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## CERTAIN ASPECTS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION'S FOREIGN POLICY

GIORGI BILANISHVILI

# 102

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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## **EXPERT OPINION**

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## Introduction

Ever since gaining its independence, Georgia has constantly had tense relations with the Russian Federation. Formally, these tensions had different reasons in different periods of time; however, if we look at the problem from a wider angle, there is in fact a single reason for this; namely, Russia's aspiration to restore its lost influence over the post-Soviet area for which it takes rather harsh actions, mainly through forceful methods.

It is beyond debate that Russia is exactly the country that directly and strongly influences Georgia's security. Consequently, it is very important for us to correctly assess the foreign policy interests, objectives and plans of this country in order to realize what kinds of threats Georgia might be facing and try to neutralize them. This is especially important today when we more often hear talks about Russia's growing influence on the international arena following the annexation of Crimea and military involvement in the Syrian conflict.

Russia's ambitions have indeed grown quite a bit. This is clearly indicated by the actions taken by Russia in Ukraine and Syria as well as the political points publicly stressed by its leading officials. The latest example of making clear political points was the annual address<sup>1</sup> of the President of the Russian Federation, **Vladimir Putin**, to the Federal Assembly where during the concluding part of his speech he focused on the unprecedented development of Russia's military capabilities. More specifically, **Vladimir Putin** talked at length about the seven different weapons of strategic purpose which, according to his explanation, have no analogy in the world.

Determining whether or not Russia really possesses such unprecedented military technologies is very difficult to do; however, it is relatively easier to guess what the main political message of the Russian President was when talking about the new and unprecedented military capabilities. Politically, given the tense relations between the West and Russia, **Vladimir Putin** once again stated that the Russian Federation is not planning to retreat. It will fully protect its interests in the future as well and attempt to implement its objectives and plans in order to restore the influence it lost on the international arena.

## Geopolitical Vision of Contemporary Russia

According to the assessment of the government of the Russian Federation, the influence of the West, especially that of the United States, has been weakening steadily for the past years. This is determined, on the one hand, by the incorrect steps taken by the United States on the international arena and by the strengthening of other great powers, on the other.

Hence, the unipolar world formed after the Cold War, where the United States of America was a hegemon, is already over. The transfer to a multi-polar system has started. This process is irreversible and despite the efforts of either the US or any other international actor, it will get to its logical ending.

The transfer to a multi-polar system is accompanied by growing instability<sup>2</sup> both on the international as well as the regional levels caused by deepening confrontations between various countries taking place largely due to their struggle for influence and natural resources.

According to the government of Russia, the Russian Federation must take a leading role in the process of transferring to the multi-polar system. More specifically, Moscow must increase its involvement in the resolution of international problems and be active in order to form new alliances. As well, the Russian Federation should attempt to create such rules of play in international politics that will be in accordance with its interests. To this end, they will also use military force which has already happened first in the case of Georgia and later in the case of Ukraine.

At the same time, Moscow sees that the United States is no longer active in resolving problematic issues in various regions of the world.<sup>3</sup> No other great power seems to be especially active either. Hence, there is a certain space which enables Russia to become more active and, through this, ultimately strengthen its positions on the international arena.

Having this background situation, Moscow made a decision to get involved in the Syrian conflict through the use of military force in September 2015. It must be pointed out that since then the Russian Federation has managed to radically change the situation in Syria. It managed to save its ally, the **Assad** regime, which was on the brink of collapse prior to this. It dealt a heavy blow to the Syrian opposition. It restored the control of the **Assad** regime over many Syrian settlements. Further, it formed a new peace talk

format, the so-called Astana Format, where it plays a leading role together with Iran and Turkey while all other countries, including the United States, have secondary roles.

All in all, after the military involvement in Syria, Russia became a leading player in one of the most difficult conflicts in the world which serves the purpose of the growth of its influence on the international arena.

In addition, it has always been the interest of the government of Russia to foster discord in the West. Clearly, the possibilities to do so for Russia rise when it sees that there are disagreements in the West regarding certain issues.

An especially successful policy conducted by Russia in this regard has been implemented since 2003 when Paris and Berlin did not support Washington's decision regarding the implementation of a military operation in Iraq. After this, Moscow's relations with France and Germany became especially deep.

This gave Moscow a certain ability to foster the deepening of disagreements between Washington and capitals of major European states, dealing a blow to the relations of the allies in the process.

A clear example of this was the refusal of Berlin and Paris to grant Membership Action Plans (MAP) to Georgia and Ukraine during the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit despite strong support for this idea from the United States. At that time, this was definitely an important foreign policy victory for Moscow. On the one hand, it was revealed that the allies could not agree on the issue of the further expansion of NATO which, in principle, must be considered not as an ordinary but, rather, one of the main issues of NATO's agenda. On the other hand, it was also revealed that the West still takes Moscow's position into account when it comes to the countries which it considers in the sphere of its exclusive influence.

Ultimately, managing to block the issue of granting the Membership Action Plans to Georgia and Ukraine at the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit made Russia much more daring. This daringness manifested itself first in the military aggression against Georgia and the recognition of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region as "independent states" and later, in 2014, it was also manifested in the annexation of Crimea and the launch of a military campaign in Eastern Ukraine.

Parallel to the attempts of sowing discord among the Western states, the Russian government believes that in the case of such a chance, it must deal a blow to the prestige of the United States on the international arena and deepen cooperation with the countries that, much like Russia, are interested in the formation of a multi-polar world order and establishing their influence there.

One of the topics which the Russian Federation successfully uses against the United States to this day is the abovementioned military operation in Iraq which, ultimately, had no positive effects in terms of establishing stability in the Middle East or any other regard.

This was complemented with the 2007-2008 world financial crisis which was based upon the events that unfolded in the United States of America and negatively influenced numerous countries around the world. Due to this, the reform of the international financial system became an important topic in many countries, both on the governmental level as well as in academia.<sup>4</sup>

Hence, the Russian Federation was also given a chance to more loudly express its interests regarding the changes to the architecture of the currently existing financial system as Moscow believes that this is a major contributing factor to the USA's leading role in the world.

During his February 2009 speech<sup>5</sup> at the Davos Economic Forum, **Vladimir Putin** openly criticized the US for causing the world economic crisis. In addition, he assessed the reliance on the USD as the only reserve currency to be quite dangerous and expressed his positions regarding the advisability of creating regional currencies.

It should be pointed out that at the same forum and regarding the same topics, then Prime Minister of China, Wen Jiabao, expressed a milder position than that of **Putin's**, although one still critical.<sup>6</sup> This, of course, must be considered as an important condition as the Russian Federation is constantly looking for the convergence of its positions to potential partners in balancing the United States.

This task for the Russian Federation is made further easier by the fact that some big countries have their own growing interest in balancing the United States.

In this regard, the growing cooperation between Russia and China is especially noteworthy. In the recent years, various research and documents have shown that an especially careful focus is made on this issue in the United States. For example, the 2017 study<sup>7</sup> by the US Congressional Research Service points out that Russian and China have a lot of reasons for cooperation. Both countries have a desire to stand up to the United States' influence in the region and around the world.

It is also very important that both the 2017 as well as 2018 US Intelligence Community Global Threat Assessment Reports refer to Russia and China together in several sections within the context of the threats facing the United States.<sup>8</sup>

In this regard the latest US National Security Strategy<sup>9</sup> is especially noteworthy in that it has a lot of focus on Russia and China as the main adversaries of the United States. The same document clearly states that Russia and China object to the power, influence and interests of the United States. Additionally, they undermine the security and well-being of the US.

Talking about the Russian Federation having a strategic partnership with China or any other large country with the objective of curbing US influence is an exaggeration. However, the interest of the Russian government to use all possible events in order to form thematic partnerships, gathering more efforts to balance US influence, is clear.

According to the vision of the Russian government, there is so far no clear outline of the new multi-polar world order. It is still unknown which countries will be the leading powers and how they will distribute the spheres of influence between one another. However, Moscow realizes one thing very well; namely, in order for it to become one of the strong poles in a multi-polar world it needs to at least fully re-establish its influence over the post-Soviet states. This means that the post-Soviet area must be recognized as an exclusive zone of Russian influence by other leading powers. The post-Soviet states will nominally keep their independence; however, in reality they will be under strict Russian subordination. At the same time, they will be integrated into the regional geopolitical organizations formed with the Russian initiative such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

It must be pointed out that at this stage the Baltic states are not included in the list of post-Soviet states as they are members of both NATO as well



as the European Union and, therefore, have strong security guarantees. However, this does not mean that Russia has finally gotten used to these countries exiting its sphere of influence.

### **Russia's Place in a Multi-Polar World**

As already pointed out above, according to the vision of the Russian government, there are no clear contours of the new world order as of yet. Despite this, the Russian Federation has long been quite actively trying to establish a perception of its actions at the international level that will be acceptable for the international community.

The ideas voiced in the conceptual documents of the Russian Federation, as well as in the public speeches of the country's leaders and publications, give a more-or-less accurate perception of the Russian government's vision.

One of the ideas which the Russian government has been steadily trying to popularize over the years is regarding the creation of an entirely new geopolitical space. This idea is expressed in the 2008 Foreign Policy Strategy<sup>10</sup> of the Russian Federation where the talk is about the regional collective security and cooperation system which is supposed to cover the territory from Vancouver to Vladivostok.

It must be pointed out that this idea later changed somewhat: in the narratives of the representatives of the Russian Federation, Vancouver was replaced with Lisbon (from Lisbon to Vladivostok)<sup>11</sup> while in the conceptual documents a phrase "from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean"<sup>12</sup> has started to appear. Consequently, the focus shifted from the Euro-Atlantic region to Europe. At the same time, security disappeared completely with only economic and humanitarian topics remaining; however, this has not changed the core of the idea.

It should also be pointed out that after a serious deterioration of relations with the West due to the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and the military intervention in Eastern Ukraine, the Russian government has changed a lot of things in its statements and conceptual documents. However, the abovementioned idea has still been maintained and expressed in the country's latest Foreign Policy Strategy which was published at the end of 2016.<sup>13</sup>

In general, it is more characteristic to the Russian government to attempt reviving old ideas rather than generating new ones. The same happened in this case as well: as it appears, the creation of a new geopolitical space has long been discussed in the political elite of the Russian Federation. For example, in one of his most famous books, *Diplomacy*, **Henry Kissinger** writes that the idea of the creation of a new geopolitical space stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok was first voiced in 1989 by the then Secretary General of the Communist Party of the USSR, **Mikhail Gorbachev**, during his speech to the Council of Europe. According to **Kissinger's** assessment, the core of this idea served the weakening of Euro-Atlantic unity.<sup>14</sup>

It is quite clear that the leaders of contemporary Russia have the same objective. This is especially so given the background when they consider the international system formed after the Cold War to be over, trying to facilitate the creation of a new, multi-polar system moved by the interest to bring discord between the leading countries of the West. Furthermore, both the Soviet as well as the contemporary Russian leaders knew and know very well that the idea of the creation of a pan-European space was quite popular in Paris and Berlin at various stages of history.

Parallel to this, the Russian Federation is also actively lobbying the idea of indivisible security.<sup>15</sup> To explain it simply, this means the following: the security of one country must not be ensured at the expense of the security of another country or group of countries. This idea is directly linked to the recognition of the spheres of influence of the Russian Federation. In reality, this means that NATO cannot be enlarged as this contradicts Russia's security interests. The foreign policy and security interests of the neighboring countries are, of course, disregarded as allowing for the freedom of choice is in direct contradiction with the vital interest of the Russian Federation to fully restore its influence over the post-Soviet area.

What the place of the Russian Federation should be in the multi-polar world order is even more clearly expressed in the publications of the Russian leaders which, of course, absolutely and consciously contain clear political messages. It is enough to refer to just a few examples to illustrate this:

The President of the Russian Federation, **Vladimir Putin**, talks about this issue in his article which was published on October 3, 2011 and dedicated to the Eurasian Economic Union.<sup>16</sup> In the article, he openly states that in the name of the Eurasian Economic Union, Russia offers the world a

supranational union which has the opportunity of becoming one of the poles of the world and serving a connecting function between Europe and a rapidly developing Asia.

It must be pointed out that the idea of the Russian Federation as a link between the West and the East, having its own unique culture and great traditions, is very popular in the Russian public. This idea, in various forms, is often relied upon by politicians as well as well-known public figures. One of the clear examples of this is the article by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, **Sergey Lavrov**, which was published in March 2016.<sup>17</sup>

In this article, **Lavrov** quotes the Perpetual Secretary of the French Academy, **Hélène Carrère d'Encausse**, who said that the Russian Empire, in all its parameters – size, ability to govern its territories, life expectancy – is the greatest empire of all time. In addition, according to the article, **d'Encausse**, much like the famous Russian philosopher, **Nikolai Berdyaev**, claims that Russian history has been endowed with the greatest mission – to be the link between the East and the West.<sup>18</sup>

The idea that Russia represents a self-sufficient civilization and plays a very important connecting role between Europe and Asia is very popular in the so-called New Eurasianist circles of the Russian Federation of which one notable representative is **Aleksandr Dugin**. It is well known that there is a strong convergence between the views of the New Eurasianists, especially **Dugin**, and the policies of the Russian government. However, this is not the only topic where their views converge.

For **Dugin**, as well as for other representatives of Eurasianism, considering conspiracy theories is quite characteristic. In one of his most famous books, *Foundations of Geopolitics*, **Dugin** openly talks about the harassment of Russia from the United States and its allies and their constant rigorous attempts to pressure Russia.<sup>19</sup>

The contemporary Russian political elite has practically the same perception, believing that Russia has been purposefully oppressed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The President of Russia, **Vladimir Putin**, has publicly stated many times that the Russian Federation is only respected when it is strong. Otherwise, nobody listens to it which means that other international actors, especially the Western states, completely disregard its national interests.

The most recent 2015 National Security Strategy of Russia expresses the same position, underlining that “the United States and its allies oppose the exercise of independent domestic and foreign policy by the Russian Federation, trying to retain their domination in the processes unfolding around the world.”<sup>20</sup>

It should also be pointed out that it is characteristic for the Russian Federation to think through conspiracy theories not only in the contemporary era but also, in general, at various stages of its development. Due to this, not only during weakening and dissolution, but also during strengthening and expansion, Russia always considers itself to be under threat. This largely defines the aggressive foreign policy conducted by the Russian Federation and its constant aspiration to increase its sphere of influence. In addition, such actions emerge despite the fact that the Russian Federation’s weaknesses and problems are not external but, rather, of a domestic character.

### **Main Instruments that the Russian Government Relies Upon to Strengthen its Influence on the International Arena**

As of today, with its level of economic and state development or any other important parameter, the Russian Federation does not belong to the category of countries that should have the ambition of having global access to the international arena and making decisions in international political processes. To assess realistically, it is a backward country in many fields with quite serious domestic challenges.

Given this background, the international activeness of the Russian Federation is especially improper. It must be pointed out that Moscow’s activities not only cover its neighboring countries and regions but also much further removed places where it is not supposed to have national interests. The South American continent can be named as one of these where the growing dynamics of Russian activity have been revealed. Apart from the economic interests, these activities of the Russian Federation are followed by a well pronounced political interest. More specifically, Moscow is trying to create problems for the USA, which it considers to be its main rival, in the immediate neighborhood.

Such bold and active measures taken by the Russian government on the international arena are largely determined by the active support from the Russian public. At first glance, one may think that such strong support of

the public is caused by the tools of public opinion formation which are definitely quite effective in the Russian Federation today.

In reality, however, the situation is quite different. The case is that the Russian public cannot make peace with the dissolution of the Soviet Union to this day and firmly supports the idea of restoring Russia's international influence. Many researchers of the Russian Federation share this opinion. Additionally, many of them consider that the Russian population is more obedient to the government and more resilient to the problems within the country which ultimately makes it easier for the government to make decisions. In order to confirm this it would be enough to remember the sharp increase in public approval towards **Vladimir Putin** after making the decision to annex Crimea.

At the same time, it must be taken into account that the government of the Russian Federation is an authoritarian regime. Hence, unlike a democratically elected government, it can make tougher decisions much more quickly and easily, including regarding the use of its military forces.

Together with all of the aforementioned, if we analyze the activities of the Russian Federation on the international arena, we shall see that the Russian government is using three main instruments very efficiently. These instruments include:

- 1) **Military Force** – Russia is a nuclear power and despite lagging behind in a lot of areas, its military machine is still quite strong. Properly answering the aggressive policies conducted by a nuclear power is no easy task for anyone. This is especially so since Russia is openly talking about using nuclear weapons by which it is practically blackmailing the West. It must be pointed out that according to the current military doctrine of the Russian Federation, Russia reserves the right to use nuclear weapons not only in the case of a nuclear attack against it but also during conventional military aggression if the existence of the state is in question. In addition, it is clearly visible in the examples of Ukraine and Syria that Russia has achieved significant success in terms of refining the tactics of so-called small wars. More specifically, in both cases the Russian Federation conducted military operations rather successfully with relatively small losses to manpower and material expenditure.
- 2) **Intelligence Agencies** – The level of access of the Russian intelligence agencies in various regions of the world remains high. Their work is

simplified by the fact that as a cover they are very effectively using private Russian companies as the level of control over the private sector is quite high in the Russian Federation. The development of cyber technologies also increases the effectiveness of the work done by the intelligence agencies as they offer a good way of gathering information. Apart from gathering intelligence, the intelligence Agencies also heavily focus on serving yet another purpose. Specifically, they are getting involved in the processes taking place in a country and influencing the situation for the benefit of the Russian Federation. These types of activities by the Russian intelligence agencies are exactly why the issues of a possible Russian meddling in the elections of the United States and other countries is such an actively discussed topic in international relations right now.

- 3) **Propaganda** – The Russian Federation pays close attention to exercising effective propaganda. These activities have been significantly refined in the past several years. Apart from its state and non-state resources, the Russian Federation also efficiently uses the resources of foreign countries for its propaganda, be it foreign experts, NGOs or media. It should also be pointed out that the main line of Russian propaganda is very well selected. More specifically, this means that Russian propaganda does not serve the purpose of making Russia more popular. Its main task is the anti-PR of the countries Russia considers to be its adversaries. It is in terms of this objective that the strong narrative designed to discredit the West is disseminated where the West is portrayed as a community on the way to degradation and which is doomed to destruction. Against this background, Russian propaganda tries to establish a perception that the Russian Federation is the top protector of traditional values in the contemporary world.

## **Conclusion**

The Russian government perceives the developments in the world today as a window of opportunity to expand its influence. Moscow believes that the faster and more boldly it acts, the more successfully it will be able to implement its foreign policy interests, plans and objectives.

Moscow's goal is to create completely new political realities through fast and bold actions and then gradually make the international community accept these realities. This was the principle used by the Russian Federation

against Georgia in 2008 and against Ukraine in 2014. Despite the inherent differences in these two cases, Moscow uses the same principle in Syria as well.

Overall, Moscow's goal is to achieve a new re-distribution of the spheres of influence in the world as soon as possible and get exclusive influence over the post-Soviet states. Russian politicians and experts are not even hiding this. They often talk about the need for the new Congress of Vienna (or Potsdam or Yalta) where leading players must agree on the sphere of their influence.

Given the background where there are often talks about the growing influence of the Russian Federation on the international arena, it should also be pointed out that Moscow's policies come with serious risks. This is especially so when the Russian government has put the bar rather high and practically operates on the brink of its own abilities.

Such a scale of activity is inevitably followed with certain mistakes. This is natural as it is impossible to calculate everything. For example, in the case of Ukraine the Russian government miscalculated the reaction of the West. Specifically, it was not anticipating such an amount of sanctions from the West or, at least, they had the hope that they could be removed quickly and that relations with the West would be normalized.

The Russian government also anticipated a large-scale pro-Russian attitude among the population of Ukraine. When it started military adventures in Donetsk and Luhansk, it was not just aiming for these regions. The Russian Federation presumably had a much wider objective; however, ultimately it so happened that Ukraine managed to maintain control over large parts of these two regions as well.

The military adventure of the Russian Federation in Syria also seems risky. On the one hand, everything appears to be going according to Moscow's plan; however, the importance of the political dividends received by the Russian Federation due to its involvement in Syria is still not entirely clear.

It is also unclear how Moscow can lead the situation in Syria to a stage when the risks of further complications will be minimized. We must take into account that we are talking about a very difficult region – the Middle East, where traditionally there are a lot of interests present and combat action could break out anew at any given moment. This is especially so since serious crises have arisen several times recently, containing not only

the risks of re-invigorating the Syrian conflict but also the risks of clashes between countries which is much more dangerous.

Ultimately, on the one hand, it is definitely visible that the Russian Federation is acting quickly and boldly on the international arena. Additionally, it correctly assesses the difficulties that exist in the West. On the other hand, however, it is not visible how the difficulties that the Russian Federation has can be resolved or even how it can reduce its distance from the West in terms of development.

The Russian government is mainly making its calculations for the nearest future and, as it would appear, it has less long-term calculations. Consequently, the international success achieved by this country is oftentimes quite fragile with the constant alternation of both positive and negative dynamics of events.



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18. It should be pointed out that Ms. **Hélène Carrère d’Encausse**, whose father is Giorgi Zurabishvili who emigrated to Paris after the Soviet occupation of Georgia in 1921, is definitely considered to be a peerless expert of the Soviet and Russian Empires. However, one of her most famous books is *The Shattered Empire* which was published in 1978 and contained a presumption about the dissolution of the Soviet Union.
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