

Russian foreign policy as an instrument for domestic mobilization

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Summary

Despite numerous declarations, the Russian authorities have done very little about domestic reforms, such as economic modernization. By contrast, Russia's external policy has been extremely active, and is extensively debated within Russia itself. On the surface, it may seem that the domestic agenda is fully suppressed by the external one. In reality, however, foreign policy plays an important instrumental role, as the main tool for achieving domestic consensus and mobilization. It is public approval of the country's foreign policy, together with 'Russia-friendly' interpretations of international processes, that create openings for the political elite to postpone domestic reforms. Various strategies for domestic reforms have recently been elaborated on the order of the President – but there are no indications that they will be realized anytime soon.

Introduction

National foreign policymaking is frequently described as emanating from the 'black box'. In general, foreign policy belongs to the domain of the national executive, and the decision-making process is less transparent than in domestic policy. To be sure, there may be moments when a state faces real external threat, or where the decisions that elites make in the sphere of foreign policy may impact deeply on the lives of the populace – but these are rare occasions. Domestic affairs are far more important for 'ordinary people', and foreign policy tends to remain a slightly esoteric concern.

That, however, is not the case in Russia, which defeats all these stereotypes. In today's Russia, the domestic agenda at first sight appears fully suppressed by the external one – but that impression is mistaken. The domestic

comes first, but Russia's foreign policy plays a key instrumental role, as the main tool for domestic consensus and mobilization.

I argue that public approval of the country's foreign policy, together with Russia-friendly interpretations of international processes, make it possible for the political elites to postpone domestic reforms. As Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, has pointed out, 'Since February 2014, the Kremlin has been de facto operating in a war mode, and Russian President Vladimir Putin has been acting as a wartime leader' (Trenin 2017). What Putin and the Russian elite want is not an open conflict with the West, but rather an excuse for putting off domestic reforms at relatively low costs.

External for domestic: How does it work in Russia?

For Russia, foreign policy has arguably become the most powerful of all domestic policy tools. This is a complex tool, consisting of various elements that need to work in combination – which in turn means that the failure of just one can ruin the system as a whole. Among these elements are Russia's foreign policy actions; the 'philosophical' interpretation of global trends and Russia's role in the world; and massive propaganda of Russia's external successes, intended for the domestic audience.

Russia's foreign policy actions are very diverse and develop at various scales and distances, also far beyond Russia's borders. Structurally they involve three main aspects: dealing with armed conflicts, economic coercion and military posturing. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 pulled a trigger. Today Russia supports insurgents in Eastern Ukraine, trying through Minsk II to create an insurmountable obstacle to Ukrainian accession to NATO and to insert a pro-Russian element into the Ukrainian political system (Trenin 2017). The year 2014 also marked

the beginning of Russia's openly challenging US global dominance. Today no action taken by the USA against Russia remains unanswered, as per Russia's 'mirroring policy' (a 'tit for tat' approach). Since the autumn of 2015 Russia has operated in Syria: the Kremlin now reports that the war is over, and that Russia has defeated ISIS and simultaneously taught the USA a lesson in how to conduct a victorious war far from one's own borders.

Russia is also in the process of establishing itself in the non-Western world. This means first of all prioritizing political and economic ties with China and increasing Russia's influence in the ASEAN countries, where Vietnam is seen as the point of entry to the region. Within the post-Soviet space, Russia has been investing considerable efforts in building a hard coalition in the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union – where economic coercion features as a substantial and inherent element in this activity. In order to 'paralyse' the West, Russia is also making extensive use of 'virtual coercion', in the form of demonstrating constant Russian presence and closeness – as in military exercises simulating the invasion of Poland or the Baltic states, or by violating the territorial waters and airspace of the Scandinavian countries.

As for the '*philosophical*' interpretation of global trends, this has been shaped to justify foreign policy actions. This worldview was developed relatively quickly, although not from scratch. The days of Russia as a 'sovereign democracy' are gone: instead, Russia's external behaviour is now built on the idea of global opposition between Russia and the West, and Western conspiracies against Russia. The USA and the European Union are singled out as the conspirators, the rationale being the old idea of the West not wanting to see a strong Russia. Protagonists of this view see Russia as strong not so much because of its military power, but first and foremost because it adheres to the right values. Today Russia strongly supports the discourse of cultural distinctiveness, presenting itself as a global defender of conservative values.

Russia presents itself as a defender of global order, as the antithesis to the global dis-order that, according to the Russian authorities, has now reached its apogee. Russia sees itself as striving to build a new world order that can correspond to modern realities. The old neo-liberal order is declared to be not an order at all – in the words of the well-known Russian foreign policy analyst Sergei Karaganov, it has become 'the law of the jungle', where the norms of international law are constantly and maliciously violated (Karaganov 2017). Constructing a new order will require the world to be divided amongst a narrow and unchanging circle of major powers. As a member of this privileged club of 'majors', Russia wants recognition as an indispensable player in the rule-building process of the new, 'balanced' world order. Great-power status entails special rights (different from those of other states) to pursue foreign policy, free from outside constraints (norms and values), but in accordance with Russia's

understanding of its international commitments.

What, then, is new about today's situation? Until recently the West was seen by official Russia as biased and unfair, but strong actor. Now this is no longer the case. The West is still perceived as unfair, but also as weak and degenerating – the EU in particular (Busygina 2018).

Russia's external successes and its great-power status are key elements of the current consensus between the national elites and the population. In the domestic sphere, everything from falling standards of living and rising consumer prices, to corruption or state attacks on small businesses could potentially lead to popular discontent and dissatisfaction. However, with the 'great power' perspective, everything changes: support for insurgents in Eastern Ukraine, Russia's victories in Syria and, most importantly, the annexation of Crimea have all made Russia a 'great state' in the eyes of much of the citizenry. '*Krym nash!*' ('Crimea is ours!') was not just an idea – it became reality, a genuine confirmation of Russia's 'greatness'.

The *massive propaganda* declaring Russia's external successes does not allow the population to forget this for one minute. Countless talk-shows on federal TV channels are devoted to foreign-policy issues and Russia-friendly interpretations of what is happening in the world. In fact, these talk-shows have become an endless TV series with the same set of recognizable 'guests' playing the same roles over and over again. These shows draw an audience that no domestic issue-related discussion can match. The same idea is implicitly repeated in all programmes: world politics is a fairly simple matter, it is not difficult to understand how things work. However, as foreign policy is in fact necessarily complex, in these talk-shows it is replaced by a form of primitive geopolitics easily digestible for Russian audiences.

Turning external into domestic: why does it work?

The success of turning the external dimension into an instrument for maintaining domestic consensus and mobilization is determined by both endogenous and exogenous conditions. As noted, the main endogenous condition is that *all* the elements of the system must function. In the current situation, *any* external action of Russia can be interpreted as a success, and any external signal can be read as confirmation of the Russian vision of the world. At the same time, apparent miscalculations do not lead to policy change, since they are not recognized as such. Take, for instance, Russia's approach to the European Union. In Russia, the discourse is increasingly shaped by notions of a 'powerless, outdated Europe'. However, this betting on the decay of the EU clearly ignores what is really happening. While Russia tries to amass evidence of imminent collapse and general chaos engulfing the EU, the Union is coming together, and cooperation is developing in precisely the areas most difficult to integrate: defence and security policy (Busygina 2017).

Oddly enough, the contradictions embedded in the Russian leadership's view of the modern system of international relations and Russia's mission in the world do not give rise to doubts among the population about the reliability of this approach. And there are many such contradictions. Here I will only mention some related to values:

In Russia a certain system of values is seen as the main pillar of the state, whereas other powers are denied the possibility of having genuine values. Apparently, only traditional values deserve to exist, and European states are merely seeking to mask their own selfish interests with their rhetoric about 'liberal values'. Russian values include support for the traditional family system, patriotism, centralization, and priority of fairness over formal rules. In international relations, this value system includes support of state sovereignty and a political pluralism that objectively opposes Western universalism. One of Russia's ideological messages to the world is that consumption is not an end in itself: that the main thing is service (*sluzhenie*) to higher goals.

However, the Russian establishment does not seem concerned that its declared values do not correspond with Russian realities. As to 'family values', for instance, Russia occupies second place in Europe after Ukraine in the percentage of marriages ending in divorce, and is the absolute leader regarding abortions. The desire for personal enrichment among Russia's state servants is well-documented, as is the gap between declarations and behaviour: for instance, after the five-day war with Georgia in 2008, Russia continued to proclaim respect for international law, and specifically for the inviolability of borders.

There is also an exogenous condition that objectively supports the existing system: the behaviour of the West – or rather, the significant constraints on its behaviour towards Russia. First, the sanctions regime introduced after Crimea has led neither to political changes, nor to the emergence of significant incentives for economic modernization. On the contrary, the sanctions have served to strengthen the anti-Western consensus in Russia. Second, the possibilities of information impact of the West on Russian society are becoming increasingly limited, and cannot be compared with the capabilities of Russian propaganda. Finally, there are groups that lose out in the neo-liberal world order that stimulates discussions in the West about the crisis of the neo-liberal model, in turn giving support to Russian ideologists in their quest for developing their kind of a new world order. If the order needs to be changed, why not along the lines promoted by Russia?

Why domestic reforms are infinitely postponed

In recent years, various strategies for domestic reform have been elaborated in response to direct instructions from the Russian president. In 2016, Putin launched discussions on Russia's economic future, reviving the Presidential Economic Council. Since then, the Centre for Strategic

Research (*Tsentr Strategicheskikh Razrabotok*), headed by former Minister of Finance Aleksei Kudrin, has prepared a strategy for domestic reforms; business associations have formulated reform proposals; and the Stolypin Club of Boris Titov, Presidential Commissioner for Entrepreneurs' Rights, has elaborated its 'Strategy for Growth'. Moreover, the Ministry of Economic Development has developed a programme for accelerating national economic growth for the period until 2025.

The Russian authorities are aware of the need for deep structural economic reforms. Nor is it any secret why previous strategies have not been implemented. According to experts from the Centre for Strategic Research, three main factors have hampered economic reforms in Russia: ideological differences within the expert community, administrative barriers (the low quality of the state apparatus), and the derailing of the reforms by lobbyists who are not guided by ideology, but 'act purely pragmatically'. As one measure to help in getting reforms implemented, these experts proposed the creation of a 'new supra-ministerial reform centre' (*Znak.com* 2017a). Kudrin is convinced that there is no time to lose: If Russia does not invest in infrastructure, education and healthcare, it will not be able to build a modern economy. And if Russia loses another six years, it will be very difficult to catch up. Thus, if Russia further postpones economic modernization, it risks losing its role as a technological power (*ibid.*). However, even though reform strategies have been ready for quite some time, and endless meetings have been held in the ministries and presidential administration, the adoption of a deadline for the implementation of even one single strategy has yet to be established.

The experts from the Centre for Strategic Research have failed to mention the real problem: the lack of demand for reforms on the part of the elite groups that benefit from the current status quo. According to the well-known analyst and publicist Kirill Rogov (2017), many people believe that a well-written reform strategy and the political will of the president will be enough to initiate economic growth: if someone like Kudrin puts together a good reform strategy and Putin implements it, Russia will automatically get qualitative and self-sustaining growth. This is not going to happen. Rogov argues that the possibility for reforms can open up when there is *already* some economic growth, and, moreover, there is a coalition that supports it (*ibid.*). Today, there are too few agents of change in Russia. The economic agents that are included in the rent-distribution networks benefit from the current status quo – and such distribution networks create a powerful coalition against reforms. As Rogov argues, the private–state oligarchy is the main beneficiary, while the ruling elite manages and protects this economic model (*Znak.com* 2017b). Thus, no attempts will be made at implementing the structural reforms being discussed in today's Russia.

The ruling elite groups cannot publicly acknowledge the main reason that obstructs the implementation of

domestic reforms, since the reason is actually themselves. What remains is to look for other explanations of why reforms are being postponed, and these are found in foreign policy. Russia may not have conducted domestic reforms – but it has achieved the status of a great power in a hostile environment. Proud of national foreign-policy successes, the Russian people are ready to rally around their president. If the Kremlin were to start meaningful reforms, that would imply putting this unity under threat: if such reforms were to be implemented, Putin's personal popularity would inevitably decline. And Putin's system cannot afford that.

Conclusion

In today's Russia, external discourse has absorbed the domestic one, but the driver (and explanation) for this situation is domestic: the inability of the Russian leadership to initiate internal structural reforms. A vicious circle has developed: the impossibility of reforms has led to the emergence of a system where the external dimension is used to support consensus within the country and to mobilize the population. However, the task of achieving these goals further reduces the chances for the start of reforms in the country. The Russian leadership is continuously forced to 'add fuel to the fire': any foreign policy action should yield immediate results and be 'sold' to the public. Everything is short-term, everything turns into tactics – to the detriment of strategic goals and approaches. This situation seems set to continue for the foreseeable future, as the Russian elites have no other choice but to keep mobilizing the external dimension to rally the domestic audience. In developing their approach to Russia, European states should realize that the Russian leadership does not aim at starting an open conflict: Moscow's threats are more a by-product of achieving the priority goals of domestic mobilization and preservation

of popular loyalty to the regime.

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