials (thanks to contacts with the UAE) and the adoption of its coronavirus vaccine, covering 9 countries in the Middle East (Iraq was one of the last countries to register Sputnik V), agreements were signed on the joint production of a vaccine and on the accompanying technology transfer. For example, after a delegation of representatives of Iranian pharmaceutical companies had visited Russia to discuss the production of Sputnik V, Iranian officials began to speculate that Iran could soon become a regional hub for the sale of Russian drugs as part of expanding health cooperation between the two countries.[24] The example of Turkey is also curious. The Turkish pharmaceutical manufacturer VisCoran Ilac Sanayii A.S confirmed in January 2021 that it was ready to produce millions of doses of Sputnik V after the transfer of relevant technologies.[25] Obviously, the instruction to continue working

[24] "Iran, Russia Conclude Talks over Launching Joint Vaccine Production", *Tasnim News Agency*, 11 February 2021.

[25] M. Birinci, "Firm signs deal to produce Sputnik V vaccine in Turkey", *Anadolu*

with Russia and not to question the degree of cooperation between the two countries was given at the highest level. However, in addition to expanding scientific and technological contacts with the countries of the Middle East, Russia was able to take advantage of the situation to advance its humanitarian agenda, promising to provide vaccines to Lebanon[26] and Syria[27] at no cost, suggesting Russia is pursuing a special relationship with these countries.

"Personal Chemistry": Pragmatism or Putin's Charm Offensive?

In addition to business interests, the main driver for the development of Russia's contacts with the Middle East is "personal chemistry" between President Putin and his counterparts abroad. This "chemistry" has developed between Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammad bin Salman, Emir of Qatar Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and, to some extent, with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. In the early 2000s, Putin and King Abdullah II of Jordan had a fairly close relationship, but this did not result in large-scale economic projects.

A turning point in relations between Moscow and Riyadh occurred in 2015, when Mohammed bin Salman (then the Deputy Crown Prince) took part in the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF), where he met with President Putin. It was within the framework of the SPIEF that the documents were signed between RDIF and PIF, and Kirill Dmitriev was one of the organisers of the meeting.

Agency, 26 January 2021.

[26] "Russia 'Ready' to Donate Sputnik V Covid Vaccine to Lebanon", *Naharnet*, 16 February 2021.

[27] "انجام انوروكل داضملا "V كيتنوبس" حاقلب ايروس دوزتس ايسور :يروسلا ريفسلا" ("Syrian Ambassador to Russia Riad Haddad announced that Russia will provide Syria with the Sputnik V corona vaccine free of charge"), *Sputnik Arabic*, 22 February 2021.

Since then, despite the age difference, a special understanding has developed between the President and the Prince, which significantly influenced the development of bilateral relations over the next five years.

The second reason for this rapid convergence is the sharp drop in oil prices in late 2014 and early 2015. Russia and Saudi Arabia are faced with similar economic problems: budget deficits, the need to diversify the economy, and reduce their dependence on oil exports. Both countries realised that these goals were easier to achieve with stable oil prices. As a result, agreements between Moscow and Riyadh became possible thanks to the close contacts between the President and the Saudi Prince and led to the conclusion in 2016 of an agreement to reduce oil production between OPEC and independent producing countries. At a lower level, the Ministers of Energy of Russia and Saudi Arabia, Alexander Novak (2012 to 2020) and Khalid al-Falih (2016-19), were involved in the OPEC+ topic. In the spring of 2020, relations between Saudi Arabia and Russia were put to the test – foreign media even wrote about a personal conflict between Putin and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman over oil prices.[28] However, direct dialogue between them continued. There were five direct phone calls between them from April 2020 to mid-March 2021. During a visit to Riyadh in March 2021, Sergey Lavrov and his Saudi counterpart Faisal bin Farhan stated: "There have been no scenarios which, should they play out, will undermine the interest underlying our cooperation".[29] It is not yet possible to see how much the nature of the relationship between Putin and the Crown Prince has changed in reality – they have not met in the year since the conflict over oil prices due to the pandemic.

[28] D. Hearst, "EXCLUSIVE: Saudis launched oil price war after 'MBS shouting match with Putin'", *Middle East Eye*, 21 April 2020.

[29] Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a news conference following talks with Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, Riyadh, "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation", 10 March 2021.

Personal contacts between Vladimir Putin and the Emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, also influenced the alignment of the dialogue with Doha, which has become one of the largest investors in the Russian economy. RDIF organised a joint platform with the Qatar Investment Agency (QIA), within which, according to the latest statements by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, investment projects worth US$1.2 billion have been implemented.[30] One of the largest projects is investments in Pulkovo airport. In addition, QIA is one of the largest shareholders of Rosneft with a share of 18.93%, the market value of which in December 2020 was about US$11.5 billion. In 2013, Qatar also contributed US$500 million to VTB's capital. At the same time, Doha speaks not only about its investments in Russia, but is also waiting for Russian business to participate in joint projects in Qatar. Among the pioneers is VTB, which in 2019 became a co-owner of the new Qatari bank CQUR Bank. At the time, experts did not rule out that CQUR was created as a counter investment by a Russian bank in the Qatar economy against the backdrop of falling securities of VTB itself, more than 2% of which are owned by QIA.[31] In an interview, VTB President Andrey Kostin confirmed that this was the wish of the Qatari side: "It was impossible not to take into account the opinion of such a shareholder. Moreover, the region has become quite attractive jurisdiction for us and our clients in terms of business development".[32] The Sberbank group has also found a place for itself in the dialogue with Qatar. In 2019, its subsidiary BI.ZONE and the largest system integrator in

[30] M. Belenkaya, "K nam priekhali finansy. Delegaciya Katara posetila Moskvu vpervye posle nachala pandemii" ("Finances came to us. The Qatar delegation visited Moscow for the first time since the start of the pandemic"), *Kommersant*, 24 December 2020.

[31] M. Belenkaya et al., "VTB and Qatar exchanged investments. Russian state bank invested in CQUR Bank", *Kommersant*, 16 August 2019.

[32] T. Voronova and K. Golubkova, "VTB President Andrey Kostin on the pandemic, Yandex, the economy and the reassessment of values", *Tinkoff Bank*, 28 October 2020.

Qatar, MANNAI Corporation, entered into an agreement on cooperation in the field of cybersecurity.

Russia and Qatar became especially close on the issue of organising the World Cup. Doha actively adopts Russian experience and engages Russian companies in preparation for the World Cup. A lot of consulting and PR companies, public organisations and firms and new faces have appeared on the platform of bilateral relations. Among them is Ksenia Shoigu, the daughter of Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, who is in charge of the League of Heroes project, created in 2015 to promote the OCR (obstacle racing) movement in Russia. In 2019, she told RT about cooperation with the organising committee of the 2022 World Cup.[33] It was about consultations on the construction of facilities and "export of services from Russia". According to her, the organisation that transferred the Russian experience to Doha and invited Russian firms to work in Qatar as part of the World Cup was the Consortium company, in which Ksenia Shoigu has a share.

Based on the above, the real guarantee of success is the coincidence of personal sympathies and economic interests, which ultimately result in a mutually beneficial political partnership. Thus, the improvement of Moscow's cooperation with Riyadh and Doha, as well as cooperation with Ankara, significantly influenced the success of Russian policy in Syria. And coordination with Ankara, Cairo and Abu Dhabi allows Moscow to play a prominent role on the Libyan scene.

[33] A. Yaroshevsky, "'In 2020, our half marathon will run in 85 regions of Russia': Ksenia Shoigu on the 'League of Heroes' and cooperation with Qatar", *RT Russian*, 18 October 2019.

Business and Government

Regarding the collaboration of business and government agencies, it is worth paying attention to the Russian co-chairs of the Intergovernmental Commissions. As a rule, countries are assigned to one or another ministry for years, but sometimes castling occurs. Here are the most influential and interesting figures on this list.

As Energy Minister Alexander Novak was co-chairman of six Middle East Intergovernmental Commissions (IGC): Saudi, Qatari, Libyan, Algerian, Turkish and Iranian. On November 10, 2020, Novak became Deputy Prime Minister, continuing to oversee fuel and energy issues in his new position. The Iranian and Libyan IGCs remained under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Energy and were co-chaired by Novak's successor, Nikolai Shulginov. Alexander Novak continued to represent Russia in the IGC with Saudi Arabia and Turkey, thereby bolstering relations with these countries. Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borisov, who oversees the military-industrial complex, became the co-chairman of the IGC with Qatar, which was regarded by experts as a shift in emphasis in Moscow's interest in Doha. Yuri Borisov also heads the IGC with Syria and Iraq.

Alexander Novak stopped supervising the Algerian IGC while he was still Minister of Energy. In February 2020, Russia's interests in this commission were represented by the Ministry of Agriculture, headed by Dmitry Patrushev, the son of Nikolai Patrushev, secretary of the Russian Security Council and former director of the FSB. Traditionally, the Ministers of Agriculture also represent Russia in the IGC with Morocco and Jordan. The countries of the Middle East are the main importers of Russian grain. Turkey is the leader, followed by Saudi Arabia. In North Africa, Egypt is the main importer. Moscow is also constantly fighting for new markets, with one of the toughest campaigns to reduce import restrictions in Algeria. Thereby, the appointment of Patrushev and the transfer of responsibility

over the IPC from the Ministry of Energy to the Ministry of Agriculture look very logical.

Another iconic figure on the platform of the Intergovernmental Commissions is the Minister of Industry and Trade Denis Manturov. He has represented Russia in the IPC with Egypt (since 2014) and the UAE since 2012, and in addition, for ten years now, he has been heading the Russian delegation at one of the world's largest exhibitions of arms and military equipment – IDEX, held in Abu Dhabi. In Egypt, the Ministry of Industry and Trade, together with the Russian Export Center, is responsible for the creation of a Russian industrial zone in the Suez Canal region. Besides, all Russian trade missions abroad were transferred to the Ministry of Industry and Trade in 2018. Previously, they were subordinate to the Ministry of Economic Development.

Is There an Ethno-Confessional Lobby?

One of the main lessons of the Syrian conflict for Moscow is the need to adopt a multi-vector approach. Before the start of the military campaign in Syria, Russia did not maintain a dialogue with non-state actors, recognising only official actors. The new policy required the expansion of communication channels, which were found primarily along the "Islamic line". Moscow understood the need to develop ties with the Islamic world back in the early 1980s, after its negative experiences in the Afghan war. However, a turning point in bilateral contacts only occurred in 2005, when Russia received observer status in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (today it is the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation).

After that, in 2006, Yevgeny Primakov and then-President of Tatarstan Mintimer Shaimiev created The Strategic Vision Group "Russia – Islamic World". After a promising launch, the Group's work gradually dwindled, due in part to the Arab Spring. Nevertheless, in 2014 Vladimir Putin unexpectedly decided to resume the work of the Group, appointing the new President of

Tatarstan, Rustam Minnikhanov as its Chairman. Immediately after the collapse of the USSR, Tatarstan developed its own strong external ties with the Islamic world – spiritual, political and economic – primarily with Turkey. On the one hand, its policy may appear to be somewhat independent from Moscow. But on the other, Moscow itself has used Russian Muslims for the last 15 years – both at the level of the leadership of Russian regions and Islamic structures (for example, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Russian Federation, headed by Mufti Rawil Gaynutdin) to establish ties with Islamic countries.

In this regard, the Head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, is one of the most important assets. As Maxim Suchkov claims:

The very phenomenon of direct outreach to the Muslim world is not a new thing in post-Soviet Chechen history. During the two wars (1993-1996 and 1999-2000), first separatist and then jihadist warlords found sympathy in Turkey and some Gulf states, where some are still harboured. With Putin's rise to the Russian presidency, Akhmat-Haji Kadyrov, the father of current Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov and the former mufti of the unrecognised Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, was elected the first president of Chechnya. In January 2004, after just two months in office, he travelled to Saudi Arabia to declare, "Chechnya will become a linking chain in Russian-Saudi relations.[34]

His assassination in a bomb blast in May 2004 halted this and other initiatives. But his son continued the efforts immediately upon seizing power in 2007: Ramzan Kadyrov impressed a delegation of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) visiting Chechnya by the scale of its progress after a decade of conflict. In subsequent years, he became a welcome guest at many royal households, meeting with King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia, King Abdullah II of Jordan and

[34] M. Suchkov, "Chechnya's silent diplomacy in the Middle East", *Al-Monitor*, 15 January 2014.

dozens of other Middle Eastern movers and shakers, including twice with the Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas. Through the Department of External Relations – Chechnya's analogue of the Foreign Affairs Ministry – slowly but surely Chechnya increased the number of its political, economic and cultural contacts in the Middle East. In July 2020, the deputy mufti of Chechnya for external relations, Turko Daudov, officially became Kadyrov's official representative in Arab and Muslim countries.[35] Announcing this, Kadyrov stressed the need to "raise to a new level" relations between Chechnya and Arab countries. Prior to that, for a long time, Kadyrov's ties with the Arab countries were supervised by the senator from the republic in the Federation Council, a native of Syria, Ziyad Sabsabi. His powers were suspended at his request in November 2019.

Kadyrov's activity became especially noticeable after the start of the Syrian war, when the frequency of his trips to the Middle East sharply increased. These visits were intended to demonstrate that by sending troops to Syria, Russia is not opposing the Islamic world. To this end, military police units in Syria were formed largely from fighters of Chechen origin. In addition, there is a charitable foundation named after Akhmat Kadyrov (Ramzan Kadyrov's father) in Syria. He is involved in the distribution of humanitarian aid and the restoration of mosques, including the historic mosque in Aleppo.[36]

In 2018, Chechnya was called the only region of the Caucasus that was able to successfully attract foreign investment, primarily from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain. However, as Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, director of the Center for Conflict Analysis and Prevention, noted in an interview with the BBC

[35] "Turko Daudov naznachen predstavitelem Glavy CHechenskoj Respubliki v arabskih i musul'manskih stranah" ("Turko Daudov appointed as the representative of the Head of the Chechen Republic in Arab and Muslim countries"), *Groznyy Inform*, 3 July 2019.

[36] "Fond Ahmata Kadyrova otpravil v Siriyu gumanitarnuyu pomoshch'" ("Akhmat Kadyrov Foundation sent humanitarian aid to Syria"), *Rossijskaya gazeta*, 3 February 2018.

Russian service: "If the Middle East invests in Chechnya, they will do it for the sake of relations with Putin, with Russia".[37] The same applies to political ties – the Middle East leaders are interested in Kadyrov in many ways as a person who demonstrates direct access to Putin.

Despite Putin's close contact with Kadyrov, it is still unclear to what extent the Head of the Chechen Republic acts in the interests of the Kremlin, as opposed to seeking to promote his own agenda. For example, in August 2016, Kadyrov convened a theological conference in Grozny, where over a hundred religious leaders from 30 countries were invited. Revolving around the question of "Who are the people of Sunnah and majority Muslim community?" the conference participants adopted the so-called "Grozny fatwa" about the differences between Islam and heresies and about who should be considered extremists and radicals, which exacerbated relations with the Salafi clergy of Saudi Arabia. The Head of the Russian Council of Muftis publicly criticised the fatwa. The official authorities did not comment on the current situation, thereby relegating it to the status of a regional issue.

Kadyrov is also credited with lobbying for the return of Russian children and women from Iraq and Syria, although Dagestan insists that they have begun work to return children before Chechnya.

Russia is also actively using contacts along the "Orthodox line" to strengthen foreign policy ties. In the 1990s, the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society (IOPS) was re-established. Since 2007, this public organisation has been headed by Sergei Stepashin (from 2000 to 2013 – the chairman of the Accounts Chamber, before which he served several terms as director of the FSB, Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Internal Affairs). In the Middle East (primarily Israel and Palestine) and elsewhere, the society works closely with the Russian Orthodox

[37] O. Shamina and E. Savina, "Druz'ya Kadyrova: pochemu Blizhnij Vostok stal sponsirovat' CHechnyu" ("Kadyrov's Friends: why the Middle East began to sponsor Chechnya"), *BBC Russian Service*, 9 January 2018.

Church. The society includes many Middle Eastern diplomats, both active and retired. One of the deputy Chairmen of the IOPS is Mikhail Bogdanov, who notes that the society "contributes to strengthening the authority and influence of Russia in the Middle East".[38] Among the merits of the IOPS is participation in the return of Russian property in the region that was sold during the Soviet era. Moreover, one of its latest projects is a community centre for the protection of Christians in the Middle East and Africa, spawned by the war in Syria.

When the question about the existence of a "Jewish or Israeli lobby" in Russia is raised, experts related to Jewish topics confidently answer "no", implying the absence of a structure similar to the American AIPAC, which officially defends Israel's interests before the US government. "Considering that solutions to such important issues for Israeli security as Iran's nuclear program and arms supplies to the region are decided in Russia at the very top level – it's useless to lobby for anything there. But there are 'Jews in power' in Russia. This is, first of all, the representative of Chabad, the chief rabbi (according to the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia) Berel Lazar", said Semyon Dovzhik, a journalist on Jewish issues[39]. He also noted that virtually all Jewish organisations in Russia work for Moscow's image abroad. "They are lobbying outside, not inside", he said. And not only to the Western world and Israel. Therefore, it is not surprising that Berel Lazar has been spotted on visits to Iran and the UAE.

[38] "Zamestitel' ministra inostrannyh del Rossii Mihail Bogdanov prinyal uchastie v zasedanii Soveta IPPO" ("Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov took part in the meeting of the IOPS Council"), Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, 26 December 2020.

[39] Author's interviews.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it worth noting that, given that the Kremlin is the centre of foreign policy decision-making, lobbying activities in Moscow's foreign policy are more aimed at improving its image abroad and building profitable ties there, including obtaining contracts. At the same time, there are many players and institutions that have their own interests in the region: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its instruments of influence, including those represented by public organisations of an ethno-confessional color; "Siloviki" (politician who came into politics from the security, military, or similar services); business and related structures, including state institutions – the economic block of Ministries, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, business councils, and investment funds (like RDIF).

Sometimes the interests of these groups run counter to Moscow's official position or to one another. Therefore, there is no certainty as to whether Russia has a coherent long-term strategy in the Middle East, though there is a common line drawn from the Kremlin, which concerns strengthening Russia's security, expanding its contacts and growing influence in the Middle East and in the world as a whole.

There may not be a single country in the Middle East that is of interest to only one player in Russia. There is always a mix of interests, with the understanding that the Kremlin ultimately approves foreign policy, and it also broadcasts it outside. And if at some point "Siloviki's line" outweighs it, then the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will still provide support with its connections and diplomatic resources. The business sector will also provide support. At the same time, the reverse is not necessarily true: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not always defends and lobbies the interests of Russian business abroad, especially if they are not state corporations. Moreover, businesses rarely think about long-term work for national interests. However, due to the centrality of Russian politics, the result is still the same – business structures, public organisations and state institutions all work for their own

interests, giving Russia ample room for manoeuvre. Ultimately, the activities of individual players contribute to the formation of a common foreign policy, filling it with the necessary content. Sometimes it is good, sometimes it is not.

A multi-vector approach (the use of different communication channels from business to religious structures) with the dominant role of the Kremlin is, perhaps, the main principle of Russian foreign policy.

5. Russian "Alternative" in sub-Saharan Africa: A Challenge to Western Liberalism

Maxim Matusevich

On 10 February 2007, while speaking at the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy, President Vladimir Putin of Russia shocked the well-heeled audience by decrying a unipolar global arrangement and criticising the unilateralism allegedly practised by the United States and its European allies.[1] In a fiery speech, Putin questioned the motivations behind the West-sponsored projects promoting democracy and rejected the right of Western allies to determine the course of international affairs or exercise paternalism towards Russia. "Russia," he stated, "is a country with a history that spans more than a thousand years and has practically always used the privilege to carry out an independent foreign policy … We are not going to change this tradition today".[2] Both Putin's supporters and detractors tend to agree the Munich speech foreshadowed the arrival of a more assertive Russia, which would continuously challenge the West and confound the optimistic "end-of-history" expectations that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Less than two years after Putin's performance in Munich, Russia would go to war with its neighbouring Georgia and, in 2014,

[1] T. Shanker and M. Landler, "Putin Says U.S. Is Undermining Global Stability", *The New York Times*, 11 February 2007.

[2] "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy", President of Russia Official Website, 10 February 2007.

instigate a fratricidal war in Ukraine and annex its Crimean peninsula. Domestically, the regime would push back hard against the demands for greater openness and transparency from Russia's burgeoning civil society and segments of the urban-based middle class; the Kremlin would also label the opposition as "foreign agents" and purveyors of views and lifestyles (e.g. LGBTQ activism) supposedly antithetical to Russia's "traditional values".[3] It is in the context of this growing assertiveness and willingness to push back against Western interests and, increasingly, Western liberal values that one needs to situate Russia's expanding and deepening involvement in sub-Saharan Africa. But in a manifest departure from the past Soviet adventures on the continent, this new era of Russian involvement in Africa is marked not so much by an ideological contest but rather by a collusion between African ruling elites and the business interests of "Putin's people".[4]

Significance of the Soviet Precedent

The Soviet presence on the African continent ended with a whimper. Sub-Saharan Africa had figured prominently in the Soviet Union's grand geopolitical strategy that pitted it against its Western rivals. Independent Africa presented Moscow with an important stage to showcase the Marxist-Leninist ideology and try to sell its own brand of modernity to the developing world. In sub-Saharan Africa, the Soviets courted the new postcolonial regimes in the hope of gaining valuable allies while also expanding their nation's global reach and potentially convincing these new African states and their elites to follow the socialist path of development.[5] At various periods of the Cold War the

[3] "Russia: Government vs. Rights Groups", *Human Rights Watch*, 18 June 2018.
[4] See, C. Belton, *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took On the West*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020.
[5] See, O.A. Westad, *The Cold War: A World History*, New York, Basic Books, 2019; S.V. Mazov, *A Distant Front in the Cold War: The USSR in West Africa and the Congo,*

Soviet Union's outreach to Africa was based on ideological considerations, geopolitical opportunism or pragmatism. However, the Soviets could always claim with some credibility their commitment to anti-colonialism and anti-racism, which figured prominently among some of the fundamental principles of Marxism-Leninism. Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the Soviet state, famously defined Western imperialism as the final stage of the doomed capitalism.[6] Subsequently, throughout its existence the Soviet Union, always in rhetoric and sometimes in deed, engaged in massive propaganda campaigns targeting Western racism and the system of European colonialism in Africa and elsewhere. In fact, the volume and effectiveness of Soviet anti-racist propaganda were such the Soviet Union accumulated significant good will among some anti-colonial activists in Africa and the more radical segments of African American intelligentsia. During the first two decades of the USSR's existence, the country became a destination of choice for a number of Black radicals and Marxists, drawn by the novelty of the experiment of building a socialist society. Many more trekked to the Soviet Union to experience a colour-blind utopia, ostensibly free of Western-style racism.[7] At the height of America's Jim Crow laws and in the heyday of European domination of the African continent, not only did the new socialist state eschew racism and colonialism as a matter of national policy, but it also subjected both to a sustained and

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1956-1964, Washington, D.C.-Stanford, CA., Woodrow Wilson Center Press-Stanford University Press, 2010.

[6] V.I. Lenin, "Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism", in *Selected Works*, vol. I, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1963, pp. 667-766.

[7] See, M.L. Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow: African Americans and the Soviet Indictment of U.S. Racism, 1928-1937*, Lincoln, Neb., University of Nebraska Press, 2012; M. Matusevich, "'Harlem Globe-Trotters': Black Sojourners in Stalin's Soviet Union", in J. Ogbar (Ed.), *Harlem Renaissance Revisited: Politics, Arts, and Letters*, Baltimore, MD, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010, pp. 211-44; J.G. Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise*, New Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers University Press, 2008.

withering critique.[8] In the process, the Soviet Union would build a track record of anti-racism and anti-colonialism that would become a reference point in the course of Russia's quarrels with Western nations in the post-Soviet period.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, two historical developments overlapped to dramatically expand the scope of Moscow's involvement on the African continent. The rise of the Cold War proceeded on parallel tracks with the demise of the global system of European colonialism, and the emergence of independent African states turned the continent into one of the major battlegrounds between the two superpowers. Both ideological blocs exerted considerable effort in courting the new African nations, while also working hard to undermine the position of their rivals. In these contests for influence, the Soviets were stymied by their lack of experience on the continent and the ideological rigidity and parochialism of Soviet area studies. In fact, under Stalin, the study of Africa had often been treated with suspicion on account of the alleged "bourgeois influences". Some of the founders of Soviet-African studies were even swept up in the Stalinist purges.[9] To complicate things even further, Stalin harboured no affection for the first generation of African nationalists (people like Kwame Nkrumah or Jomo Kenyatta), whom he tended to dismiss as the puppets of European colonialism.[10]

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[8] S. Gillory, "Despite Its Complicated Past, Soviet Antiracism Was Ahead of the Historical Curve", *Moscow Times*, 15 June 2020.

[9] A. Davidson and I. Filatova, "African History: A View from Behind the Kremlin Wall", in M. Matusevich (Ed.), *Africa in Russia, Russia in Africa: Three Centuries of Encounters*, Trenton, N.J., Africa World Press, 2006, pp. 111-31; A.B. Davidson (Ed.), *The Formative Years of African Studies in Russia*, Moscow, RAN, 2003.

[10] I.I. Potekhin, "Stalinskaia Teoriia Colonial'noi Revoliutsii i Natsional'no-Osvoboditel'noe Dvizhenie v Tropicheskoi i Iuzhnoi Afrike" ("Stalin's Theory of Colonial Revolution and National Liberation Movement in Tropical and Southern Africa"), *Sovetskaya Etnografiya*, vol. 1, 1950, pp. 24-50; I.I. Potekhin, "Manevry Angliiskogo Imperializma v Zapadnoi Afrike" ("The Maneuvers of English Imperialism in West Africa"), in V.Y. Vasilieva, I.M. Lemin, and V.A. Maslennikov (Eds.), *Imperialisticheskaya Bor'ba za Afriku i Osvoboditel'noe Dvizhenie*

It took the departure of Joseph Stalin from the scene and the rise of Nikita Khrushchev to inaugurate a new, far mor engaged period in the history of Soviet-African relations. The new, post-Stalin leadership of the Soviet Union embraced a far more optimistic vision for Africa, where Khrushchev recognised the potential for socialist development. Two particular institutions, launched in 1959-61, became the tangible manifestations of a new era of Afro-optimism in the USSR. The Africa Institute (Institute of African Studies) and the University of the Friendship of the Peoples (also known as Lumumba University), both founded in Moscow at the time, captured Khrushchev's dual ambition to expand the study of Africa in the Soviet Union, while also forging a network of connections with the continent by extending generous educational scholarships to African students.[11] Over time, thousands of African students would arrive in the Soviet Union to act as symbolic proof of Soviet internationalism, but, also occasionally, as the conduits for new ideas and aesthetics that challenged the late-Soviet status quo and confounded Soviet officials.[12]

These initiatives were being realised against the backdrop of the ongoing process of African decolonisation, which presented the Soviets with important opportunities to position themselves "on the right side of history". In Ghana, in the Congo, in Egypt, in Algeria, in South Africa, in Lusophone Africa – the Soviets sided with and provided assistance to the forces of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism. There was a reason why Soviet ideologues named Moscow's new university, founded to

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Narodov (*The Imperialist Struggle for Africa and the People's Liberation Movement*), Moscow, Gospolitizdat, 1953, pp. 229-30.

[11] S.V. Mazov, "Sozdanie Instituta Afriki" ("The Creation of Africa Institute"), *Votok*, no. 1, 1998, pp. 80-88; S.V. Mazov, "Afrikanskie Studenty v Moskve v God Afriki" ("African Students in Moscow in the Year of Africa"), *Vostok*, no. 3, June 1999, pp. 91-93.

[12] C. Katsakioris, "Burden or Allies?: Third World Students and Internationalist Duty through Soviet Eyes", *Kritika*, vol. 18, no. 3, Summer 2017, pp. 539-67; M. Matusevich, "Expanding the Boundaries of the Black Atlantic: African Students as Soviet Moderns", *Ab Imperio*, no. 2, 2012, pp. 325-50.

cater to the needs of Third-World students, after the martyred Congolese nationalist, Patrice Lumumba. Americans though, guided by the Truman Doctrine and constrained by their Cold War alliance with European colonial powers, struggling to salvage the remnants of their quickly disintegrating empires, routinely ended up supporting the regimes and political forces that were anachronistic, reactionary, and, in the case of apartheid South Africa and Southern Rhodesia, unambiguously white-supremacist.

To claim that this progressive posturing invariably played to Moscow's advantage would be an oversimplification. The Soviets, just like their Western rivals, suffered their share of setbacks in Africa. In the 1960s, Soviet-friendly regimes in Ghana, Mali, Algeria, and Guinea were either overthrown or else distanced themselves from Moscow. Soviet aid to Lumumba had not been sufficient to keep him in power in the Congo, and likely became a contributing factor in his demise at the hands of the Belgian-US-Katangese plotters, acting in cahoots with the kleptocratic and strategically anti-Communist Mobutu Sese Seko.[13] In the aftermath of these failures, Moscow's ideological commitments became increasingly situational and opportunistic. For example, during the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-70, Moscow threw its lot in with the federalist side, which was dominated by pro-Western and reactionary political forces.[14] In the 1970s, the emergence of Marxist-Leninist regimes in Angola, Mozambique, and Ethiopia, and the Soviet Union and Cuba's growing involvement in their internal and external conflicts, as well as the Soviet Union's deepening ties with the liberation movements in Southern Africa, temporarily elevated Moscow's position on the continent (while also greatly

[13] See, L. De Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba*, London, Verso, 2003.

[14] M. Matusevich, "Strange Bedfellows: An Unlikely Alliance Between the Soviet Union and Nigeria During the Biafran War", in D. Moses and L. Heerten (Eds.), *Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide: The Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967-1970*, London, Routledge, 2017, pp. 198-216.

exacerbating Cold War tensions).[15] But neither these alliances nor some of these regimes and political players' commitment to Marxism-Leninism would prove to be durable and would virtually evaporate with the onset of *Perestroika*. However, some ties apparently endured. The Soviet Union may have disappeared, but it had left in its wake networks of personal and business connections – a legacy of the Soviet presence on a continent where a significant number of new political and cultural elites had been educated in the USSR. Angola's wealthiest woman and daughter of the former president, Isabel dos Santos, is reportedly a dual Russian national, born in Baku of a Russian mother.[16] Igor Sechin, probably the most influential of "Putin's people," is presently the chief executive officer, president and chairman of the management board of Rosneft, Russia's state oil company. Sechin, who shares with his boss a KGB past, cut his teeth back in the 1970s on what appears to have been a foreign intelligence assignment in Angola, where he worked in close collaboration with Moscow's MPLA allies and was allegedly involved in arms transfers.[17] The history of such extensive contacts and common causes can be drawn upon to ease Russia's return to Africa in pursuit of geopolitical objectives and lucrative business opportunities.

[15] V.G. Shubin, *The Hot "Cold War": The USSR in Southern Africa*, London-Scottsville-South Africa, Pluto Press-University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008; V.G. Shubin, *A N C: A View from Moscow*, vol. 88, Bellville, South Africa, Mayibuye, 1999.

[16] Y. Krutikov, "Zapad Meshaet Rossiyanke Stat' Glavoi Gosudarstva v Afrike" ("West Interferes with a Russian Woman Becoming a Head of State in Africa"), *Vzglyad*, 21 January 2020.

[17] H. Foy, "'We Need to Talk about Igor': The Rise of Russia's Most Powerful Oligarch", *Financial Times*, 1 March 2018; A. Luhn, "The 'Darth Vader' of Russia: Meet Igor Sechin, Putin's Right-Hand Man", *Vox*, 8 February 2017.

Post-Soviet Russia: Mantra of Sovereignty and Cultivation of Alternative Groupings

In retrospect, the Soviet withdrawal from Africa in the late-1980s can be rightly viewed as a symbolic expression of the disillusionment with the Soviet system. Among the less seemly aspects of Mikhail Gorbachev's *Perestroika* was a rise in nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric, which often took on an overtly racist tone. Soviet reformers of that period routinely ascribed the roots of the malaise corroding the Soviet economic system to the Soviet Union's allegedly unreasonably generous support for a variety of Third-World (read: non-white) causes. Under the circumstances of a new economic restructuring (*Perestroika*) and openness (*Glasnost*) late-Soviet media vociferously criticised Soviet involvement in Africa and argued for rapprochement with the West, often at the expense of Moscow's allies in the developing world.[18] Accordingly, on the eve of the Soviet Union's collapse, the nation's presence and influence in Africa shrank dramatically. Both Mikhail Gorbachev and his successor Boris Yeltsin focused on their relationship with Western partners and were eager to abandon what they saw as the antiquated and draining liabilities in the Third World. This change of course was not lost on the Soviet Union's former African allies, who often lamented the end of the "Soviet moment" in Africa, which they saw as a counterweight to Western imperialism and neo-colonialism. The African National Congress (ANC), for example, harboured quite a bit of bitterness on account of the late-Soviet rapprochement with apartheid South Africa.[19] One-time Soviet allies in Africa such as Angola, Mozambique, and Ethiopia would expediently ditch their Marxist-Leninist ideology and reorient themselves towards the West.

In view of the above, Russia's much-discussed "return" to

[18] M. Webber, "Soviet Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Final Phase", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1992, pp. 1-30.

[19] E. Sidiropoulos and C. Alden, *Inside Russia-Africa Matryoshka: Summitry, Geopolitics and Resources*, South African Institute of International Affairs, October 2019.

Africa during the second decade of the 21st century represents a peculiar reversal of Moscow's foreign policy as practised in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse. Notably, the return to the once abandoned continent has paralleled a deteriorating relationship between Vladimir Putin's Russia and the West. Once again, the depth of Russa's engagement in Africa can be viewed as reflective of Moscow's disillusionment with and resentment of the West. However, Russia's motivations appear to be less ideological and more geopolitical and opportunistic. Obviously, there is no trace of Marxism-Leninism in the new Russian foreign policy, yet this foreign policy is once again clearly oppositional to Western interests and strives to offer an alternative to the so-called neo-liberal international arrangement, championed by the United States and its European allies. It is also distinctly self-serving, because it argues for the primacy of sovereignty and non-interference at a time when Russia's conduct in Ukraine, Georgia, Syria and other places remains the subject of Western criticism and even sanctions. By refusing to "play by the rules" and advocating freedom from the constraints of Western legal frameworks (including international law) and Western public opinion and sensibilities, Russians are essentially offering an alternative model they clearly hope many African ruling elites will find appealing. As recently stated by Professor Dmitry Bondarenko, an anthropologist and historian at Moscow's Institute of African Studies, "The West is not very much loved by many countries. And many see Russia as the country that will oppose the West".[20]

At the 2019 Africa-Russia Summit in Sochi, the Russian hosts highlighted Russia's commitment to the primacy of sovereignty and respect for national identities. The summit featured a conference panel that specifically addressed the importance of the "preservation of national values and priorities" and argued that Russia was well positioned to assist African nations in securing their right to make independent decisions and help

[20] "What Does Russia Want in Central Africa?", *Week*, 18 October 2018.

them preserve "African identity", while safeguarding "African values" and … the "ideals of pan-Africanism".[21] In practical terms, the mantra of sovereignty and non-interference implies the established elites can have carte blanche to pursue their political goals in a multipolar world, where their actions are not subjected to external oversight, the norms of international law or international public opinion. On 1 January 2021, Russia's ambassador to Ethiopia penned a New Year's congratulatory message to the people of Ethiopia, in which he obliquely referenced the unfolding tragedy in the Tigray region. At a time when Western observers and governmental agencies were widely reporting on the suspected massacres and ethnic cleansing by the Ethiopian army and their Eritrean allies,[22] the Russian ambassador reiterated his nation's support for the government of Ethiopia and articulated it in terms of Russia's traditional anti-colonialism: "Russia has always been on Ethiopia's side in its struggle for independence, state sovereignty, and territorial integrity. So we are not indifferent to current events in Ethiopia. We take the position that the situation in Tigray is a purely internal affair of Ethiopia and its people".[23] The vision of Russia in Africa (and elsewhere) as a uniquely disinterested player and an inheritor of the Russian and Soviet tradition of anti-colonialism seems to be driving much of the elite discourse on the subject. On the eve of the Sochi summit, Olga Kulkova, another senior scholar at the Institute of African Studies, articulated this view on the website of the Putin-friendly Valdai Club, an intellectual hub for the pro-Kremlin elites. In a notable departure from the Yeltsin years, the academic explicitly and tellingly linked

[21] "Obraz Budushego Afrikanskogo Kontinenta: Suverenitet i Traditsionnye Tsennosti kak Vazhnye Elementy Strategii Razvitia" ("Imagining the Future of the African Continent: Sovereignty and Traditional Values as the Important Elements of a Strategy of Development"), Russia-Africa Summit: Business Program, Sochi, Russia, 2019, https://summitafrica.ru/programm/

[22] D. Walsh, "Ethiopia's War Leads to Ethnic Cleansing in Tigray Region, U.S. Report Says", *The New York Times*, 26 February 2021.

[23] E. Terekhin, "Russia-Ethiopia Ties Acquiring More Intense Dynamics", *Ethiopian Herald*, 1 January 2021.

Russian policies on the continent to the Soviet precedent:

Russia's policies in Africa can be called unique, they are undoubtedly different from the ones conducted by China or the United States. Russia aspires to establish genuinely friendly ties with African nations, it is guided by its partners' needs and shares their commitment to the values of national sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. Russia never colonised Africa, and the USSR actively supported the decolonisation of the continent…[24]

Very similar sentiments were sounded at another pre-summit event by the Russian ambassador to South Africa, Ilya Rogachev. At a roundtable discussion held at South Africa's Institute for Global Dialogue, Rogachev highlighted the history of Russia's support for anti-colonial movements and liberation struggles. Contrary to the West, the ambassador proffered, Russia does not see the world "through a colonial lens". In Russia, he claimed, Africans have a real partner, someone who shares many of their values, especially the value of sovereignty.[25]

Shoring Up and Diversifying Diplomatic Support

In the context of the deepening crisis in the relationship between Vladimir Putin's Russia and its Western partners, Russia began to conduct a more assertive foreign policy, while also reconsidering its relationship with its Soviet past. In 2005, Putin famously and controversially proclaimed the collapse of the Soviet Union to have been "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe" of the 21st century.[26] Amidst growing disillusionment with the West, and particularly with the United States, the Kremlin embarked on

[24] O. Kulkova, "Summit «Rossia – Afrika» v Sochi: Demonstratsia Seryoznosti Namerenij i Dobraya Volya" ("'Russia-Africa Summit' in Sochi: A Demonstration of the Seriousness of Intentions and Good Will"), *Valdai: An International Discussion Club*, 19 August 2019.

[25] A. Muresan, *The Russia-Africa Summit, 23-24 October 2019*, South Africa, Institute for Global Dialogue, 2019.

[26] "Putin Deplores Collapse of the USSR", *BBC News*, 25 April 2005.

an outreach campaign that sought to expand and diversify its network of global connections. Sub-Saharan Africa, shunned and abandoned in the immediate aftermath of *Perestroika* and the subsequent Soviet collapse, once again emerged as an important region for Russia's diplomatic and economic ambitions. By reconnecting with Africa Putin's Russia was now signalling an affinity for the Soviet precedent and an eagerness to acknowledge and even celebrate that continuity.[27]

In 2006, Vladimir Putin arrived in South Africa to hold talks with the nation's then President Thabo Mbeki. Like a number of other prominent ANC members and anti-Apartheid activists during the Cold War, Mbeki had received military training in the Soviet Union. The significance of this historical connection was not lost on the observers of Putin's South African trip: the first ever visit to sub-Saharan Africa by a Russian head of state clearly served to underscore the continuity between the USSR's support for the struggle against Apartheid and the post-Soviet Russia's willingness to serve as a counterweight to Western neo-colonialism.[28] Around the time of his South African visit, Putin appointed the head of the Institute of African Studies (and an old Soviet Africa hand) Professor Alexei Vasiliev as his special envoy for liaison with African leaders. In 2011, Vasiliev was succeeded in this position by Mikhail Margelov who became special presidential representative for cooperation with African countries. Margelov had formerly overseen Russia's relations with Sudan, one of Moscow's closest allies and most important clients on the continent. And finally, in November 2014, Putin appointed Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov as special presidential representative for the Middle East and Africa.[29] These appointments and reshuffles indicated

[27] E. Schmitt, "Russia's Military Mission Creep Advances to a New Front: Africa", *The New York Times*, 31 March 2019; S. Shuster, "How Putin Built a Ragtag Empire of Tyrants and Failing States", *Time Magazine*, 4 April 2019.

[28] "Putin in Historic South Africa Visit", *News Al Jazeera* 5 September 2006; E. Sidiropoulos and C. Alden (2019), pp. 30-31.

[29] E. Sidiropoulos and C. Alden (2019), p. 8.

the steadily growing importance of Africa in the Kremlin's geopolitical vision.

The Russian-African rapprochement gained in significance in the aftermath of the Georgian war (2008), Putin's crackdown on domestic protests and dissent that followed his return to presidential power (2011-12), and the tragic events in Ukraine and the annexation of the Crimean peninsula by Russia (2014). Facing an expanding array of sanctions imposed on it by Western nations, Russia continued to broaden and diversify its connections in the non-Western world, particularly by creating or participating in various alternative diplomatic and economic groupings. In these efforts and in yet another noteworthy departure from the Yeltsin years, Moscow sought to cast Russia as a non-Western power, a Eurasian nation that has fallen victim to Western predation. Disrespected and ostracised by the West, Russia now looked for alternatives to West-centred international associations to better safeguard its global standing: the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS initiative, and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).[30]

In Africa, Russia positioned itself as a "special case" – an industrial nation and a great power, yet not of a Western kind, free of the sin of colonialism and culturally and politically closer to Africans than to the West. And this is exactly the message spread on the continent by a coterie of pro-Russian (and apparently Russian-trained and financed) propagandists. One of them, Professor José Matemulane of Mozambique, who spent years living and studying in Russia, thus encouraged his compatriots to work closer with Russia to offset the influence of the United States and Europe: "The Russians have their own way of thinking different from the Western patterns … I used to tell people: Russians are nothing else than white Africans, white blacks".[31]

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[30] S. Köstem, "Russia's Search for a Greater Eurasia: Origins, Promises, and Prospects", *Kennan Cable*, February 2019; E. Sidiropoulos and C. Alden (2019), pp. 6-7.

[31] A. Troianovsky, "A New Message': Russia Trains Its Propaganda Machine on

In fairness, Russia's task of building new bridges to African nations was greatly simplified by America's growing isolationism during the last two US presidential administrations. Both the Obama and the Trump administrations significantly reduced the US footprint in Africa. Some Africa watchers unfavourably contrasted President Obama's brief visit to Ghana in 2009 with a far grander tour by Russia's placeholder president, Dmitry Medvedev. Obama gave an inspirational speech to a packed stadium in Accra, but Medvedev visited Egypt, Nigeria, Namibia and Angola on the longest tour of the continent undertaken by a Russian leader since the Soviet collapse. Medvedev's retinue included 400 business leaders, and the visit produced a 10-year cooperation pact with Egypt, a US$2.5 billion oil deal with Nigeria, and a US$300 million deal to help Angola launch its first satellite, Angosat.[32] Negotiations were probably made easier by Russia's willingness to forgive up to US$20 billion in African debts, some of them dating back to the Soviet times.[33]

While American interest in Africa waned, Russian outreach efforts on the continent continued to intensify, especially after 2014. Sergey Lavrov made several trips to Africa, promoting economic and business ties, but also emphasising the commonality of Russian-African positions within international bodies, particularly in the United Nations. The evocation of the spectre of the "colour revolutions" seems to be one of the favoured arguments deployed by Russian officials negotiating with African rulers. Just like in the former Soviet spaces, they argue for the preservation of stability at the expense of democratic experimentation, clearly expecting the argument to resonate with the entrenched ruling elites. In the course of his 2018 tour of Africa, Lavrov pressed this issue in Angola, Namibia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Ethiopia. A similar point was made repeatedly by the Secretary of the Russian

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Africa", *The New York Times*, 29 October 2019.

[32] A. Cohen, "Russia's New Scramble for Africa", *Wall Street Journal*, 2 July 2009.

[33] "Moscow Forgave More than $20 Bln of Africa's Debt to Russia, Says Putin", *TASS Russian News Agency*, 23 October 2019.

Security Council, Sergey Patrushev, in the course of his extended visit to Angola and South Africa in the summer of 2018. The Russians persisted in bringing up the examples of such non-Western nations as Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria, which they claimed to have been destabilised and ruined through Western interference and machinations. A South African journalist covering the visit recalled the visitors insisting on the importance of finding "alternative solutions to those proposed by the West".[34]

It is difficult to gauge the exact effectiveness of Russia's quest for alternative groupings and new alliances, including those they seek to build on the continent. But this diplomatic offensive can claim at least one measure of success: it has enabled Russia to break out of the diplomatic isolation following Putin's crackdown on the opposition and, especially, after the Russian annexation of Crimea. In 2014, when the United Nations General Assembly fielded a resolution condemning the annexation of Crimea, more than half of African governments either opposed it or abstained from voting.[35] Since the introduction of Western sanctions in 2014, Russia has signed at least 19 military cooperation agreements with sub-Saharan African nations, including significant arms deals with Ethiopia, Nigeria, Angola, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe.[36] Presently, Russia is enjoying the dubious distinction of being the largest exporter of arms to Africa, accounting for 49% of all arms transfers to the continent in 2015-19.[37]

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[34] A. Kalika, "Russia's 'Great Return' to Africa?", *Russie.Nei.Visions*, no. 114, April 2019, pp. 10-11.

[35] "Backing Ukraine's Territorial Integrity, UN Assembly Declares Crimea Referendum Invalid", *UN News*, 27 March 2014.

[36] "What Does Russia Want in Central Africa?"…, cit.; J. Hammond, "Lavrov Visit Highlights Security Ties between Russia and Southern African Countries", *The Defense Post* (blog), 13 March 2018.

[37] "Russian Arms Sales Growing in Africa", *DefenseWorld.net*, 24 March 2020.

Instability as a Business Opportunity for Russia's State Capitalism and Putin's oligarchs

In the summer of 2018, three Russian journalists were murdered in the Central African Republic (CAR), where they had travelled on assignment to investigate the alleged involvement of Russian mercenaries and business interests in that country's ongoing unrest. The murdered journalists' investigative project had been bankrolled by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, an exiled Russian tycoon and nemesis of Vladimir Putin.[38] The crime has remained unsolved, but it brought the world's attention to the significant Russian presence in this mineral-rich but troubled African nation, which the United Nations ranks as the least developed in the world.[39] The unrest in CAR had been occasioned by intercommunal violence between a mostly Muslim coalition of rebels and Christian vigilante militias, and, according to some observers, represented a spill-over from the bloody implosion of the Qaddafi regime in Libya. The country possesses rich deposits of diamonds, gold, and uranium, while having no functioning central government and touching on no obvious national interests of any of the major Western powers, including the United States and the former colonial master France.[40] This apparent void was filled by Russia. In some ways, CAR represents a model for Russia's involvement on the continent: a weak central government, political strife, mineral wealth, weariness of the West, and a need for Russian-made arms are the basic ingredients of this recipe.

In CAR, Russia has been able to test its recently developed

[38] A. Roth, "Russian Journalists Killed in CAR 'Were Researching Military Firm'", *Guardian*, 1 August 2018; A. Higgins, "Pushing Further into Africa, Russia Signs a New Military Accord", *The New York Times*, 21 August 2018.

[39] *Central African Republic: Human Development Indicators*, Human Development Reports, United Nations Development Programme, 2020.

[40] "What Does Russia Want in Central Africa?"…, cit.; J. Losh and O. Matthews, "Battle for Africa: Russia Pushes Into 'Free Country for the Taking' in Attempt to Rival the West", *Newsweek Magazine*, 9 August 2018.

ability to gain significant returns on a relatively minor investment in manpower and resources. It is also a place where Russians have put the principle of deniability to yet another test. The vast majority of the reported 400 Russian special forces, providing security for the regime of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra of CAR, ostensibly do not represent the Russian state, but rather a private security company, Wagner, which happens to be controlled by Putin's close associate and loyal oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin. In the West, Prigozhin, nicknamed "Putin's chef" on account of his business rise as Russia's catering magnate,[41] is better known for allegedly deploying mercenaries in conflict zones in Ukraine and Syria. He is also assumed to be the mastermind behind the internet campaign to derail the 2016 presidential elections in the United States, where he is presently under indictment.[42] CAR provides a real time conflation of Russian national interests and the business interests of Putin-friendly oligarchs. By doing the bidding of the Russian state (conflicts in Syria and Ukraine, or the interference in foreign elections) these individuals gain access to mineral resources and promising business opportunities, often created by political instability. Lobaye Ltd mining company and Sewa security company are two such examples of a symbiotic and mutually reinforcing relationship between Russia's state capitalism and Putin's foreign policy. Both firms were registered in Bangui (the capital of CAR) and both appear to be affiliated with Yevgeny Prigozhin.[43]

It seems reasonable to view many of Russia's recent undertakings on the continent as a multi-purpose enterprise that combines the need to break out of the political isolation

[41] "Powerful 'Putin's Chef' Prigozhin Cooks Up Murky Deals", *BBC News*, 4 November 2019.

[42] "Internet Research Agency Indictment", The United States Department of Justice, 16 February 2018.

[43] D. Searcey, "Gems, Warlords and Mercenaries: Russia's Playbook in Central African Republic", *The New York Times*, 30 September 2019; P. Huon and S. Ostrovsky, "Russia, the New Power in Central Africa", *Coda*, 19 December 2018.

forced on it by the West and expand Russia's global reach with a desire to secure lucrative contracts and business deals for the Kremlin-loyal oligarchs. The volume of trade between Russia and sub-Saharan Africa remains relatively modest (and is dominated by weapons trade). In 2018, it amounted to about US$19 billion, which is significantly less than the US$300 billion in trade with the European Union and US$60 billion with the United States.[44] But Russia feels no need to engage in a futile competition against the West and China; it focuses instead on the niche markets of nuclear technology, energy, and arms.[45]

In pursuing business and other ties with their African partners Russians have one significant advantage over the West: as a matter of course they attach no strings to their deals. Whether extracting suspected "blood diamonds" in CAR, bauxite in Guinea or platinum in Zimbabwe, they exhibit no particular concern for the causes that often excite public opinion in the West. In dealing with the Russians, Africa's ruling elites have no reasons to worry about appearances or concern themselves with such issues as human rights and democracy. Moscow's mantra of the supremacy of sovereignty resonates with those African leaders, who do not want to have their hands tied by notions of due process or Western appeals (not infrequently hypocritical) to good governance. When Guinean president Alpha Condé opted to extend his presidency beyond the constitutionally mandated term, he received enthusiastic backing from the Russian ambassador Alexander Bregadze. In a colourful departure from diplomatic norms, Bregadze appealed to the Guineans to give Condé, whom he called "legendary", another chance. He also encouraged Guinean citizens not to get fixated on constitutionality: "Constitutions are not dogma, the Bible, or the Koran. Constitutions adapt to reality, it's not realities

[44] J. Devermont, "Russian Theater: How to Respond to Moscow's Return to the African Stage", *Lawfare Blog of the Brookings Institution*, 18 October 2019; A. Troianovsky (2019).

[45] E. Sidiropoulos and C. Alden (2019), p. 11.

that adapt to constitutions".[46] Understandably, such a laissez-faire approach to diplomacy has not been lost on the interested parties. The late Prime Minister Amadou Gon Coulibaly of Ivory Coast was favoured to win the nation's presidency before his unexpected death in July 2020. He was also rumoured to be favoured by the Russians, for whose practical approach to doing business he expressed a healthy appreciation: "My experience is that the Russian authorities I meet with want business … They don't talk ideology. They don't talk about political control".[47] At the height of a crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which was accompanied by egregious human rights violations and suspected crimes against humanity,[48] Vladimir Putin arrived in Cairo to sign a deal on behalf of Rosatom for the construction of two nuclear reactors with a close ally, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Characteristically, the agreement came into being just as the United States had started "to scale back energy cooperation with Egypt due, in part, to concerns over the Sisi government's curbs on press freedoms and its abusive handling of members of the previous Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohammed Morsi".[49] Egypt's Russian partners clearly harboured no such concerns.

Post-Modern Realignments and Russia's Challenge to Western Liberalism

As the 2019 Russia – Africa Summit was drawing to an end, *Moskovskij Komsomolets (MK)*, one of Russia's most popular tabloids with a daily circulation approaching 1 million copies, published its own irreverent take on the gathering in Sochi. The

[46] J. Devermont (2019); O. Camara, "Russian Diplomat's Praise of Guinean Leader Sparks Outrage", *Bloomberg*, 10 January 2019.
[47] A. Troianovsky (2019).
[48] "Egypt: Year of Abuses Under al-Sisi", *Human Rights Watch*, 8 June 2015.
[49] J.-C. Hoste and F. Koch, *Putin in Africa*, Africa Policy Brief, Egmont Institute, June 2015.

article mocked the guests of the summit by describing them in terms that were harsh and unambiguously racist. The visitors were alleged to be a motley collection of dictators, criminals, and ignoramuses, some of whom were not even aware of their own date of birth. King Mswati III of Swaziland was presented to the paper's readers (about 11% of Russia's population) as a savage, who "back home strolls around half-naked, adorned with feathers and finds himself a lucky owner of 13 to 15 wives, who have given him about 40 children".[50] It is hard to imagine this sort of "summit coverage" appearing in a popular Western publication, unless the purpose was to embarrass the government. But *MK* is hardly a critic of Putin's regime; in fact, it is a Kremlin-friendly media vehicle, whose long-time editor-in-chief, Pavel Gusev, is one of Putin's advisers.[51]

The *MK* article's irreverence and even its offensiveness may have been the point though. When it comes to Russian conduct on the international stage the Kremlin places itself in stark opposition to the liberal norms and values promoted by its Western opponents. In following its own course in foreign and cultural affairs, Russia gleefully rejects "Western hypocrisy", which Russian authorities interpret as a sham to disguise the West's naked ambition to exploit and dominate. Because this critique of the West is often articulated in terms that combine the language of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism with conservative, and even reactionary sensibilities, it resonates across the broad political spectrum – both in the West and in the developing world. As noted above, many African elites have no problem dealing with partners who do not subscribe to Western liberal pieties, even when it comes to the sensitive issue of race. By rejecting and mocking the "political correctness" of the West, Russia effectively positions itself outside of the West,

[50] "Diplomatia s Peryami: Putin v Sochi Poobshalsya s Polugolymi Partnyorami" ("Diplomacy with Feathers: Putin Interacted with Half-Naked Partners in Sochi"), *Moskovskij Komsomolets*, 24 October 2019.

[51] "Doverennymi Litsami Putina Stali Znamenistosti iz Spiska-2012" ("Putin's Confidants Hail from the Celebrity List-2012"), *Polit.Ru*, 12 January 2018.

and in doing so it circumvents the mine field of the racial discourse that complicates the domestic and foreign affairs of so many Western nations. In a recent interview, foreign minister Sergey Lavrov lamented the excesses of political correctness in the West and criticised the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the United States: "You see this is absurd. Political correctness taken to the point of absurdity will not end well". But just as he was levelling this criticism of the movement for racial justice in the West, he also referenced Russia's own history of and commitment to anti-racism.[52]

Such ideological flexibility and its accompanying trolling of the West seem to be important elements in Russia's overall strategy of securing its interests in Africa. Having cast aside the shackles of Marxist-Leninist ideology, Russia's post-Soviet elites have no trouble collaborating with a dizzying array of the ostensibly incompatible political players: from the anti-imperialist and anti-colonial left to the ultranationalist and racist right.[53] It is a strange post-modern alliance indeed, whose one common denominator appears to be a shared disdain for the Washington-led neo-liberal consensus. In this regard, the Kremlin takes advantage of the opportunities afforded by the rise of radicalism and cultural and political disenchantment in the West. It also benefits from its own positioning as a defender of traditional values and patriarchy. So, in the midst of the #metoo reckoning across many Western nations, Russian operatives in the Central African Republic staged a series of beauty pageants in Bangui. It was a strange spectacle of African women parading in high heels in a venue decorated by Russian flags. The contestants were greeted by Miss Russia 2013, Elmira Abdrazakova. As a local 23-year old student was crowned "Miss Centrafrique" radio broadcasts in the capital thanked Russia for its help.[54]

[52] "Russia Warns of Anti-White 'Aggression' in U.S.", *Moscow News*, 1 April 2021.

[53] A. Shekhovtsov, "Fake Election Observation as Russia's Tool of Election Interference: The Case of AFRIC", Berlin, European Platform for Democratic Election, 2020.

[54] "Russian Influence on Show in C. African Beauty Contest", *France 24*, 12

In recent years, sub-Saharan Africa has become the stage for more than Russia-sponsored beauty contests. It is now a testing ground for a variety of influence and disinformation campaigns, waged by the Kremlin-affiliated *polittekhnologi* (political technologists). Considering the well-supported allegations of Russia's interference in Western election processes, it may not be a coincidence that some of the Russian persons and entities, identified in the indictment by the US Department of Justice, appear to also be active on the continent, most recently in Madagascar, the Central African Republic, Libya, Mali, Mozambique, Sudan, Cameroon, Zimbabwe, etc.[55] In October 2019, Facebook took down dozens of inauthentic, Russia-connected accounts in eight African nations. And in 2020, a bombshell *CNN* report alleged that Russia had moved some of its infamous "troll farms" to locations in Ghana and Nigeria. Several experts have linked this apparent shift of influence operations to Africa with the media revelations about the disinformation activities by the Prigozhin-affiliated Internet Research Agency, based in Saint Petersburg, Russia.[56]

One case encapsulates the sort of post-modern realignment that has become one of the hallmarks of Russia's growing

December 2018; P. Huon and S. Ostrovsky (2018).

[55] D. Alba and S. Frenkel, "Russia Tests New Disinformation Tactics in Africa to Expand Influence", *The New York Times*, 30 October 2019; A. Troianovsky (2019); M. Weiss and P. Vaux, "Russia Is Using Undercover Racists to Exploit Africa's Anti-Racist Political Revolt", *Daily Beast*, 8 September 2020; M. Schwirtz and G. Borgia, "How Russia Meddles Abroad for Profit: Cash, Trolls and a Cult Leader", *The New York Times*, 11 November 2019; L. Harding, "Revealed: UN Sudan Expert's Links to Russian Oligarch Prigozhin", *Guardian*, 27 November 2020.

[56] I. Rozhdestvensky, M. Rubin, and R. Badanin, "Master and Chef: How Russia Interfered in Elections in Twenty Countries", *Проект at Dossier Centre*, 11 April 2019; S. Grossman, D. Bush, and R. DiResta, "Evidence of Russia-Linked Influence Operations in Africa", Stanford Internet Observatory, 29 October 2019; *Russian Disinformation Campaigns Target Africa: An Interview with Dr. Shelby Grossman*, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 18 February 2020; "Russian Election Meddling Is Back - via Ghana and Nigeria - and in Your Feeds", *CNN*, 11 April 2020.

involvement in Africa. The founding, in 2018, of the Association for Free Research and International Cooperation (AFRIC) by an international team of operatives and "political technologists", many of them close to Yevgeny Prigozhin, had as its purpose the creation of a network for the dissemination of "Africa-related narratives beneficial to the Russian state".[57] AFRIC's current president, the above-mentioned Professor José Zacarias Samuel Matemulane, is a Russian-educated Mozambican academic with extensive business and personal ties in Saint Petersburg. On his Facebook page, Matemulane posts frequent encomia to Vladimir Putin and the Russian Ministry of Defence.[58] Since its creation, the think tank has expanded its areas of concern by venturing out into a variety of election monitoring activities, most recently and controversially in Madagascar and Zimbabwe. In both instances, the goal appeared to be the providing of backing and legitimacy to the candidates, favoured by Russia, but also, in an echo of the 2016 US election controversies, supporting spoiler candidates.[59]

One of the more remarkable and telling features of AFRIC has to do with the strange assortment of characters involved in the organisation. The Russian cohort is represented by several of Prigozhin's known associates, some of them with ties to Russian nationalists and right wingers. Among those associated with Prigozhin's efforts in Africa are such arch conservatives and resisters against the evils of "liberal totalitarianism" as Saint Petersburg-based businessman Konstantin Malofeev or a seasoned anti-American propagandist, Alexander Malkevich, whose Foundation for National Values Protection rallies in defence of national sovereignty and traditional values. It also publishes propaganda materials targeting Africans and warning them about the dangers of Western-sponsored "coloured revolutions".[60] Russian conservatives are joined by

[57] A. Shekhovtsov (2020), p. 14.
[58] Ibid.
[59] M. Weiss and P. Vaux (2020).
[60] A. Troianovsky (2019); A. Malkevich, *Dark Story of "Color Revolutions in Africa"*,

known European right wingers, including, for example, Volker Tschapke, the founder of the far-right Germany-based "Prussian Society". It is a tribute to Russia's post-modern approach to foreign policy that its outreach to Africa is overseen by ultra-nationalists. But not just.

AFRIC is truly a big tent, because besides these white conservatives it also attracts a group of anti-imperialist and anti-colonial activists, most notably among them, a peripatetic, self-styled pan-Africanist Kémi Séba (real name: Stellio Gilles Robert Capo Chichi).[61] Born in France of Beninese parents, Séba was at some point affiliated with the US-based Nation of Islam and the New Black Panther Party (NBPP), designated by the Southern Poverty Law Center as an extremist racist organisation.[62] Notorious for his antisemitic views (he was imprisoned in France for making antisemitic statements) and celebrated in some quarters for his vociferous denunciations of French neo-colonialism, Séba apparently developed extensive connections with the far-right figures in Europe and Russia. In 2017, he met with a prominent Russian Eurasianist philosopher and extreme right ideologue Alexander Dugin, whom Séba referred to as "the most important theoretician and political adviser in Russia". Dugin reciprocated by penning a preface to Séba's book *L'Afrique libre ou la mort* (*Free Africa or Death*), in which he praised Séba for his commitment to anti-colonialism and hailed him as a "man of his time … not just a chance for Africa but also a hope for all the forces of multipolar resistance".[63] Séba's involvement in AFRIC-sponsored activities would continue to grow and eventually lead him to play a central role in the attempted Russian meddling in the 2019 presidential election in Madagascar.[64] The common cause between anti-

The Foundation for National Values Protection, 22 August 2019.

[61] A. Shekhovtsov (2020), pp. 17-18.

[62] *New Black Panther Party*, Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), accessed 15 April 2021.

[63] A. Dugin, "Free Africa or Death!", *Геополитика.ru*, 20 May 2019.

[64] I. Rozhdestvensky, M. Rubin, and R. Badanin (2019).

imperialist anti-Western activists like Kémi Séba and Russia's ultra-nationalists and traditionalists is representative of a bigger challenge facing Western liberalism. Sub-Saharan Africa is one of those arenas where the durability and effectiveness of such unusual post-Cold War realignments is being tested.

Conclusion: Russia's Return to Africa and the Limitations of an Elite Project

On 15 April 2021, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) introduced new sanctions against individuals and entities alleged to have attempted to influence the 2020 US presidential election at the direction of the Russian leadership. Alexander Malkevich and his Foundation for National Values Protection, AFRIC, and the managers of AFRIC's "Africa Back Office" in Saint Petersburg are featured prominently on the sanctions list and identified as parts of Yevgeny Prigozhin's network in Africa.[65] There is remarkable symbolism in the fact of the US government sanctioning Russian nationals and organisations overseeing Moscow's much-discussed "return" to Africa. The document inadvertently fleshes out some of the essential elements of Russia's most recent activities on the continent. Probably the most prominent among them is the elite nature of this project: it serves the interests and geopolitical ambitions of the Russian state but is being conducted (and bankrolled) by a team of Putin-friendly oligarchs and businessmen, pro-Putin nationalist ideologues, and a colourful assemblage of pro-Russian foreigners, united by their antipathy for Western liberalism (an antipathy shared by Vladimir Putin and many members of Russia's ruling class).[66]

[65] "Press Release: Treasury Escalates Sanctions Against the Russian Government's Attempts to Influence U.S. Elections", U.S. Department of the Treasury, 15 April 2021.

[66] L. Barber, H. Foy, and A. Barker, "Vladimir Putin Says Liberalism Has 'Become Obsolete'," *Financial Times*, 27 June 2019.

The deal between the oligarchs like Prigozhin and the state appears to be straightforward: Prigozhin acts in accordance with a "dual mandate", which weds Russian national interests with pecuniary pursuits and profit-making, especially in business endeavours related to arms trade, extraction industries, and mercenary services.

Judging by the flurry of recent publications on Russia's return to Africa, the West is troubled by this development. Western observers and journalists have variably described the rekindling of Russian-African ties as a new "scramble for Africa", a "battle for Africa", a "great African game", or even as an empire-building exercise.[67] Western anxiety has been greatly enhanced by the fact Russia has apparently used the continent as a staging ground for some of its disinformation campaigns targeting Western democratic institutions and processes. But as recently observed by Kimberly Marten, Russian activities in Africa appear anything but a national project. Rather than building an "African empire", Russia conducts a series of initiatives, centred on Putin's cronies and other members of the elite class.[68] In Africa, Russians usually focus their attention on local elites, who are cultivated to better promote Russian interests, and with whom they establish patronage relationships to secure access to lucrative business opportunities for individual Russian businessmen.[69]

While Russia's profile on the continent has risen significantly, its "individualistic model of involvement" can become problematic, because it prevents Russia from engaging with African nations' civil societies and democratic institutions.[70] Some observers have noted this approach, which is usually

[67] A. Cohen (2009); J. Losh and O. Matthews (2018); S. Paduano, "Putin Lost His African Great Game Before He Started", *Foreign Policy*, 31 October 2019; S. Shuster (2019).

[68] K. Marten, "Russia's Back in Africa: Is the Cold War Returning?", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 4, December 2019, pp. 155-70.

[69] Ibid. pp. 160-61.

[70] Ibid.

centred on the entrenched elites, prevents Russia from developing deep and meaningful ties on the continent. In places like Ivory Coast, Sudan, South Africa or Zimbabwe, Russia is sometimes perceived as a power whose interests are antithetical to the functioning of vibrant civil societies. Young educated Africans, in particular, may question Russia's close ties with local elites, a collaboration that comes at the cost of the stability of democratic institutions and the rule of law.[71] As the younger generation of educated Africans grows more concerned about the issues of human rights, transparency, corruption, environmental degradation, and the rule of law, their attitudes towards the elite-centred, "no strings attached" tactic, that has become the hallmark of Russia's presence on the continent, may toughen.[72]

Moreover, Russia's successes in sub-Saharan Africa remain fairly limited in scope. The footprint is still light, and not every undertaking comes to fruition. In Sudan, the infusion of Russian mercenary force and significant financial and diplomatic assistance failed to keep Moscow's close ally, former president Omar al-Bashir, in power.[73] Russian attempts to meddle in the recent elections in Madagascar apparently backfired and failed to produce the desired outcome.[74] Russians have not been successful in securing a naval base in Djibouti. And in South Africa, Moscow's close friend and former president Jacob Zuma now stands accused of a massive corruption scheme.[75] The South African administration of President Cyril Ramaphosa opted to discontinue the nuclear deal with Moscow, first negotiated on Zuma's watch.[76] In other words, Russia's return to Africa has been a success, but it is a qualified success, its scope limited by

[71] E. Sidiropoulos and C. Alden (2019), pp. 33-34.
[72] J.-C. Hoste and F. Koch (2015).
[73] K. Marten (2019), p. 161.
[74] S. Paduano (2019).
[75] "Arms Deal Corruption Trial against South African Ex-President Zuma to Start in May", *Reuters*, 23 February 2021.
[76] E. Sidiropoulos and C. Alden (2019), p. 28.

the nature of what essentially is an "elite project". In Africa, Russia follows an opportunistic course to meet the needs of Russia's resurgence mission and challenge Western neo-liberal narratives. Pro-Putin oligarchs overseeing this expansion pursue their own interests, which often overlap with the interests of the Russian state. They appeal to Africa's ruling classes by playing up the commonality of their conservative and traditional values and trumpeting Russia's support for sovereignty and non-interference. The message could not be any clearer: local elites will not be bothered with demands for transparency and the rule of law; the Russian president, entrenched in power since 1999, is not going to demand his African partners comply with term limits. But the messaging is also opportunistic, and as such it hardly foreshadows any grand strategy for either authoritarianism promotion or empire-building. It appears the only "empires" Putin's Russia desires to forge are business ones.

Conclusions

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The year 2020, which marked 20 years in power of President Vladimir Putin, started with increasing chatter about succession. This had actually been going on for some time already, even before the end of the Putin-Medvedev tandem era. In January of that year, Putin proposed a raft of constitutional amendments that initially seemed to reinforce the parliament's role and give more powers to a relatively low-profile institution, the Security Council. Speculation on a possible transition to a post-Putin phase, however, ended abruptly in March, when lawmaker Valentina Tereshkova (the first woman to fly into space) proposed "resetting the clock" of Putin's presidential terms so that he could stay in power beyond the end of his term in 2024. Her proposal was indeed included in the package of constitutional amendments that were later approved by the referendum on July 1.

The constitutional reform seemingly reaffirmed Putin's domination of Russia's politics. The top-down nature of Russia's decision-making process has been famously described as the "power vertical", meaning that the centralisation of power severely limits the capacity of local regimes or "stable patterns of subnational governance"[1] to exert genuinely independent and autonomous policies. In the last few years,

[1] V. Gel'man and S. Ryzhenkov, "Local Regimes, Sub-national Governance and the 'Power Vertical'", *Contemporary Russia, Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 63, no. 3, May 2011, pp. 449-465.

we had seen some cracks in the Russian power vertical system. Local leaders have started making the structures they manage more autonomous, establishing their own spheres of influence relatively independent from the Kremlin.[2] Sometimes, the government fears this trend, especially when individual politicians become "too" popular and autonomous. Such is the case of Sergei Furgal, Khabarovsk Krai's governor, who was arrested on murder charges that are largely seen as bogus, in the context of a general rise in criminal cases against regional officials.[3] Sometimes, though, the Kremlin has encouraged it: its empowerment of many local governments during the pandemic revamped the debate about regional autonomy.[4]

Despite these contradictions, the consolidation of Putin's autocratic tendencies and his apparent stability despite the many challenges posed by international sanctions, economic stagnation and the COVID-19 pandemic, have contributed – at least in the Western literature – to an excessive "Putin-centrism" and the relative neglect of other agents of domestic politics when explaining Russia's foreign policy.

This book sought to overcome this gap, exploring the evolving distribution of political and economic power under the surface of Putin's leadership to assess the influence that such power distribution exerts on the process and content of Russia's foreign policy. Today, several domestic actors still concentrate material resources and political influence in their hands, affecting some areas of Russia's foreign policy. We asked ourselves the question: *Who* decides *what* in Moscow? The answer, unsurprisingly, is not always "Vladimir Putin". Our primary goal was to show the complexity of Russia's decision-making process beneath

[2] A. Pertsev, *The Beginning of the End of Russia's Power Vertical*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 31 January 2017.

[3] The daily Novaya Gazeta reported that from 2000 to 2020, at least 102 mayors and 30 governors from 53 regions have come under investigation. *Novaya Gazeta*, "Russia, Explained #43", 15 July 2020.

[4] A. Ferrari and E. Tafuro Ambrosetti, *Russia: Centre-Periphery Relations in the Time of Covid-19*, ISPI Dossier, ISPI, 22 May 2020.

the surface of a monolithic, increasingly authoritarian and personalistic government.

Of course, Russia's growing authoritarianism impacts the relative weight of the different lobbies with a stake in the evolution of foreign policy-making mechanisms and priorities. We acknowledge the weakened position of Russian liberals, who often face a difficult choice: either to compromise and integrate with the system of power or to disappear from the political scene. On the other hand, it is the religious lobby from the Russian Orthodox Church and, particularly, Putin's circle of oligarchs who keep the upper hand and can advance their particular economic and political interests through Russia's *aussenpolitik*. But this can only happen if there is a certain alignment with the government: those who have different views are marginalised and constrained not only due to the verticalisation of power, but also the general context of Western sanctions, which limit their economic engagement opportunities.

We also noticed a certain lack of ideological considerations in determining these actors' choices. Profit and individual influence seem to be their major driver, as the case of leading non-Kremlin Russian players in Sub-Saharan Africa shows. When there is a narrative about ideology – be it conservatism or Orthodoxy – it is often a façade behind which other aims and interests are pursued. In this regard, our book seems to confirm the tendency in the literature[5] not to consider Russia as engaging in "authoritarian promotion": the Kremlin works best with governments that are less constrained by their public opinions and do not criticise Russia's growing illiberal nature,

[5] L.A. Way, "The limits of autocracy promotion: The case of Russia in the 'near abroad'", *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 54, pp. 691–706, 2015. doi: 10.1111/1475-6765.12092691; K. Yakouchyk, "Beyond Autocracy Promotion: A Review", *Political Studies Review*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2019, pp. 147-160, doi:10.1177/1478929918774976; O. Tansey, "The problem with autocracy promotion", *Democratization*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2016, 141-163, doi: 10.1080/13510347.2015.1095736.

but it does not actively promote authoritarianism abroad. A like-minded government certainly makes business smoother.

Another quite relevant aspect highlighted by this book is the role of some think tanks and research institutions in promoting Russian foreign policy. These institutions appear far from homogeneous in their visions, and of course, have a different ability to influence the Kremlin's choices. For example, while the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) has recently advocated, with limited success, for a cooperative approach to replace unconditional confrontation with the West, the Valdai Discussion Club and the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs at the Higher School of Economics (Moscow) have contributed significantly to the emergence of "Greater Eurasia" as the key idea driving Russian foreign policy.[6]

In conclusion, this volume clearly highlights the need to avoid simplistic visions of Russian politics; on the contrary, it invites us to deal with its complexity. As a matter of fact, a country can be authoritarian and complex at the same time. This rule of thumb also applies to Russia and its foreign policy, whose outcomes often stem from heterogeneous conflicting forces and interests rather than the exclusive expression of the will of an autocrat and his narrow circle.

[6] On the evolution of this concept see D.G. Lewis, "Geopolitical Imaginaries in Russian Foreign Policy: The Evolution of 'Greater Eurasia'", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 70, 2018, pp. 1612-1637; and A. Ferrari, "Greater Eurasia. Opportunity or Downsizing for Russia?", in A. Ferrari and E. Tafuro Ambrosetti (Eds.), *Forward to the Past? New/Old Theatres of Russia's International Projection*, Milan, ISPI-Ledizioni, 2020.

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