

Jakub Kulhánek

# Russia and Near Abroad

## Past and Present

[jakub.kulhanek@amo.cz](mailto:jakub.kulhanek@amo.cz)

## Russia and Near Abroad: Past and Present

*Jakub Kulhánek*

“Anyone who does not regret this has no heart. Anyone who wants to restore the Soviet Union in its previous form has no head.”<sup>1</sup>

*Vladimir Putin commenting on the collapse of the Soviet Union during the 2000 presidential campaign*

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought about far reaching geopolitical changes and nowhere was this more evident than in the former Soviet space. The new successor states had to come to terms with their Soviet heritage as their interdependent economies and ongoing border disputes presented enormous challenges to new national leaderships. As for the new Russian state, Moscow found itself in a rather peculiar position; there was no doubt that Russia was the most important of all the successor states but the question many asked both inside and outside Russia was: Is Moscow going to attempt to reassert its control over its former subjects? Or is Russia to become a sort of benign hegemon exercising its influence through its political and economic preponderance in the region? Incoherent and pursuing conflicting interests, Russian foreign policy was often a source of ample controversy during its early years. Only recently has Russian foreign policy begun emerging as speaking with one voice.

In this paper, an attempt will be made to analyze Russian policy and its motives and goals vis-à-vis the post-Soviet region<sup>2</sup>. The author of this paper believes that in so doing it might help to reveal the true nature of Russian policy towards its neighbors. First, this paper will present an overview of basic

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/4099.html>

<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this paper, the post-Soviet region is defined as comprising all successor states except for three Baltic republics.

developments in Russian policy towards the 'near abroad'. Second, it will explore current trends in Russian CIS policy. Furthermore, it will define major political, security and economic concerns for Russia in the 'near abroad' and how they might be reflected in Russian CIS policy making.

The demise of the Soviet Union presented the new Russian leadership with a myriad of political, economic and security challenges in its neighborhood. Ethnic and religious conflicts threatened to destabilize parts of post-Soviet space with possible spillovers into Russian territory. Worse still, the Russian army which was scattered across the former Soviet Union was being gradually dragged into various local conflicts. Looming economic crisis was made even worse by the high level of interdependency between former Soviet republics.

Nevertheless, Russian leadership at that time exhibited little if any interest in the 'near abroad' and focused instead on building closer relationship with the West. Hopes of Yeltsin and his young Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev for closer cooperation with the West and a more equal partnership between Russian and major Western powers turned sour in the light of Russia's dwindling status as a great power; Moscow's initial apathy would have then far reaching repercussions for the post-Soviet space. Despite the fact that Moscow initiated the creation of the CIS regional grouping there was very little done in terms of genuine integration. The CIS was established in December 1991 comprising Russia, Belarus and Ukraine who were later joined by other successor states. New countries showed little interest in any form of integration and started grudgingly building their statehood. To no small degree this was possible thanks to Russian initial disinterest in the 'near abroad' affairs.<sup>3</sup>

However, a failure of Yeltsin's pro-Western policy and disintegration of post-Soviet space gave rise to a more pro-active Russian CIS policy. With Kozyrev and the likes largely discredited, the Russian foreign policy debate became increasingly dominated by nationalists and hardliners. By the end of 1992, a consensus on a more assertive Russian policy towards the CIS countries began emerging as a result of mounting pressure from hardliners influencing Yeltsin to change the foreign policy course. During that time, there was a widely held belief that for Russia to improve its position in the international arena it should garner necessary political and economic resources in the 'near abroad' through deepening integration process in the CIS. The end of 1992 thus marked a passing of liberal

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<sup>3</sup> B. Litera et al, *Rusko? Vzájemné vztahy postsovětských republik/Post-Soviet Republics relations* (Prague, Institute of International Relations, 1998) p. 10-13.

vision for Russian foreign policy.<sup>4</sup> In the opinion of many in Russia, the time had come for the country to implement its own Monroe Doctrine in the post-Soviet territory.<sup>5</sup>

Pursuing such an ambitious project of economic and political reintegration of post-Soviet space, Russia was soon to learn the limits of its own power. In fact, during that period Russia achieved considerably little in terms of scoring foreign policy victories, a good example being Moscow's abortive attempt to forge closer foreign policy coordination between successor states. Nevertheless, Russia's push for greater reintegration of the post-Soviet space failed and brought little political or economic advantages to Russia.

A reason for Russia's failure was many-fold: Firstly, successor states saw little incentive in closer cooperation with Moscow as they were afraid of Moscow encroaching on their recently gained independence. Secondly, Russia's own economic problems made most of the CIS's governments less than lukewarm about the prospects of continuing economic integration.<sup>6</sup> Thirdly, bogged down in the Chechen quagmire the Russian army was seen as of little use in Moscow's coercive diplomacy against its neighbors.<sup>7</sup>

As long as the 1995 Russian CIS policy underwent another major change towards pragmatism; aware of its own limits Russia began to pursue a more realistic foreign policy in search for economic advantages in its relations with CIS countries. 'By spring 1997, the influence in the Russian government of Anatoly Chubais and Boris Nemtsov was reflected in a priority on Russian economic growth and reforms, as well as a search for geo-economic opportunities.'<sup>8</sup> Yet still, there was remarkably little done in terms of pursuing more profit-seeking foreign policy. Bobo Lo, for example, points out that blunders in Russian CIS policy throughout the 1990s only 'reinforced the trend of the former Soviet republics seeking, with increasing success, to lessen their economic dependence on Moscow by diversifying sources of external trade, investment and assistance.'<sup>9</sup> For example, in 1998 trade between the CIS members accounted for 6% of their combined GDP, compared to 23% in 1991.<sup>10</sup> This trend in itself was to complicate any attempts at region wide integration.

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<sup>4</sup> A. Brown (ed.), *Contemporary Russian Politics*, (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2001) p. 445.

<sup>5</sup> R. Sakwa, *Russian Politics and Society*, 3rd edn, (London, Routledge, 2002 ) p. 353.

<sup>6</sup> B. Lítéra et al, *Rusko? Rusko? Vzájemné vztahy postsovětských republik /Post-Soviet Republics relations*, p. 42-50.

<sup>7</sup> B. Lítéra et al, *Rusko? Rusko? Vzájemné vztahy postsovětských republik /Post-Soviet Republics relations*, p. 131.

<sup>8</sup> A. Brown (ed.), *Contemporary Russian Politics*, p. 445.

<sup>9</sup> B. Lo, *Vladimir Putin and the Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy*, (Bodmin, Blackwell Publishing, 2003), p. 52.

<sup>10</sup> R. Sakwa & M. Webber, 'The Commonwealth of Independent States, 1991-1998: Stagnation and Survival', *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 3, 1999, JSTOR

Vladimir Putin's ascent to the office of Russian President in 2000 reaffirmed the trend of further strengthening economic relations between Russia and the successor states. Nonetheless, the recurrent theme of Russia's special status in the 'near abroad' was to continue to play role in the Russian CIS policy making as was demonstrated by the new Russian Foreign Policy Concept, from June 2000, which 'rather blandly indicated the need to 'form a good-neighbor belt along the perimeter of Russia's borders' and to form a 'strategic partnership' with all CIS states. It also revived the theme that Russia's relations with these states should depend on their readiness to take account of Russian interests 'including in terms of the guarantees of rights of Russian compatriots.'<sup>11</sup> Russia's view of its role in the 'near abroad' is thus torn between the self-perceived image of Russia as the most prominent country in the region with special responsibilities deriving from such a status and the exigency to take care of its own primarily economic interests in the region as its influence in the CIS continues to decline.<sup>12</sup>

Against this backdrop, Putin's CIS policy has been, in Bobo Lo's words, guided by geo-economics and geopolitical considerations, whereby Moscow increasingly prefers to pursue an economic agenda in its relations with CIS countries but at the same time, it has no intention of relinquishing its regional preponderance in the short term.<sup>13</sup> Apart from the economic interests on their minds, Russian foreign policy makers focus on other issues in the 'near abroad', namely political and security cooperation, and one special category concerning Russian expatriates.

Under Putin's watch, the interaction in the post-Soviet territory has been further reduced to inter-regional groups defined by high-level bilateral relations with Russia.<sup>14</sup> In fact, it can be argued that Moscow has arrived at the point where it prefers to deal with the CIS countries primarily on a bilateral basis. In the west, Russia continues to emphasize its special-relations with Belarus; for all bickering between the two countries, Minsk still remains the Kremlin's important ally.<sup>15</sup> In the Caucasus, Armenia stands out as Russia's most trusted ally and Russian Central Asia policy is largely determined by its relations with Kazakhstan.<sup>16</sup> In addition, there have been sporadic attempts to launch various forms of inter-regional cooperation, albeit to not much avail. The most visible of these

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<sup>11</sup> A. Brown (ed.), *Contemporary Russian Politics*, p. 451.

<sup>12</sup> M. Delyagin, 'Russia's Solitude After the CIS', *Russia in Global Affairs*, No. 4, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> B. Lo, *Vladimir Putin and the Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy*, p. 51-69.

<sup>14</sup> J.L. Black, *Vladimir Putin and the New World Order*, (United States of America, Rowman and Littlefield, 2004) p. 275-6.

<sup>15</sup> A. Brown (ed.), *Contemporary Russian Politics*, p. 449-450.

<sup>16</sup> A. Brown (ed.), *Contemporary Russian Politics*, p. 446-447.

are the Common Economic Space with a stated goal of creating free trade space among its members by the end of the decade<sup>17</sup> and the Collective Security Organization established in 2002.<sup>18</sup>

Thereby, Putin's foreign policy has effectively spelled an end to the hopes, misplaced though they might have been, of a resurrection of the CIS as a platform of possible reintegration of the post-soviet space. 'Although Putin may have had a sentimental regard for the recreation of some sort of post-Soviet integrated space, his approach in practice was ruthlessly realistic.'<sup>19</sup> The CIS proved to be nothing more than a means of 'civilized divorce'<sup>20</sup>. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was obvious that its days were numbered as the CIS was unable to accommodate divergent interests of its members or to positively address various disputes between its members. 'Following the 'rose revolution' in Georgia in November 2003 and the 'orange revolution' in Ukraine in late 2004, there was serious talk about disbanding the organization in its entirety by 2005.'<sup>21</sup>

Also very illustrative of the rationalization of Russian CIS policy is the manner in which Russia's policy has reflected the fate of Russian expatriates. After the fall of the Soviet Union, some 25 million Russians found themselves stranded outside the borders of the Russian federation.<sup>22</sup> Protecting the rights of Russian minorities became a rallying point for hardliners and extreme nationalists in Russia throughout the 1990s. Caving in to mounting pressure from extremists, embattled Yeltsin and his Foreign Minister Kozyrev even suggested the use of force to defend the rights of Russians abroad.<sup>23</sup> But the new pragmatic Russian foreign policy - this is especially true of Putin's presidency - is too often willing to put that issue on the back burner to attain broader geo-economic goals.<sup>24</sup>

In the political cooperation realm, Russian foreign policy is concerned with retaining its influence in the 'near abroad' and prevent any large-scale penetration by outside powers, which might in turn undermine the Russian position. After allowing the anti-terrorist coalition led by the U.S. to deploy its troops in Central Asia, Moscow has been growing increasingly uneasy about the American military presence in the region; ever since American military assistance to Georgia and the West's support for the Orange revolution didn't help to alleviate Moscow's suspicions of a meddling West. In the

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<sup>17</sup> S. Blagov, 'Economic Union Slips from View at Russia-Kazakhstan Summit', Eurasianet.org, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> S. White et al (eds.), *Developments in Russian Politics*, 6th edn, (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005)

<sup>19</sup> R. Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's Choice*, (London, Routledge, 2004), p. 230.

<sup>20</sup> B. Litera et al, *Rusko? Vzájemné vztahy postsovětských republik/Post-Soviet Republics relations*, p.7.

<sup>21</sup> R. Sakwa, 'Vladimir Putin and Russian Foreign Policy towards the West: Towards a New Realism', University of Kent

<sup>22</sup> R. Sakwa, *Russian Politics and Society*, 3rd edn, p.391-394.

<sup>23</sup> R. Sakwa, *Russian Politics and Society*, 3rd edn, p. 394.

<sup>24</sup> R. Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's Choice*, p. 207-233.

wake of colored revolutions, Moscow's policy towards the CIS bore some signs of increasingly erratic behavior. 'Russia's interventions in the electoral process in Ukraine in the winter of 2004 were certainly driven by perceptions of the U.S. and the West orchestrating events in Georgia, and then supporting Viktor Yushchenko in Ukraine.'<sup>25</sup>

The former U.S. ambassador to the USSR Jack Matlock provides a quite fitting description of how Moscow's attitude towards the Western presence in the post-Soviet territory: 'They[Russians] see the United States competing for influence in what was once the Soviet Union, and they think this is very dangerous. I don't know why we have any trouble understanding that, ever since President Monroe, we haven't been very happy about foreigners fiddling around in our hemisphere, and yet they have gone so far at times as to approve U.S. bases in Central Asia because we were going after an enemy in Afghanistan'<sup>26</sup>

Russia's heavy-handed response to the colored revolutions also showed the limits of its ability to affect changes in the 'near abroad'. On the other hand, a more sensitive approach to the post-Soviet space has brought its fruits: for example, through a coordinated effort of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Moscow has achieved reduction of US military forces in Central Asia<sup>27</sup>, and the victory of former pro-Russian presidential hopeful Viktor Yanukovich in the 2006 Ukrainian parliamentary elections helped to bring about change in Ukraine's pro-Western course.

Military security interests figure prominently in Russia's approach towards the 'near abroad'. This is especially the case with the southern flank of the CIS, as it is seen as the last-line of defense against militant Islam extremism from the South.<sup>28</sup> A potential arch of instability stretching from the South Caucasus to Central Asia has been of great strategic concern to Russia ever since the breakup of the Soviet Union. This is why Russia has been trying to maintain its military presence in the region. Moreover, the collapse of the Soviet Union was accompanied by several violent conflicts, either of ethnical or political nature, threatening regional stability. 'Perceived as a threat to Russian security, Russia has become involved both in peacekeeping (either on its own or as part of CIS forces) and in attempting to mediate between the conflicting parties.'<sup>29</sup> Richard Sakwa argues that the failure of the

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<sup>25</sup>F. Hill, *Beyond the Colored Revolutions*, Key Note Speech, Central Eurasia Studies Society 6th Annual Conference, 2005.

<sup>26</sup>J. Matlock, 'Living with Vladimir Putin's Russia', a lecture at Foreign Policy Association, 2005.

<sup>27</sup>L. Beehner, 'The Rise of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization', Council on Foreign Relations, 2006.

<sup>28</sup>A. Brown (ed.), *Contemporary Russian Politics*, p. 445-6.

<sup>29</sup>S. White et al (eds.), *Developments in Russian Politics*, p. 233.

CIS to resolve conflicts plaguing the region rendered Russia to undertake a peacekeeping role in the region.<sup>30</sup>

The detractors of Russian peacekeeping in the 'near abroad', however, point out that Moscow has been conspiring to secure a sphere of influence through its peacekeepers. For all intents and purposes, in the case of Russian peacekeepers in the Georgian breakaway province Abkhazia, for example, Mackinlay and Sharov argue that there has been very little to support such a conspiracy theory.<sup>31</sup> Even though there is little doubt about Russia's interference in various conflicts throughout the 'near abroad' – this was especially true during the first years in the wake of the Soviet Union's demise – it is very difficult to establish the nexus between Moscow trying to promote its interests and the conduct of the Russian military on the ground. It is now clear that Russia's military involvement in various conflicts across the CIS was both ill-planned and ill-executed and often involved freelance Russian units engaged in fighting without Moscow's blessing.<sup>32</sup> Also note-worthy is the actual value of the Russian military presence in the 'near abroad' from a military perspective. Given the ailing state of the Russian armed forces, for Moscow the viability of using coercion against CIS states has become circumspect to say the least. Furthermore, lightly armed peacekeepers deployed in the CIS can not be expected to perform anything beyond its original peacekeeping mission.

As it has been argued, Russian foreign policy, including its relations with CIS members in recent years, has become more and more economized, that is, Russia pursues foreign policy that is less ideologically driven but rather seeks to gain economic advantage. It is no wonder then that economic relations inside the CIS figure prominently in Russian CIS policy. Given the importance of energy resources for Russia, it is ultimately energy policy that dominates Russian relations with CIS states. During his presidency, Putin has repeatedly made a case for Russia to become a world leader in the energy sector.<sup>33</sup> Echoing the same theme, Russian CIS policy has been trying to increase its profile in the CIS's energy market under Moscow's tutelage while preventing a major strategic penetration of the CIS energy sector. Furthermore, some authors like Bobo Lo point out that under Putin 'there has been a transformation – in motives, methods, and results – in which the dominant elements have been the greatly increased importance of the economic agenda and its central role in the protection

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<sup>30</sup> R. Sakwa, *Russian Politics and Society*, p. 389.

<sup>31</sup> J. Mackinlay & P. Cross (eds), *Regional Peacekeepers: The Paradox of Russian Peacekeeping*, (Tokyo : United Nations University Press 2003), p. 105.

<sup>32</sup> J. Mackinlay & P. Cross (eds), *Regional Peacekeepers: The Paradox of Russian Peacekeeping*, p. 207.

<sup>33</sup> H. Balzer, 'Vladimir Putin on Russian Energy Policy', In the National Interest Online. [http://www.foi.se/FOI/templates/Page\\_\\_\\_\\_4889.aspx](http://www.foi.se/FOI/templates/Page____4889.aspx)



and promotion of Russia's geopolitical interests in the region'.<sup>34</sup> According to Bobo Lo 'the clearest example of this is Moscow's exploitation of the economic vulnerability of certain CIS member-states, notably Ukraine and Georgia, to ensure they take a greater account of Russian foreign and security policy interests.'<sup>35</sup> Rober L. Larson, in his study for the Swedish Ministry of Defense, summarizes what might constitute Russian energy leverage over some of its CIS neighbors: supply interruptions (total or partial), threats of supply interruption (covertly or explicit), pricing policy (prices as carrots or sticks), usage of existing energy debts, creating new energy debts and hostile takeovers of companies or infrastructures.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Russia has an impressive array of tools at its disposal to apply pressure on CIS states, if it wishes to.

In addition, Russia controls major energy exporting routes, which means that the majority of energy exports from the CIS must go through the Russian territory. This in turn gives Russia important leverage, especially over gas and oil exporting countries in Central Asia. Russian virtual monopoly in this field is negatively perceived by some CIS countries such as Azerbaijan and makes them seek alternative routes bypassing Russian territory. Something that is obviously opposed by Moscow but gradually in a rather subtle manner 'in emphasizing the commercial advantages of Russian participation and pipelines, it has not lost sight of the strategic agenda. But it recognizes that realization of this requires more subtle, economically oriented methods. Better to show that, for example the main Russian-controlled pipeline between Tengiz and Novorossiisk is more profitable for everyone than the more expensive and logistically awkward Baku-Ceyhan option.'<sup>37</sup>

Another pattern of Russian energy policy that has been emerging quite recently is Moscow's attempt to buy out energy infrastructures inside the CIS. A quite illuminative example is the role energy issues play in Russian-Belarusian relations. Russian gas monopoly Gazprom constantly threatens to make Belarus pay as mach as four times the price it has been paying for Russian gas supply in what some see as Moscow attempt to 'force Minsk into ceding 50% ownership of the state gas transport company Beltransgas to Gazprom.'<sup>38</sup> However, it is difficult to determine to what extent Russia is motivated by the profit or geopolitical considerations. For example, some of the attempted takeovers in the CIS by Gazprom can be well interpreted as simply adhering to one of the basic rules of thumb

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<sup>34</sup> B. Lo, *Vladimir Putin and the Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy*, p. 68.

<sup>35</sup> B. Lo, *Vladimir Putin and the Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy*, p. 68.

<sup>36</sup> R. L Larson, *Russia's Energy Policy: Security Dimensions and Russia's Realibility as an Energy Supplier*, (Stockholm, Sweedish Defense Ministry, 2006).

<sup>37</sup> B. Lo, *Vladimir Putin and the Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy*, p. 68-69.

<sup>38</sup> V. Socor, 'Moscow Showing Belarus the Energy Whip', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 3, Issue 203, 2006.

in economics that is to maximize its own profit. Furthermore, for Russia, its credibility as a reliable energy supplier would be at stake whenever it tries to employ its energy weapon against CIS countries.

To what extent can the neo-imperialist label of Russian policy be justified on the grounds of Russia policy past and present towards the CIS countries? Or is Russia coming to terms with its geopolitical position in the post-Soviet area as the first among the equal. First of all, Russian foreign policy and its tools and goals are evolving since Russia still remains a relatively young country that has to identify its long-term foreign policy priorities in its relations with CIS countries. Secondly, geopolitical realities of the post-Soviet area have not been clearly delineated yet; there has been a lot of shifts of affinities between CIS countries, witness for example the fluctuation in Uzbek-Russian relations.<sup>39</sup> It will take some time to establish a clear pattern of relations within the CIS so as to determine the geopolitical position of GUAM to Russia.

For Russia to transform the CIS or at least parts of it into a new empire through reintegration, there are two fundamental obstacles: first and foremost, new states of Eurasia have generally succeeded in their nation-building endeavors and thus see little point in reintegration and giving up their recently gained sovereignty; thus any Russian push for reintegration of the CIS has won little support among its members and quite to the contrary it has increased their suspicions of Moscow's ulterior motives and diminished what little was left of their support for reintegration of the post-Soviet space. In this respect, Richird Sakwa points out that Putin recognized that the CIS would not be able to act as the vehicle of reintegration.<sup>40</sup>

Secondly, it is the presence of foreign powers such as the US, China, NATO and the EU that makes reintegration highly problematic. Russia is still the most powerful country in the region but the presence of these outside actors places serious constraints on its room to maneuver. Motivated by their own foreign policy objectives, these outside actors support individual CIS members in reducing their dependency on Moscow, witness the U.S. and NATO support for Saakashvili's Georgia.

To conclude, in the first half of the 1990s Russia realized that any forceful attempt at rebuilding a new empire on the ruins of the Soviet Union would be bitterly opposed. Furthermore, over time Russia has had to come to terms with the new realities in the post-Soviet space: that it is too powerful to be excluded from the region but at the same time too weak to afford a Soviet Union II. In the upcoming decade, Russia will continue to seek economic advantages in its dealing with the new states of

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<sup>39</sup> A. Brown (ed.), *Contemporary Russian Politics*, p. 448.

<sup>40</sup> R. Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's Choice*, p. 230.

Eurasia; Moscow will also try to maintain or increase its political influence mainly through strengthening bilateral relations with allies in the region; and last but not least, Russia will remain concerned about the violent extremism coming from the southern flank of the CIS and how it could be successfully fought, perhaps in cooperation with other concerned countries. Given its relative weakness and gradual crystallization of the geopolitical situation in Eurasia preventing any empire restoration, post-Soviet Russia has thus been unable to pursue more than hegemonic foreign policy vis-à-vis CIS countries. Indeed, as a regional power, Russia has high stakes at the CIS and its regional power status determines its relations with CIS states.

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