

No Enemy at the Gate

AN UNUSUAL ELECTION CYCLE IN RUSSIA

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A few weeks after the September 2004 hostage crisis in Beslan, North Ossetia, the leading propaganda man of the Putin regime, Vladislav Surkov, declared: “We must all realize – the enemy is at the gate.” The claim that Russia is surrounded by all sorts of enemies, from radical Islamists in the Caucasus to the U.S. military in Europe and Central Asia, legitimized a range of measures aimed at consolidating the “vertical of power.” This trend culminated in 2007, in the run-up to parliamentary and presidential elections, held against the background of an open confrontation with the West and a crackdown on the liberal opposition within the country.

Promoting the image of Russia as a besieged fortress in order to consolidate public opinion around the “party of power” and ensure a smooth transition of the presidency is by no means unprecedented in recent Russian history. Similar tactics were used in all election campaigns since Vladimir Putin became national leader in 1999. It is therefore surprising that in the mid-2011, as a new election time approaches, there is no enemy at the gate – no propaganda campaign that would urge the Russian people to consolidate around their leaders in the face of overwhelming external or internal threats.

In this memo, I first highlight the key differences between the current pre-election landscape and the pattern that emerged over the last twelve years. Secondly, I discuss the possible implications of these unusually calm pre-election developments.

The Curious Case of Libya

Perhaps the most conspicuous feature of the current Russian foreign policy debate is the sluggish reaction to Western intervention in Libya. The decision to abstain in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) was in itself unique, but there was a moment when one might think that Moscow had changed its mind and was going to lash out at its “Western partners” for violating the sovereignty of yet another state. Prime Minister

Putin's criticism of the UNSC Resolution 1973 as "deficient and flawed," and of the intervention as a "medieval crusade," pointed in that direction. However, what this finally amounted to was a rather vivid exchange (by Russian standards) between the prime minister and President Dmitry Medvedev, with the latter calling Putin's rhetoric "inexcusable" and "unacceptable." This was followed by a series of dull, repetitive statements by Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov criticizing the Western powers for going beyond the measures needed to enforce a no-fly zone authorized by the resolution. Eventually even Medvedev himself joined the critical chorus, while Russia declared its unequivocal opposition to any similar involvement in Syria. These disagreements have not amounted to a real conflict, however, and have not affected cooperation in other areas. Moreover, the evolution of Moscow's position on the Syrian case enabled the UNSC in early August to issue a presidential statement condemning the violations of human rights by Syrian authorities.

This stands in sharp contrast to both 1999 and 2003, when interventions in Kosovo and Iraq, respectively, had very serious effects on both Russia's foreign policy and domestic politics. The reaction to NATO's operation against Yugoslavia was particularly harsh and virtually unanimous: the intervention was denounced as cynical, using human rights rhetoric for the sake of geopolitical expansion. Arguably, it was the shock and disappointment over Kosovo that consolidated Russian public demand for a strong leader, which was finally met with the appointment of Putin as prime minister and future presidential candidate. The series of terrorist acts and the start of the second Chechen campaign later in the same year were important to Putin's success, but it was the outcry over Kosovo that made most Russians deaf to Western criticism of human rights abuses in the second Chechen war.

Similarly, in 2003, Russia did not spare harsh words in condemning the U.S. intervention in Iraq as a violation of international law. The campaign reversed the rapprochement that Moscow and Washington achieved in the wake of the September 11 attacks; it enjoyed sustained media attention throughout the year that revealed no sympathy to the American cause. Against this background, it was once again very easy to present Western criticism of the Yukos affair and the crackdown on independent media as cynical and disrespectful of Russia's sovereignty. These abuses, in turn, clearly influenced the results of the 2003-04 elections.

The fact that the Libyan case has not fueled any serious propaganda campaign is even more striking in view of the fact that Russian public opinion is strongly critical of Western action. According to a recent poll by the Levada Center, 62 percent of Russians believe that the intervention is "an aggression against a sovereign nation," 53 percent support Putin's condemnation of the UNSC resolution (compared to only 13 percent supporting Medvedev's stance), and 46 percent describe their reaction as "indignation." The fact that the "party of power" has not used the opportunity to fully capitalize on this public anger is symptomatic.

Different Trajectories for Missile Defense Debates

In 2007, there was no major international crisis comparable to Kosovo, Iraq, or Libya.

However, tensions in relations between Russia and the West were definitely higher than in 2003 (and comparable to 1999–2000). The year started with the famous speech by then-President Putin at the Munich Security Conference, where he strongly condemned the United States for its alleged attempts to create a “unipolar world” of “one master, one sovereign” that undermines the key principles of international law. A major conflict area, also referred to in the Munich speech, was arms control: Russia was particularly unhappy with the U.S. plan to deploy elements of its anti-ballistic missile defense system (ABM) in Eastern Europe. In response, it introduced a “moratorium” on its participation in the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty and threatened to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, as well as to deploy Iskander tactical missiles in Kaliningrad.

In military-security terms, Russia’s strategic situation is hardly any different today compared to 2007. The New START treaty, signed last year, has made a huge contribution in terms of mutual trust, but it did not dramatically affect the realities of mutually assured destruction. The strategic significance of the ABM systems currently planned by the Obama administration is largely the same as those planned under George W. Bush: they present no immediate threat to Russia, but a non-expert audience can be scared by their future potential if and when their capabilities grow.

Against this backdrop, Moscow and Washington have failed to agree on a joint missile defense system – a proposal that was evidently very dear to Medvedev and was considered the next major step in building up the partnership between Russia and NATO. The White House makes no secret of its determination to go ahead unilaterally. In a typical Russian pre-election scenario, this would provide a perfect opportunity to re-invoke the enemy image for the sake of internal consolidation. However, official media hardly noticed the failure of the talks, and this certainly was not used for propaganda purposes.

Same Fences, Better Neighbors?

Another pattern in pre-electoral Russian foreign policy is conflict with neighboring states. In 1998, a year before the military campaign in Kosovo, Russia found itself immersed in a war of words with Latvia about its Russian-speaking minority. It all started with the police in Riga dispersing a small demonstration of pensioners, mostly ethnic Russians, who were protesting against the low standard of living. Most observers later agreed that the police used excessive force but also that Russia blew the event way out of proportion. Two weeks later, there arose more cause for indignation: Latvian Waffen-SS veterans, who fought against the Soviet army during World War II, held their annual commemorative march in Riga. These events caused a prolonged crisis in Latvian-Russian relations with far-reaching consequences. It firmly established the theme of discrimination against, or even “oppression” of, the Russian minority in the Baltic states. It also made divergent interpretations of history in Russia and its former satellites a matter of intense public attention, and even obsession, in all countries of the region. Finally, the crises resulted in the first major energy infrastructure project aimed at bypassing transit countries – the Baltic Oil Pipeline System, which diverted Russian

oil from the Latvian port of Ventspils to the Russian terminal in Primorsk. This was the predecessor of such contemporary undertakings as the Nord Stream and South Stream gas pipelines.

In 2007, Russia saw itself encircled by unfriendly neighbors. The most acute was the conflict with Estonia over the so-called Bronze Soldier – a Soviet-era monument to Red Army troops who died fighting the Nazis. The Estonian government's decision to relocate the statue caused riots in Tallinn and a huge bilateral scandal, with Russian public opinion strongly siding with the Kremlin. Also, the "meat war" (a ban on the import of Polish pork) marred relations between Moscow and Warsaw. Meanwhile, the fateful row with Tbilisi was escalating, starting with the Russian ban on Georgian wines and mineral water and deportation of "illegal Georgian migrants" in 2006.

In 2011, one can hardly call Russian-Baltic or Russian-Georgian relations friendly, but a certain normalization is definitely in the cards. Relations with Poland were improving even before the death of President Lech Kaczyński in a plane crash near Smolensk, Russia. Numerous problems remain, but none of them are presented in a manner that was typical in the mid-2000s – as an indication that East Europeans are inherently hostile to Russia.

To be sure, if something similar to the Bronze Soldier crisis happened today, the Russian reaction would be equally antagonistic. At the same time, there is no shortage of pretexts for making a good scandal. For example, one of the factors behind the Russian-Latvian crisis in 1998 were disputes about transit fees and infrastructure. Current disagreements around the ownership of Lithuania's natural gas infrastructure and, more broadly, around the "third liberalization package" pushed forward by the European Union possess at least the same or even greater destructive potential. However, this potential appears to be of no political use to anyone.

No Fifth Column

Finally, one aspect of the current situation belongs in the sphere of domestic politics but also has an important external dimension. Since 1999, election campaigns in Russia have always involved a campaign against the human rights movement and other independent political forces. Activists have been accused of working on Western payrolls and against their country's interests. In 1999, this was a major aspect of the Russian repudiation of the West in the context of both Kosovo and Chechnya. In 2003, similar arguments were used against independent media, and they provided additional justification for restrictive laws on non-commercial organizations, political parties, and elections in 2005-07. In 2003, furthermore, the election campaign was overshadowed by the Yukos affair and Mikhail Khodorkovsky's arrest, while in 2006-07 there was a whole spectrum of cases ranging from spying scandals to high-profile killings, including those of Anna Politkovskaya and Alexander Litvinenko.

There are reasons to be skeptical about the timid liberalization initiated by Medvedev, but at least it has not been reversed in the run-up to elections. Khodorkovsky is still in jail, but the president has recently said that he sees no danger in the former oligarch walking free one day. Various officious boards and committees

might be a caricature of working civil society, but they sometimes dare to speak up, such as on the sensitive issue of the death of lawyer Sergei Magnitsky in a Moscow prison. Overall, the political climate in Russia in 2011 is very different from both the alarmist atmosphere of 1999 and the sultry, apprehensive mood of 2007.

The Reset Has Worked

Each election in Russia's recent history has taken place in a unique historical context. On a case-by-case basis, explaining the absence of individual tendencies is easy. Neither an overreaction to NATO's policies, nor a conflict with neighboring states, nor a crackdown on domestic opposition *has* to take place at this time, or indeed at any other specific moment. However, the image of the enemy at the gate has been a recurring feature of Russian election campaigns since 1999, even if its specific manifestations have varied. The fact that no attempts are made to invoke *any* of the hostile images typical for the contemporary Russian worldview suggests that rather than individual pieces missing, we might be dealing with an altogether new puzzle.

In the months remaining before parliamentary and presidential elections, something can still happen that will bring out the familiar specters. Yet it is also worth noting that at least two perfect opportunities to stir up passions – the Western intervention in Libya and the failure of the missile defense talks with the United States – have *already been ignored* by Russian spin doctors. Arguably, this demonstrates a conspicuous disruption of the pattern.

One explanation for this irregularity could be that the “party of power” feels completely secure in its current position and believes that no adrenaline injections are needed for the country to rally around its leaders. This hypothesis, however, does not seem to hold water in view of other developments, such as the creation of the Popular Front around Putin, or the usual flurry of costly promises to all significant groups of voters, which has already given a headache to the Ministry of Finance. All this suggests that the Kremlin does care about the upcoming elections and wants to leave nothing to chance.

Thus, only one explanation remains: the reset has worked. Russian elites might still worry about the domestic political scene, but they are relatively more relaxed about the international environment. Moreover, they value cooperation with the West as a means to achieve external security and promote social modernization. Whether this new attitude is going to last remains to be seen. And there is no guarantee it can be translated to the public, whose view of the outside world in general, and of the West in particular, is still dominated by images of threats rather than opportunities. It will also not automatically lead to a liberalization of the Russian political system. What it does, at best, is create better conditions for Russia's return to democratic development at some point in the future.