



Volume 4 Number 1&2 Spring & Summer 2005

Bracketing the Problems at Home, Scrutinizing the Near Abroad:

Does the “Compatriots” Nationalist Discourse Portray a Russian Foreign Policy

Entrapped in the Democratization Process?

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Since 1991 the Russian Federation is the main successor of the Soviet Union, and as such, it has a heavy heritage. On one hand, all the imperial and communist grandeur surrounding the Soviet Union and its statute as a superpower on the global arena passed on to the surviving state, Russia, and thus this legacy dictated that it would be a major actor on the world stage. Because of this, Russian Federation since its birth has been under the close scrutiny of the West, which is well aware of the imperialist temptations that might appear in the future. On the other hand, the country faced the imperative to transform the moribund communist centrally planed economy into a competitive market economy, and to reshape the state’s relation with its citizens on democratic bases. By undertaking this course of action, the Russian Federation aims at achieving “normalcy”, by joining the family of democratic countries.

Nevertheless, the path towards this desired destination is an arduous one, and many scholars appreciate the enormity of the undertaking that Russia has embarked on.

Moreover, the euphoria of the first years quickly transformed into bitterness and liberalization apparently worked in favor of the former communist nomenklatura. The governing body was fractured along many lines of division, with competing structures or various factions within the same structure fighting for power¹, and the domestic policy took multifaceted forms because of this internal struggle. This inner battle stagnated the process of democratization, thus delaying the country from joining the Western club of the democracies. In this context, the splintered foreign policy of the Russian Federation (which it will henceforth be called Russia) rendered the country dependent on domestic developments, and as such leaving the impression of a schizophrenic act that embodies several conflicting traits at once (Dawisha, A and Dawisha, K., 1995: 23).

The essay will focus on the design and the manifestations of the Russian foreign policy, as a dependant of the internal developments of the country, especially on the nationalist discourse. When approaching this issue, the main point of inquiry will constitute the discourse about the “compatriots” left outside the boundaries of Russia and the preservation of the Russian heritage as a path to avoid questioning the lengthy process of democratizing Russia itself. In this framework, it will be questioned the extent to which it represented, on one hand, a solution for building consensus among its own citizens and to preserve in power a specific political elite; on the other hand, a toll to keep under Russian influence the newly independent states born from the body of the former Soviet Union. Moreover the period to be analyzed is restricted to the 1991- 1997 timeframe, and only the major events will be highlighted. The aforementioned timeframe has been chosen because it marked the most tumultuous period of the recent history of Russia, and 1997 marked the

eventual success of the political wing with a hard-core realist approach of the foreign policy.

In order to give consistency to such an inquiry it is necessary to define, first, the peculiarity of the Russian foreign policy decision-making apparatus. Second, the concepts of nationhood and nationalism should be described as perceived by Russia, and their influence on the foreign policy making process and to cast some light on the structural organization of it.

Factors influencing the Russian foreign policy design: Competing forces and common trends

After the official disappearance of the Soviet Union and the birth of a new state on January 1, 1992, the governmental structures of Russia faced a totally new world than that of the former superpower bipolarity, and new challenges emerged from this context. The Soviet foreign policy of the last years of the 1980s, influenced by the key figure of Mikhail Gorbachev², dramatically changed in order to adjust to the new international environment. Donaldson and Noguee (1998:108-109) argue that the president of Russia, Boris Yeltsin, inhabited a totally new situation, not only on the international arena, but at home too. The boundaries of the new state were totally different not only from those of the Soviet Union, but also from any other past independent Russian state. The Russian Federation of Yeltsin was based on the arbitrary boundaries drawn during the Soviet rule and it was pushed far away from Europe, with only the Kaliningrad oblast, which was separated by a newly independent Lithuania from the mainland, neighboring a former communist satellite. The situation was similar in Asia, where Russia did not have direct access because of the new Central Asian countries. In this context, the surviving superpower, the U.S., was no longer

perceived as a foe, the attention shifting to the unstable and extremely new space of the former Soviet Union now crowded by the other fourteen independent states.

The Yeltsin administration had to adapt both its domestic and foreign policy in order to accommodate to the new situation, and develop a foreign, rather than a domestic, approach towards relations with these new sovereign entities:

It is this last change in the external environment that is largely responsible for producing the tightest mixture of foreign policy and domestic politics that Russia has seen since the earliest months of Soviet power. (Donaldson and Noguee, 1998: 109)

In reaction to the new geopolitical confines that incorporated among other aspects a wounded national pride, the practical loss of Russia's national mission, the troublesome economic decline, and the unclearly defined national identity, Russian foreign policy attempted to portray a new state. It was not evolving "from the directions and the priorities of statehood. On the contrary, the practice of our foreign policy... will help Russia become Russia"³. As such, post August 1991, the world witnessed an euphoric Russian foreign policy, when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Andrei Kozyrev, was committed to making decisive steps for the inclusion of the country in the club of democratic countries. Moreover, he was determined to give Russia a new face, away from the messianic, the imperialist temptations and the heavy reliance on military instruments (Donaldson and Noguee, 1998: 112).

But the foreign policy was not exclusively determined by the minister's high ideals, and his "foreign policy concept" was under severe criticism from the side of re-conditioned nomenklatura members. These members comprised the military and economic nomenklatura who found a common ground not only in their material interests, but also a

strong affinity of their geopolitical approaches. From this perspective the desired outcome was building up an entity, a common security and economic space, that would incorporate virtually all the former Soviet republics (Dawisha and Dawisha, 1995:37). Among them the army, which is generally perceived as an uniting, centripetal force of the state, was highly interested in keeping the military infrastructure of the Soviet Union under control, and to transform CIS (the Commonwealth of Independent States) into a viable and strong federal state:

[T]he army pursued a line of its own with respect to newly independent states, parallel, yet far from always coincident, with the position of the president, and more particularly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The military's line aimed at 'pressurizing' the governments of the respective states with a view to bringing them into the system of a collective security system under Russia's aegis, [preserving the existing military Soviet bases], and keeping up military-political control along the perimeter of all or most of the territory of the former Soviet Union. (Dawisha and Dawisha, 1995:30).

In fact, at that point, the foreign policy design was formally divided among the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (led by Kozyrev and, thus, a bastion of liberal thinking, of modern interpretation of Russian statehood) and the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations (which was of less importance in determining the general line of Russian foreign policy). Nevertheless, because the latter was under the leadership of a hard-core "statist", it rallied to the views of the military. Besides the two ministries, which were entitled to implement the Russian perspective of the international relations and act accordingly on the international arena, the Ministry of Defense deeply intervened in the foreign policy make-

up due to its extraordinary powers, and mobilized by the wish to securing that the military interests at stake would not be jeopardized.

When the two competing positions are compared, it can be noted that the “Westernizing” or “Atlanticist” discourse was somewhat more idealist and euphoric concerning the relationship between Russia and the Western countries. On the other side, the statist gathered around the flag of “Eurasianism”, also called “pragmatic nationalism”, praising the cultural, social-political distinctiveness of Russia, as inherent of its position between the two continents. Among the fervent supporters of such stance, the presidential advisor Sergei Stankevich and Yevgenii Primakov were the most visible figures that criticized the idealist foreign policy engineered by the liberals. As a reaction to these pressures, Kozyrev adopted first a defensive position arguing that its ministry is just the president’s extension in the field of foreign affairs⁴, but disregarding the diffuse network of interests and the constant bargaining between the president and the statist. In this context, Kozyrev was actually risking its career, having to chose between faithfully following the meandrous external policy of the presidency or to step up and start a confrontation. Eventually, in order to survive politically, Kozyrev started gravitating towards the statist side, unconvincingly pressing for the banner of patriotism and nationalism to be captured from the “war party” (Dawisha and Dawisha, 1995: 37).

The first elections held in Russia changed the balance of power, in favor of the great power nationalist parties, and thus put an ever-growing pressure on the pro-western foreign policy. In the second half of the 1993, but especially starting 1994 the statist group gained control over the government, imposing the shift from the “liberal romanticism” of the first years of Russian foreign policy to a pragmatic, geostrategic-oriented approach of the

international issues. Together with this new foreign policy discourse, the nationalist discourse gained significant consistence and persistence among the Russian elites, marking the increasing interest in the “Near Abroad” issue. It can be argued that, in order to silence the internal battles that torn the various bodies responsible for designing the Russian foreign policy, the main discourses pointed at the uncertain status of the Russians living outside the new borders of Russian Federation.

Nationhood, national identity and nationalism from the Russian perspective

In the next part of the essay some working definitions of nationhood, national identity and nationalism will be provided, as defining parts of the foreign policy towards the fore mentioned area.

In Valdez’ (1995: 86) opinion, the Russian elites perceived the Russian national identity in two different, but not necessarily conflicting ways. One of them was a “primordialist” or “etatist” perspective, which argues that Russia, despite its various forms of political organization, has some permanent interests within the space of the former Soviet Union, thus assuming a “historical continuity between the nation and the state”. This perception can be understood as representing the reminiscence of the Soviet apparatus that simply could not change, nor be stimulated by means of complex learning to have a different perspective of the foreign policy issues. At this stage, Russia embodied a wishful dream of regaining the Soviet might and grandeur.

The second approach, favored by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of that time, Andrei Kozyrev, and the group among the Russian elite, which was more Western-oriented in its conceptions, supported the idea that the national feelings were primordially shaped by the state and its interests:

First of all, we have to be aware of what kind of state we have, get our own internal bearings, and then get our bearings in relation to the surrounding world. The concept of the Russian state is now taking shape and is followed, accordingly, by the concept of foreign policy⁵

The concept of nationhood is, under this reading, constructed in two ways and the nationalism has its foundations in it. Valdez (1995: 87), interpreting George Shopflin's understanding of nationalism, defined it as being the politicization of the community's culture. The concept of nationhood is based on that of national identity, which is viewed from the constructivist perspective as an ever-evolving construct, constantly in a process of reinterpretation. From this perspective, Valdez supports the idea that such transformations, the fluidity of the boundaries of national identity, can be easily observable in the case of new states, and Russia is one of representatives of such group.

It has been argued that the emergence of nationalist feelings, especially among the aforementioned states, is perceived as a path to modernization. But at the same time it is a way to draw an imaginary line of resistance and regrouping in front of the outer influences that are brought in by the very same process. In Russia's perspective, like in other eastern European countries this aspect was doubled by the understanding of nation as an empowering construct that can "restore the glory and greatness to national identities that were previously suppressed" (Valdez, 1995: 88). This line of reasoning would be used in the following in order to articulate the connection between the nationalist discourse and the foreign policy design of modern Russia.

In 1992-1993 Russia was experiencing its first years of statehood and the priority was to preserve its national and political identity and ensure that the new state was a solid

one. In order to do so it was required to reach a level of normalcy of military and political relations with its new neighbors, former components of the Soviet Union, and to develop mutually advantageous economic relations with them. Acquiring this normalization was crucially important for Russia in its relations to the West and the East (Valdez, 1995: 23-24).

To accomplish this goal, the Russian political elite focused first on defining Russia as a state and on encouraging the emergence of a Russian national solidarity, based on the fundamental constitutional act of 1993. But although it was the state with a high ethnic “purity”, being the second after Armenia as a former Soviet Union country in terms of preponderance of the majority group, exceeding eighty percent of its total population (Donaldson and Noguee, 1998:112), the constitution of the country had to take into account the other minority groups present in the Russian Federation. These ethnic groups were enjoying a certain degree of autonomy in the context of the Soviet Constitution; autonomy, which was in fact never practiced due to the high centralization of power in the communist state. Nevertheless, the newly designed constitutional act left aside the Soviet foundations and aimed at building a stronger state and a closer feeling of solidarity among its citizens:

In Russia, it is also apparent that the central government, which began with a more populist than nationalist political action program, has shifted towards state nationalism (though not yet a nation state building project). Although the new Russian constitution is the only one that opens with the phrase ‘We the multinational people of...’ it none the less represents a significant setback for non-Russians in the state. [...] However, in the constitution adopted in December 1993, the federation includes not only the non-Russian republics in the states, but treats the Russian Oblasts as the essential equivalent

of the non-Russian republics, greatly diminishing the bargaining power of the republics at the center. (Kaiser, 1997: 22-23)

The next step, was to bracket the problems at home, namely the increasing discontent of the autonomous republics within Russia over their constitutional limitations and they newly born desire to gain a sovereign status on their own⁶, to disregard the deficient implementation of democracy. The process of democratization decreased in speed and the yielded positive effects were not apparent. In this troublesome context, Russia turned the eyes towards a wider space and emphasized the issue of the Russian minority living separated from the Russian state in the new independent states surrounding it. In such an enterprise it can be depicted the attempt of the Russian officials to mask the more serious developments taking place within the country. From this perspective the Russian Foreign Policy became the main tool of disguising the internal imperfections and over-emphasizing the issue of the “Near Abroad”.

The concept of “Near Abroad” and its implications to Russian national construction and foreign policy

“Near Abroad” (“bliznee zarubezhe” in Russian), as a concept, refers to the fourteen non-Russian former Soviet republics that gained independence in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse. As they gained independence as sovereign states the relations between them and Russia shifted from a merely domestic stage⁷, within the Soviet Union framework, to the world of foreign affairs and thus constraining Russia to redesign its foreign policy approach in order to deal with the new realities. Moreover, after the development of domestic facts at the end of 1993, the nationalist discourse focusing on the “compatriots” gained substance in the foreign policy of Russia.

The cruel reality was that a significant number estimated to be more than twenty-five million, of Russian nationals and Russian speakers⁸, were living outside the borders of the Russian Federation. Among the very first documents that laid out the Russian foreign policy, adopted in April 1993, the “Basic provisions of the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation” (Valdez, 1995:95), makes clear references to this issue. The document states that, among other key issues the foreign ministry and the Russian state have the responsibility of to protect the interests of Russian citizens abroad. But this is a shared opinion among the Russian elites, gathering together both opposing sides⁹. Moreover, the issue is a multifaceted one, not only because in some republics the Russian speakers and the Russian minority were deprived from their legal rights, as in the Baltic states. Besides that, the still strong Russian affinity, and the fear of inter-ethnic conflicts determined a significant migration directed from the former Soviet republics towards Russian mainland¹⁰.

The principle of protecting the “compatriots” was put into practice all over the former Russian territory, but its most significant forms appeared in those republics that showed a stronger attitude for self-national building. In this group a special attention will be given to the Baltic republics, because the problems of sovereignty, the process of “Europeanization”, and the relation between the newly independent states and their Russian and Russophile minorities were most acute in the region (Singh, 2001: 115). Once achieving independence the issue of the Russia-oriented minorities in these countries became of extreme importance, due to the nationalist feelings fostered by the independent governments but also by the sensible disparity between the nationals and the “Russians”¹¹. As an effect of it, the citizenship laws in these countries, and their highly restrictive

requirements, virtually forbid the large majority of the Russians from gaining state's citizenship, and thus becoming stateless.

The Russian foreign policy reacted in a vigorous manner, first delaying the departure of the Russian troops from the former Soviet bases in the Baltic countries, or supporting separatist plans, as in Narva region in Estonia. Nevertheless, the tensions never escalated to an open conflict but there was been a constant tension in the relationship between Estonia and Latvia, on one side, and Russian on the other. In addition to this, once Russia joined the Council of Europe, in February 1996, it has constantly used this institution as a means of pressuring on the Baltic states, especially Latvia, for the mistreatment of the Russian speakers within their borders.

Surprisingly, to some extent the Russian attitude towards this disputed minority was ambivalent. If on one hand, it reacted vehemently whenever it considered that their minority rights were violated, on the other hand the Russian state never allocated significant funds in order to fully support them. The basically economic facts may prove that in fact Russia was not as much preoccupied with the fate of Russians abroad, as more interested in promoting a nationalist discourse aimed at drawing attention on the outer problems, and not on the internal evolutions. From this perspective it can be said that indeed the nationalist approach of the Russian foreign policy, especially the one concerning the "compatriots" from the Near Abroad, was a mere tool to disguise the fact that the foreign policy was a victim of the process of Russian democratization.

Concluding remarks

The processes that transformed the Russian understanding of the international arena, was not a paved way, and sometimes the Russian foreign policy has sent contradictory signals. This is due because the foreign policy pictured the often- conflicting interests existing within the governmental departments that were supposed to design it. Moreover, the foreign policy can be said that it was entrapped in the democratization process. Analyzing the evolution and the presence of the nationalist discourse within the Russian foreign policy is a tool to assess entrapment. Going to a more refined approach, the issue of the “compatriots” from the Near Abroad, with its continuous presence throughout the early and mid 1990s reveals that the foreign policy was responsive to such stimuli and, in this aspect, besides some other ones, played a role in shaping it. Highly dependant on the domestic struggles, the Russian foreign policy was still looking for a proper voice to deal with the very complicated post-communist developments. The “compatriots” nationalist discourse was designed to bracket the attention from the problems within, to the possible threats from outside.

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Notes:

¹ The “scramble for political power going in this context and the confrontation of the old and the new forces were still far from their final and logical conclusion” (Dawisha, A. and Dawisha, K., 1995: 17)

² “essentially a variant of liberal institutionalism, Gorbachev’s foreign policy ideas centered on interdependence, mutual security, cooperative solutions to global problems, the primacy of non-class values, and an understanding of capitalism that rejected the notion of its inherent militarism and the inevitability of war” (Donaldson, R. and Noguee, J., 1998: 111)

³ Sergei Stankevich cited in Donaldson, R and Noguee, J (1998) *The Foreign Policy of Russia. Changing Systems, Enduring Interest*. M. E. Sharpe, Armonk, NY.

⁴ “Ministry of Foreign Affairs had no independent foreign policy and that it simply implements the policies of the president. What made this argument open to criticism was that the president himself had a long since

embraced, if unannounced, a policy of concessions to, and compromise agreements with, the military and also with some civilian statist” (Dawisha, and Dawisha, 1995:37)

⁵ Andrei Kozyrev, cited in Jonathan Valdez, “The Near Abroad, the West, and National Identity in Russian Foreign Polic”, in Dawisha, A. and Dawisha, K. (1995) *The Making of Foreign Policy in Russia and in the New States of Eurasia* , vol. 4, M. E. Sharpe, Armonk, NY.

⁶ As it was the case of Chechnya, part of the Russia Federation but with a powerful commitment towards acquiring independence from Moscow, which lead to the bloody confrontations within Russian boundaries in the mid 1990s.

⁷ “For some it was psychologically difficult to think of these countries as independent states. Even many of those who accepted the separation of Russia from its ‘internal empire’ thought it was temporary. [...] Thus to many Russians (and non-Russians alike) the relationships among the former fifteen union republics were more issues of domestic policy than foreign policy” (Donaldson, R. and Noguee, J., 1998: 155)

⁸ “ In Russian, of course, there are two different terms used to denote what we in the West refer to as “Russians: *russkie* (italics in the text), meaning ethnically Russian (derived from ‘Rus’, the historical term of Russia), and *rosiianin*, usually translated as ‘Russian citizens’. This latter term is used today to denote both Russian and non-Russian citizens of the Russian Federation.

Russified non-Russians living abroad, however, pose something of a problem, given they are neither ethnically Russian nor citizens of the Russian federation. Nonetheless, they often look to Russia for political protection.” (Valdez, 1995: 104).

⁹ “ A strong sentiment exists that the former Union republics are regions which Russia has a special interest and responsibility, which is implied in the term ‘near abroad’ and in arguments made by Yeltsin, Kozyrev and Grachev about the need to defend Russian interests not within the borders of Russia but on the external borders of former USSR” (Kaiser, 1997:24)

¹⁰ “ [...]At the beginning of the last year (n.f. 1994), about a third of the Russians in the Baltic region and Transcaucasia replied in a survey that they would like emigrate in the near future, most of them to Russia. In the Central Asian republics the figure stood at 70-80 percent. [...]

At the present there are no reliable statistics on Russians or Russian refugees, but the main migration tendencies are clear and distinct. In 1990-1991, an average of 470,000 people arrived in Russia each year-70,000 more than in 1989.” (Abdulatipov, 1995: 41)

¹¹ The percentage of the Russians and Russophones had increased significantly mostly in Estonia and Latvia, if compared to the inter-war period. For instance in Estonia the ration increased from 8.2%(1934) to 30.3%(1898), and in Latvia the percentage raised from 10.6% (1936) to almost 34%(1989). Lithuania has the smallest Russian minority of the three Baltic states, less than 10% (Singh, 2001: 116) (Abdulatipov,1995:39)

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