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Near abroad Russian foreign and domestic policy in the first decade of the twenty first century

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Abstract

The rise of a new Russia after the sudden demise of the Soviet Union is an unprecedented development in the 21st century and, as such, it has rightly attracted attention all over the world, including researchers and scholars. Russia's foreign policy has undergone significant changes since 1991. In the long run, foreign policy always depends on domestic policy. In the case of Russia, this has been particularly true ever since the collapse of the USSR. Russia has emerged as a totally different type of statehood than its predecessor. Domestic factors have influenced Russian foreign policy in various ways. Firstly, internal economic, social, military and political plans are competing with foreign policy plans for the limited resources available to the state. Second, though Marxism-Leninism continues to have some degree of influence on the foreign policy of Russia, it is no longer the official ideology but one of several contending conceptual approaches. This research looks at how Russia sees its relationships with its neighbours, whom it commonly refers to as "the near abroad" (*blizhnee zarubezhye*) – a phrase that implies a lack of actual independence – and how it sees those connections in terms of its imagined sphere of influence. This study is a modest attempt to probe Russia's behaviour in contemporary international politics, specifically to explain the reason behind Ukraine's invasion. The behaviour of the new Russia in international politics is of immense importance for understanding post-cold war international politics.

Keywords: Soviet Union, Russia, Russian foreign policy, *Realpolitik.*

1. Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union was one of the most dramatic, unexpected and defining moments in the political development of the 20th century. The Soviet Union, officially the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), was a constitutionally socialist state that existed in Eurasia from 1922 until 1991. It was one of the world's two superpowers, along with the United States, from 1945 until its break-up in 1991. The USSR was founded and extended as a union of Soviet republics formed inside the territory of the Russian Empire, which was overthrown by the 1917 Russian Revolution, followed by the 1918-1920 Russian Civil War. The Soviet Union's political

boundaries changed over time, but after the last major territorial annexations of eastern Poland, Finish Karelia, the Baltic States, Bessarabia and certain other territories during the second world war, the boundaries roughly corresponded to those of late Imperial Russia from 1945 until dissolution, with the notable exceptions of Poland and Finland.

During the cold war, the Soviet Union became the principal model for future communist nations; the Soviet governance and political structure were established by the sole authorised political party, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. By 1956, the USSR was composed of 15 union republics. When the USSR crumbled at the end of 1991, disintegrating into 15 sovereign, independent states, it marked the end of an era in international relations (Marples 2016). The ideological war between the socialist and capitalist camps became merely a matter of academic speculation rather than a decisive consideration in international relations. It was also the official end of the bipolar world that had sustained and nourished international relations in general, and political alliances in particular, ever since the second world war. As the legal heir to the old Soviet Union's position, the Russian Federation, led by President B. Yeltsin, inherited all of the Soviet Union's international rights, advantages and duties (Rutland 2010). More importantly, however, for policymakers, it inherited a dramatically different geopolitical context than the tsarists and Soviet authorities faced. Not only had the external situation changed, but the home picture had also shifted beyond the Russian political elite's comprehension. And, like his predecessors – from the tsars to J. Stalin, N. Khrushchev, L. Brezhnev and M. Gorbachev – B. Yeltsin had to adapt to new conditions. Especially when it came to foreign policy, which had to take into account both external and internal forces.

Russia had never been a nation-state; rather, it had been a multinational empire with messianic aspirations during both the tsarist and Soviet periods. Russian identity is torn between the ethnic Russian (*russkiy*) community and *rossiyskiy* which implies Russian citizens regardless of ethnicity or religious affiliation. Both terms are translated into English as *Russian*, but there is a vast difference between *russkaya zemlya* (Russian land) and *Rossiyskaya Federatsiya* (Russian Federation) because *russkiy* describes something that belongs to the Russian ethnos, whereas *rossiyskiy* "describes

something belonging to the Russian state" (Fridman 2021: 73). Thus, *russkiy* is regarded as ethnic Russian by anyone who belongs to the Russian ethnos, an East Slavic ethnic group that comprise about 80% of the total Russia's population. On the other hand, the word *rossiyane* refers to all citizens of Russia.

The fall of the communist empire left a "hole" in the new Russian Federation's foreign policy, which brought up the question of Russia's national identity (Odey, Bassey, 2022). There was no precedent to follow. And psychologically, the hangover of being a global superpower was all too strong to be ignored. Furthermore, the security dilemmas confronting Russia have changed drastically in both its internal and external environments. At the centre of all policy considerations by Moscow are these new security concerns of the new Russian state. Externally, the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to include the former allies of the USSR was perceived as the most potent threat to Russian security (Waltz 2000). Even after more than a decade and some good news from the Russian point of view, NATO expansion is still perceived as a big threat to Russia's security.

However, the most complex of all the problems that Russia faced immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union was its relationship with its newly independent neighbours, the former Soviet republics, or what has been termed as the near abroad (*blizhnee zarubezhye*). In dealing with the countries of the near abroad, the new Russian state had to grapple with the historical legacies of Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union – polities in which Russia had often played a leading and oppressive role in the non-Russian regions. Immediately after the collapse of the USSR, the near abroad region was engulfed by many conflicts that were to have a significant impact on Russian foreign policy towards the region. There were territorial, leadership, economic, diaspora and military conflicts. Important among the territorial conflicts were the status of territories and borders in Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan), Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgia), the Trans-Dniester area (Moldova) and Crimea (Ukraine), and recently the entire Ukraine. Then there was the use of force in power struggles in Georgia, Tajikistan and even the Russian Federation itself. One of the critical economic issues was compensation for Russian energy sources, as well as the division of former Soviet debt, the introduction of new currencies and customs regulations, and

the termination of common prices and financial transfers across the borders of near abroad countries (Medvedev 2015). Military conflicts include the division of former Soviet military assets (Black Sea Fleet, nuclear weapons, installations and bases) and the Russian military's presence in the near abroad.

The diaspora conflicts were centred on the status and future of approximately 25 mln ethnic Russians living outside the borders of the Russian Federation. Such a scenario on the Russian Federation's borders posed a formidable challenge to Russia's foreign policymakers. Overnight, what used to be a matter of domestic policy, suddenly became a concern of foreign policy. However, neither the mechanisms nor the expertise were present in the foreign policy structure; rather, they were spread throughout the domestic bureaucracies. It was time to experiment with different concepts and institutions. It was time to build new relationships based on new national interests rather than ideological considerations.

2. The evolution of Russian foreign policy

When the Soviet Union disintegrated into 15 independent nations at the end of December 1991, the Russian Federation was faced with massive problems and complicated issues – both internal and external. In that backdrop, the emergence of Russian foreign policy must be understood. These issues and problems were to serve as the foundation for Russia's new foreign policy. Viewed historically, the decisive turning point in foreign policy thinking was the transition from the imperial and ideological paradigms of the L. Brezhnev era to the paradigms of New Thinking under M. Gorbachev. Externally, in the international arena, M. Gorbachev set a trend in the late 1980s by which the USSR willingly reduced its commitments to the outside world, particularly in Asia, Africa and Latin America (Grachev 2018). Also, it had started cutting down on its presence in East Central Europe by disbanding the Warsaw Pact and withdrawing its troops from those countries. Though much of the impetus behind these historic decisions had to do with the internal conditions of the Soviet Union, in particular the economic collapse, this had a very dramatic impact on the USSR, that lost its international standing as a superpower. The new Russian Fed-

eration under Boris Yeltsin had to keep this changed scenario in mind while formulating its foreign policy paradigm and framework.

The second important external development was the end of the cold war and the apparent ideological rapprochement with the West, especially the United States. M. Gorbachev called Europe "our common home"; his *perestroika* and *glasnost* were reflections of the rapprochement of the two earlier antagonistic systems of ideologies. It was clear that M. Gorbachev's USSR had started to look towards the West as a model for socio-economic and political development. As A. Kozyrev, B. Yeltsin's first foreign minister, was to accept later, "The past ten years (i.e. 1982-1992) have not been a period of eclipse, but a period of struggle against the inhuman communist regime" (Dembińska, Mérand, 2021: 63). "Russia [...] used all of its might to defeat the (communist) party and rejoin the rest of the world on the path to civilization. The logical conclusion of this struggle would be Russia's unification with the West" (Lynch 2002: 164). In other words, the ideological antagonism between the West and the new Russian Federation already belonged to the past when the time came for Moscow to formulate its new foreign policy. It was now a question of how rapidly Moscow would adopt the new ideology as the basic paradigm of its new foreign policy. Internally, there was a total breakdown of the economic as well as administrative system in Russia. Also, the huge foreign policy establishment in Moscow had largely disintegrated with the USSR. What remained were mainly lower and middle-level functionaries who had quickly changed their tags and turned democratic. In other words, Russia suddenly found itself devoid of an experienced group of foreign policymakers. What remained were those whose only qualifications appeared to be as active supporters and cheerleaders of President B. Yeltsyn in his drive against the socialist system in the country and the USSR as a whole.

Politically, there was a power struggle before B. Yeltsin was finally able to consolidate his position a couple of years later, by means that have not always been appreciated. Another major problem that Russia faced immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet Union was the influx of ethnic Russians from the near abroad countries, especially the non-Slavic countries. Added to these millions, were thousands of military men from Eastern Europe. In other words, Russia was faced with a refugee

problem of tremendous proportions. As this work has shown, the issue of ethnic Russians settled in other near abroad countries, numbering an estimated 25 mln, became a major issue for Russian foreign policymakers in the following years (Zevelëv 2001). Also, at a different level, the loss of superpower status had left the Russians with a loss of identity. Moscow's subsequent foreign policy had a lot to do with trying to revitalise the Russian identity and regain some form of superpower status.

3. The crisis of Russian identity

During the early years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia has been grappling with the loss of its identity. More than half a century of superpower status has left some permanent psychological impressions on the minds of the Russian people. The political elite has to cater to this craving for a new identity among the people – at least subtly, if not overtly. Though there have been some Russian leaders who have insisted on retaining the "superpower" status. Instead, most policy documents have tried to deliberately and strongly reinforce the position of Russia as a "regional power", deserving its rightful place in international politics (Mankoff 2009). The Russian Federation's vacillation in foreign policy stems in large part from the difficulties Russians have encountered in defining their national identity after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This search for a new identity has played a significant role in determining the course of Russian foreign policy, at least in the first few years of the post-USSR period. While all other former Soviet republics benefited from the Soviet Union's demise, Russia has suffered overall. Moscow has lost an empire and all the benefits that apparently go with it. The collapse has been a setback for the pride of the Russians. The new realities and the degraded status have been hard to digest.

The obvious reliance on Western financial aid has hurt the sentiments of the Russians, especially the more patriotic lot. One of the cardinal questions of Russian national identity is whether "Russia as a civilization embraces only the Russian Federation or [whether] it also includes Ukraine and Belarus" (Wolczuk 2000: 678). For many Russians, the Soviet Union rather than the Russian FSSR was their homeland, the more so that the latter was purely formal rather than actual polity, the non-

existence of the Communist Party of the RFSSR being the best example. It is not surprising that it has been difficult in the post-Soviet era to limit the Russian national consciousness to the boundaries of the Russian Federation. In fact, opinion polls in Russia have consistently shown that a majority of Russians do not see Ukrainians and Belarusians as separate ethnic groups, but as somehow Russian. This fact stems from the traditional Russian terminology, in which adjective *russkiy* applies both to Russia and (Kievan) Rus'. These considerations have influenced Russian foreign policy toward the near abroad. In recent months, Russia has been actively pursuing some sort of Slavic Union by incorporating both Belarus and Ukraine, oblivious to the fact that only the extreme left in Ukraine supports such a move. However, a movement to support the Union of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia (ZUBR) is active in all three countries and Moldova. As a result, the question of what is Russia, and who are the Russians, has had significant consequences in Russian foreign policy toward the near abroad. Since the Russian Federation inherited a certain legacy from the former Soviet Union, it is imperative to know the basic foundations of foreign policy during the Soviet era to understand Russia's foreign policy in the post-Soviet period.

4. The role of ideology in Soviet foreign policy

For more than seven decades, the USSR was one of the two pillars of the bipolar world, the other being the United States of America (USA). It was the most prominent player in the cold war that dominated most of the twentieth-century international politics. Most countries during the Soviet era were either pro-USSR or anti-USSR. One either looked up to the Soviet ideology with great reverence or looked down on it with greater contempt. Indeed, both political thinkers and Soviet practitioners were drawn to the ideological component of the Soviet polity. Ideology has been considered the cornerstone of the former Soviet Union. Only during the Soviet period was the prevailing idea encompassed in an official ideology, Marxism-Leninism. According to S. White (1988: 1), "there has been general agreement that official ideology plays a central role in Soviet politics". Z. Brzeziński also avers that "the persisting and important role of ideological assumptions in the thinking and actions of Soviet leaders" (Brzezinski 1962:132), is "essential to an understanding of

their conduct of foreign policy" (ibidem). C. Hunt (1960: 107) explains that the foreign policy attitudes of the Soviet leadership "are not simply based on Marxist-Leninist ideas in some abstract sense – they are soaked into its bones".

One major example is that the influence of Karl Marx's internationalist theme on the thoughts and actions of the Soviet Union could be clearly seen during the first world war. K. Marx stated that "workingmen have no country" (Marx, Engels, 1967). In other words, K. Marx replaced "national loyalty" with the "common interest" of the international working class. V. Lenin's theory of imperialism also states that the task of a world socialist revolution could be successfully accomplished by turning the "imperialist world war" into a series of civil wars (Lenin 1965). Thus, Marxist thought extended by V. Lenin's doctrine of imperialism provided the theoretical justification for the conclusion that the most effective course of action for the proletariat from the Marxist point of view during the first world war would be to turn weapons against its own government rather than support this government by fighting fellow proletarians from other countries. As V. Lenin summarised this position, "A revolutionary class in a reactionary war cannot but desire the defeat of its own government" (Erdogan 2020: 66). Although this tactical conclusion already possessed a theoretical basis in the general tradition of European Marxism, only Russian Marxists, namely Bolsheviks, had enough faith in this tradition to base their actions on its premises. Thus, the Central Committee of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party controlled by the Bolsheviks issued, in September 1914, a "manifesto against the war, declaring that the task of socialism was to turn the conflict into a civil war. The Manifesto called upon the socialists of each country to defeat their own bourgeoisie "manifesto against the war, declaring that the task of socialism was to turn the conflict into a civil war. The Manifesto called upon socialists of each country to defeat their own bourgeoisie" (Moore 2017: 56).

Furthermore, the Soviet political elite's verbal communications about the goals, instruments and implementation of foreign policy also made a crucial contribution to the basis on which this assertion was built. In other words, foreign policy was based on statements of Soviet leaders, who constantly claimed to act in accordance with the principles of Marxism-Leninism. P. Tugwell (1984: 31-32), for example,

saw verbal communications of Soviet leaders as open statements about their exact intentions and the motives behind their actions:

> that the CPSU "has time and time again proved its fidelity" to [V.] Lenin's behest that the Soviet government set a higher value on the world dictatorship of the proletariat and the world revolution than on all national sacrifices, burdensome as they are. Or Yuri[y] Andropov, who was presumably praising his then boss, Leonid Brezhnev, said in a 1982 speech that the chairman's name was linked "to the triumph of the magnificent cause: the victory of communism throughout the world". From an analysis of Soviet morality, ideology and military power, [P.] Tugwell reached the conclusion that Marxist internationalism was "the overriding factor in Soviet foreign and defence policy". "I think", he wrote, "that internationalism may be pushed onto the back burner from time to time, but even there, it continues to brew as circumstances allow. I think that the apparatus of state and the might of the Soviet armed forces are servants of the party in the cause of world revolution. They do not indicate a change of aim, only a modernization of method.

This continued to remain the primary driving force – not the basic rationale – for the very existence of the Soviet Union for more than seventy years. Without a revolutionary theory, there could be no revolutionary movement. Internally, the ideology was revered (or so it appeared to be to outside observers) – (Burbank 1989). Externally, it was held in awe and fear. It was, hence, no surprise that the omnipotent and omnipresent ideology had its impact in the realm of Soviet foreign policy as well. Soviet scholars, politicians and policymakers have often insisted that their foreign policy was based on the Marxist-Leninist ideology. In fact, some scholars have sought to differentiate Soviet foreign policy from Western foreign policies on this ideological ground. The way theory is made in the West and how it is used in the West is very different from how it is used in the Soviet Union.

Due to the pluralist nature of their polities (polity scheme), the Communist Party's monopoly prevented any alternative. The Marxist-Leninist philosophy was the first and last word. There was no tradition of criticism of either the theory or its practise in the Soviet Union. This stringent control of the Communist Party over ideological matters produced fatal rigidity in policy formulation and was to prove decisive in the collapse of the Soviet Union during the early nineties of the 20th century

(Li 2018). Outside observers, however, have questioned the actual role of ideology in the Soviet Union. Some believe that politics in the erstwhile USSR was more a matter of power than of ideology. They have been highly critical of the often revered and indispensable theory–practice relationship of the Soviet elite. For them, such a relationship never existed. And if it ever did, it was more of a matter of convenience than real ideological convictions. For many, Marxism has often become simply a rhetorical device for the *Realpolitik* (a political system or set of ideas based on practical factors rather than moral or idealistic ones) of the Soviet Union. Others believe that Soviet foreign policy was pragmatic rather than idealistic or ideological. On the other hand, however, inside the Soviet Union, a distinction between theory and practise would not be accepted in Soviet philosophy. This belief about an ideological foundation gives credence to this belief.

The truth, however, lies between the two extreme views. There is little doubt that Soviet foreign policy was ideologically driven. M. Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost* programmes were to usher in a dramatic shift in the ideological underpinnings of the Soviet Union's foreign policy. For the first time in the history of the socialist empire, the Marxist-Leninist ideology as the foundation of foreign policy was questioned. M. Gorbachev's *perestroika*, in its dynamics and evolution, was an attempt to resolve the problem of national security on a fundamentally new basis. With his buzzwords of democracy and market reforms, he sought to change the image of the USSR to suit the Western world. Not only externally, in dealing with the world at large, M. Gorbachev sought to use democracy as the key component. As a result of M. Gorbachev's initiatives, "the union state, which was federative only nominally, while remaining essentially unitarian, was to have obtained more of a federative substance" (Starr 1995: 19), as a result of his initiatives. "New Thinking" was primarily designed for foreign policy matters, but it was not confined to them for long.

5. Bolsheviks, the nationality question and the federal set-up

The nationalist composition of the tsarist Empire (Imperial Russia that spanned Eurasia beginning in 1721, replacing the Tsardom of Russia) was the culmination of a long process of territorial expansion and colonisation (Martin 2001). The

conquest of Kazan and Astrakhan by Ivan the Terrible added Volga Tatars to the empire; Siberian expansion in the 17th century added Mongols, and other smaller groups to the empire's populace; and by the early 18th century, the Dnieper population of Eastern Slavs Cossacks had become part of the vast Tsarist Empire. While Peter the Great shifted his borders towards the Baltic region, Catherine pushed towards Turkey and the Black Sea (Kollmann 2016). In the early 19th century, Georgia, Finland and Poland were added. By the mid-nineteenth century, the remaining Transcaucasian regions were incorporated (Burbank 2006).

One of the most urgent problems faced by the new Bolshevik government in the post-1917 period was how to deal with the various nationalities that inhabited the territory of the tsarist Empire. From the very beginning, commentators predicted that the Bolsheviks would find it impossible to control the varied and innumerable national groups that they had inherited from the tsars. For the Bolsheviks, the nationality issue was what V. Lenin called the "burning question" that needed immediate attention. And they sought to deal with it through a constitutional federal set-up – an idea traditionally abhorred by the Marxists, who considered it a retrograde development. Before the revolution, V. Lenin simply rejected federalism. Although he was a staunch advocate of national self-determination (as he understood it), he insisted that federalism and self-determination were not to be confused. The idea of a nation-based federalism had been rejected at the Minsk Congress in 1898, as well as at the January Conference of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSLDP) in 1912 (Nahaylo et al., 1999). V. Lenin often expressed his views against federalism and decentralisation. He ridiculed the idea that federalism and democracy were structurally linked. Despite the theoretical abhorrence of the concept, the world's first socialist state was to become a federal state. After the revolution, V. Lenin realised that the yearning for national representation was a potent political resource that could be exploited even if it meant compromising his principled stand against federalism and decentralisation (Feeley, Rubin, 2009). In the end, V. Lenin's acceptance of federalism was purely tactical. V. Lenin saw federalism as the surest step to the most solid unification of the different nationalities of Russia into a single, democratic, centralised Soviet state. He saw federalism as a political force that could allay the fears of different

nationalities towards allegiance to central Soviet rule. He was convinced that when the time came, the federal form would simply wither away.

The Bolsheviks did not intend for the federal structure to be a permanent organisational feature of socialism. It was only to be a stage or phase on the path to a unified socialist society. The ground realities of Russia in the early 20th century put considerable restraints on Marxist theories and political expediency dictated terms to the Bolsheviks. Hence, the principle of "national statehood" eventually became enshrined as a fundamental principle of Soviet socialist federalism. Their views on federalism underwent a complex process of evolution from rejection in principle to its acceptance as the most suitable form of organising a multinational state. Of primary significance is how V. Lenin personally sought to use the federal concept to handle the complex nationality issue in the infancy of the USSR. The formulas (sic) of Leninist nationality policy continue to be invoked in the USSR as the rationale and intellectual basis for present-day policies regarding nationalities. Even M. Gorbachev, the architect of the USSR's collapse, swore by Leninist ideas on the issue, at least initially. Hence, Soviet leaders, starting from V. Lenin to M. Gorbachev, adopted both a theoretical as well as a practical component in their policies (Koslowski, Kratochwil, 1994). While the former derived heavily from Marxist theories, the latter was influenced by their own experience and sense of political expediency. V. Lenin believed that nationalist consciousness and enmity, especially during the tsarist period, were a result of oppression. He professed that once the source of that oppression was removed through the establishment of a socialist state, the nationalist consciousness and enmity would give way to a proletarian consciousness pervading all nationalities. According to V. Lenin, just like the *state*, national identities would wither away with the establishment of socialism.

6. V. Lenin and self-determination

Though V. Lenin was not immune to the early twentieth-century trend toward national self-determination, he was a statesman capable of bending the right to self-determination to fit Russian realities. For V. Lenin, self-determination meant offering a temporary concession to nationalist sentiments in exchange for political support for

socialism (Suny 1990). V. Lenin fashioned an interpretation of national self-determination that offered the national group a voluntary and free choice to join the Bolshevik ranks. Once the offer was accepted, the "right" to direct and control their national destinies was quickly assumed by the party. Hence, the right to self-determination became a one-time choice rather than a legal right to continuing self-government. If you offered them self-determination, they would not use it; if you denied them the right, they would demand it. National autonomy as interpreted by V. Lenin included the following: the right to self-determination and secession; the formation of independent governments for national groups; and full legal, political and economic equality of all nations in the spheres of social and political life of the country (Mancini 2008). The existence of a single party as an organisation of the proletariat and the principle of "democratic centralism" within the party would, according to V. Lenin's perception, keep nationalist sentiments in check. It was only during his end-days that he realised his government was promoting the forced assimilation of different nationalities into the Soviet Union rather than the gradual, natural one he had anticipated. Perhaps his last attempt at arresting the aberrations and implementing his ideas included his interdicting J. Stalin's attempt to concentrate economic commissariats in Moscow in the draught of the Treaty of the Soviet Union of 1922 (Mawdsley 1998). V. Lenin forced J. Stalin to change the draft, but when the time came for its implementation, V. Lenin had already died.

V. Lenin's nationalities policy was the founding stone on which subsequent Moscow Republic relationships were built. The periphery states often cited V. Lenin's policy to demand further rights and also used it as a shield against the overbearing policies of the centre. As J. Critchlow notes, it has been a standard practise for the defenders of minorities' rights to use Leninist quotations "to buttress every argument for national rights" (Amato et al., 2018: 128). On the other hand, the opponents of national rights always argued that V. Lenin was essentially an integrationist. They believed that V. Lenin's purpose for managing nationality relations was national integration. The property-oriented, territorial principle of political organisation was antagonistic to Marxist communism. Such an ideological explanation made it easier for the Bolsheviks to deny individual rights, the rights of localist parties and

the rights of territorial governments. Hence, once again ideology came to Moscow's rescue and that it was used to bind the far-flung republics to the centre. However, the Soviet leaders could not afford to fully ignore the nationalist sentiments. Hence, they sought to harness the prevailing political forces by combining nationalist sentiments with the attenuated political institutions of the territorial federation. This became the root compromise of the Soviet Socialist Federation, which was essentially a hybrid of nationalist and territorial principles.

7. New approaches to foreign policy

The dominant Marxist-Leninist ideology, which was the cornerstone of Moscow's foreign policy for more than seven decades, started to lose appeal during the M. Gorbachev regime. For all practical purposes, it ceased to exist after the official collapse of the USSR. The collapse of the monopolistic, all-pervading socialist ideology gave rise to several competing concepts in the realm of Russian foreign policy. Like true neophytes, just about anyone and everyone proposed a viable and effective model of dealing with the new situation. While some advocated a complete break away from the past, others refused to accept the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Some, on the other hand, proposed a middle path that recognised the new realities but suggested gradual progress into the future. The conflicting concepts and approaches to Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet period reflected a genuine crisis for the policymakers – first identifying new national interests and then establishing the mechanisms to achieve and protect those. In short, Russia's foreign policy in the first few years after the fall of the Soviet Union was based on three main ideas, to be discussed below.

8. The Atlanticists, Eurasianists and Russian nationalists

One of the first and most significant concepts was that advocated by the *Atlanticists* or *Westerners* (Shlapentokh 2014). It centred around the idea that Russia would make a complete break with Soviet foreign policy since that was based primarily on ideological considerations. They wanted to link Russia's foreign policy to Russia's goal of becoming a normal capitalist state linked to its place in Europe (Tsygankov

2019). The *Atlanticists* advocated a blatantly pro-Western approach in the hope of becoming part of the liberal, democratic Western world. The leader of this group was independent Russia's first foreign minister, A. Kozyrev, a young professional diplomat who had spent sixteen years in the Department of International Organisations of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Having served under M. Gorbachev for a considerable period, he had come to admire and support the latter's "new thinking". Not surprisingly, he vehemently advocated Russia's participation in international institutions. He purported to rid Russia of decades of over-reliance on military instruments and develop foreign policy ideas focused on the promotion of human rights and universal values of global economic, environmental and nuclear security to be realised through a community of democratic states. During the early months of 1992, K. Yeltsin and Deputy Prime Minister E. Gaidar, who were spearheading the drastic economic reforms in Russia, consistently voiced these "liberal westernising" views of Russia's national interests. For them, Western democracies were the ideal model and partner for Russia. The *Atlanticists* were criticised for blindly toeing the US line on giving economic aid (Jain 2003). They were particularly pinned for their support of the United States on issues of arms control and the war in Bosnia. As a result of the ensuing debates and criticisms, some other competing approaches came to be heard within the Russian government in the spring and summer of 1992. Foremost among them was the voice of the *Pragmatic Nationalists*, or the *Eurasianists*.

The *Eurasianists* advocated continuity with the Soviet past without antagonism or conflict with the USA and the West in general. The *Eurasianists* were hostile to NATO and believed that Russia's primary interests should lie in its relationships with its neighbours (Morozova 2009). As opposed to the *Atlanticists*, they held that Russia was indeed separate and distinct from the West. The presidential advisor, S. Stankevich, was one of the strongest advocates of this approach. This school of thought did not reject the West but called for a balanced policy, although the immediate urgency was to heighten the emphasis on the East rather than the West. They also called for tougher talks to defend the Russian population and Russian heritage in other former republics of the Soviet Union. As a Russian equivalent to the Monroe Doctrine of the United States, one of B. Yeltsin's advisors, A. Migranian, wrote in

August 1992: "Russia should declare to the world that the entire geopolitical space of the former USSR is a space of its vital interests" (Donaldson, Nadkarni, 2018: 119). The *Eurasianists* did not advocate forcible revision of the boundaries of the Russian Federation. They, however, disagreed with A. Kozyrev and Y. Gaidar in arguing that Russia needed to foster a closer relationship with the republics of the former Soviet Union, which were Russia's newest neighbours.

The third approach that became extremely popular was that advocated by the *Russian Nationalists*. The advocates of this approach refused to accept the demise of the Soviet Union. They claimed the collapse to be a mistake and believed in the inevitability of the rebirth of the Soviet Union. At the helm of this category belonged V. Zhirinovsky, leader of the misleadingly titled Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) – a neo-fascist party that surprised everyone with its showing in the parliamentary elections of December 1993 (Umland 2010). Other proponents included G. Ziuganov, leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation; A. Prokhanov, of the extremist newspaper "Den", and Colonel V. Alksnis, leader of the reactionary Soyuz fraction in the Congress of People's Deputies.

This group sought to recreate the Soviet Union, even by force if necessary. They were blatantly anti-Western and opposed the integration of the Russian economy into the world economy. They were the twentieth-century heirs to the Slavophiles, contemptuously denouncing those who thought Western culture or political institutions were worthy of imitation and praising Russian civilisation as distinctive and superior. Though in the end, their policies turned out to be more hollow rhetoric than substance, the Russian Nationalists did find popular support among the dissatisfied, fallen-from-grace Russian citizens. It was a clear sign that A. Kozyrev's romantic overtures to the US-led West were losing their appeal.

9. V. Putin's Russia and the near abroad

V. Putin assumed office as the second president of Russia on the 7 May 2000, though he had been the acting president since January of that year. V. Putin inherited a curious mixture of success and failure in the realm of foreign policy from his predecessor, B. Yeltsin. B. Yeltsin had succeeded in solving some very complex issues,

like settling various issues with Ukraine and the transfer of nuclear weapons to Russian soil. He attempted to reassure the nations of Russia's near abroad of their independence – a key irritation and source of distrust in Russia's ties with these countries. On the other hand, however, he was unable to establish mutual trust among most of the former Soviet republics. His approach to the near abroad was erratic at best. His frequent changes in foreign ministers reflected a lack of confidence in his approach to the former Soviet space. Apart from the legacy that he inherited from B. Yeltsin, V. Putin's accession to power was marked by three significant events that were to later play an important role in determining his policy towards the near abroad.

First was NATO's expansion towards the east and the subsequent war in Kosovo (Hendrickson 2000). To Russians, these were the embodiments in Russia of the US-led effort to isolate Russia and ignore her legitimate security concerns. The second was the outset of another war in Chechnya. This time around, the war had stopped being just a secessionist movement and argued to be a war on Islamic fundamentalists and international terrorism. The third event was the financial collapse of the rubble in 1998 (Senchagov, Mityakov, 2016). Despite the currency meltdown, there was no help forthcoming from the international community through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other international lenders who were pouring billions of Russian rubbles into Indonesia, South Korea, Brazil as well as other countries. These experiences underscored the harsh reality that V. Putin and the political elite internalised: the international community could not be counted on to help Russia rebuild its economy, provide security reassurances or support Moscow's attempt to thwart the rise of Muslim extremism. In other words, Russia, as they saw it, was essentially alone. Hard-nosed and unromantic pragmatism were now the Russian watchwords. There were to be no more "free lunches" for energy-starved countries of the former Soviet Union. And more effort needed to be placed on bilateral relations rather than trying to find group consensus through mechanisms such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). And so, Russia would have to pursue its interests and define its friends according to "what's in it for Russia".

During the March 2000 presidential election campaign, V. Putin refused to outline his policy programme in any detail or debate other candidates, but he took positions on some issues. He called for a strong and stable Russia, fighting crime and enforcing law and order (exemplified by fighting Chechen terrorists as convenient scapegoats). He stressed that "the stronger the state, the freer the individual" (Donaldson, Nadkarni, 2018: 78), trying to equate safety and freedom. He also argued that a strong state is "part of Russia's genetic code" (Baev 2006: 5). Though lacking in clarity, these statements gave ample indications of where V. Putin wanted to take Russia and what image he wanted to cultivate for his country in the new millennium. After V. Putin became acting president, he gave assurances that Russian foreign policy would not change. A debate on Russia's foreign policy course, however, soon began, encompassing such traditional themes as whether Russia should be oriented toward the West or the East, should embrace "globalism" that includes ties with the West or "multipolarity" that emphasises equality in foreign relations and reliance on multilateral institutions. Though V. Putin, in his election campaign, mainly stressed domestic issues, he did appear to reject an anti-Western foreign policy. In a letter to the Russian people, V. Putin stated: "Russian foreign policy should promote national interests" (Light 2015: 17). The real, especially economic, interests of the country alone should determine what Russian diplomats do. This economic-centric approach became very pronounced in most of V. Putin's subsequent policy decisions, particularly toward the countries of the near abroad.

10. Pragmatism: the cornerstone of V. Putin's policy

V. Putin started readjusting Russian foreign policy even while he was the acting president. The aim was to protect Russian interests to the maximum extent, to make the nation strong, the people rich, and revive the economy. However, the cornerstone of the new Russian president was *pragmatism*. Such was the focus on pragmatism that V. Putin was prepared to give it another try with the West despite the recent bitterness in relations. He realised that Russia could not afford to break away from the financial aid for its economic recovery over at least the next decade. He was prepared to condone the West's indifference, as shown in NATO's actions, simply

because he was focused on Russia's economic interests. In an effort to convince the West, especially the United States, of his intentions, he urged the Duma to ratify START II as soon as possible. Russia also actively attempted to make friends with European countries (Mostafa, Mahmood, 2018). V. Putin invited German, British, French and Italian foreign ministers to visit Russia and held consultations on bilateral as well as global issues. On 16 April 2003, he broke convention and visited Britain on the eve of his presidential inauguration, conducting meetings with Prime Minister Tony Blair and business leaders. This not only demonstrated that V. Putin was prepared to adopt flexibility in Russian diplomacy but also made clear that V. Putin's pragmatism centred around economic interests. He was prepared to forget the recent wrongs if he thought that would help Russia attain economic prosperity and independence. This flexibility was most prominent in V. Putin's approach towards NATO. In a BBC interview, he indicated his desire for close ties with the West and more influence in NATO affairs, reflecting his decision to renew some Russian ties with NATO broken during the Kosovo conflict. He stated: "We believe we can talk about more profound integration with NATO, but only if Russia is regarded as an equal partner" (Aybet, Moore, 2010: 108). Russia had opposed the eastern expansion of NATO, V. Putin suggested, only because Moscow had been excluded from discussion of the issue, but this does not mean Russians are going to shut ourselves off from the world. Isolationism is not an option. When G. Robertson visited Russia in March 2000, V. Putin held talks with him and decided to make rapprochement with NATO and resume contacts. As the acting president, he even did not rule out "the possibility for Russia to join NATO" (Forsberg, Herd, 2015), if the latter paid attention to Russian interests and regarded Russia as an equal partner. The western response to V. Putin's gestures was immediate. The western creditors agreed to a package of postponements, reducing principal and interest rates, and an extension of the repayment period over 30 years.

There was a very discernable shift in Russia's foreign policy towards the West as soon as V. Putin was appointed as the acting president. Unsurprisingly, his pro-Western foreign policy became a source of much speculation, and even wonderment, among both Russian analysts and Russia-watchers in the West. According to one

school of thought, V. Putin has proven almost visionary in rejecting the reflexive anti-Americanism of his country's political class and steering foreign policy unequivocally westward. For some of the adherents of this view, V. Putin's move in this direction has been heroic, given that it has powerful opponents throughout Russia's foreign policy, military and security establishments, not to mention its parliament. The other, more cynical view of V. Putin's foreign policy shift proclaimed that it was aimed at winning the West's acquiescence to the suppression of press freedom, vote-rigging and human rights violations in Russia. The adherents of this school even suggested that Kremlin propagandists were deliberately fanning nationalistic opposition to V. Putin's foreign policy in order to convince the West that he is surrounded by "nationalistic and anti-Western wolves" (Dąbrowski 2021), and thus deserves increased support. Such cynicism, however, has not found much support from others.

In July 2000, V. Putin approved a new foreign policy doctrine focusing on economic interests, the rights of Russians abroad and intelligence gathering. V. Putin also endorsed a document already adopted by the Russian Security Council on the 24 March 2000, before his election in May. According to various news agencies reporting on the V. Putin doctrine, the top priority for the foreign ministry would be to defend Russian economic interests abroad (Abushov 2009). The document also focused on the situation of Russians living in the 14 other former Soviet constituent republics. Of particular concern was the alleged discriminatory treatment of Russian minorities in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. What, however, seemed to grab everyone's attention was the element of pragmatism in the new doctrine. Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov was quoted as saying: "The special thing about this new conception is that it is more realistic than the one approved in 1993" (Abushov 2009: 53). The new foreign policy doctrine was linked to a new Russian security doctrine adopted by the Kremlin earlier that year, under which Russia hardened its line on the use of its nuclear arsenal. The new defence policy went further than the previous one drafted in 1997, which reserved for Russia the right to carry out a first nuclear strike in response to an armed aggression that seems to threaten the very existence of the Russian Federation (Fink, Oliker 2020). The new version said that Russia envisaged the possibility of using all forces and means at its disposal, including nuclear weapons, where all other

means to settle the crisis have been exhausted or have proved ineffective. Observers have said that this reliance on nuclear weapons as a means to secure Russia indirectly hints at Russia's incapability to deal with threats through conventional means.

One of the problems that V. Putin faced on becoming the president of Russia was the creation of a free economic zone among the CIS members – something that had proved to be elusive for almost a decade. After Russia's August 1998 economic crisis, certain CIS countries began a customs war among themselves. Though many of these measures were later rescinded, as a rule, whenever Russian products were competitive they faced custom duties, while the CIS member states appealed to Moscow to continue the supply of cheap fuel. When Russia obliged, it soon discovered that even subsidised fuel was often not repaid; the CIS member states were much more concerned with settling their international debts to Western financial institutions and governments than with eliminating their debts to Moscow. V. Putin was infuriated by the fact that some CIS members, while maintaining the guise of the CIS, were indulging in other strategic games, which were not to Russia's advantage. A CIS Central Asian Union, composed of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, was created to stand up to Russia's military interventions in the region, while milking the Kremlin for maximum financial assistance. Much more significantly was the creation of the GUUAM, which consists of Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova (Tarr 2016). These countries were planning to establish their own free trade zone without consideration of Russia's interests. V. Putin reacted in the manner that has become his distinct style now. Moscow cancelled its visa-free travel regime with all these states. There were indications that V. Putin might take the drastic action of dismantling the CIS altogether and replace it with the individual bullying of key former Soviet republics. The instruments are Russia's traditional ones: oil deliveries and armed forces. V. Putin is determined to change Russia's policies towards the near abroad despite resistance from a number of states. No more slogans, or paper institutions within the CIS, but naked power and bullying is now Moscow's message. From another angle, V. Putin is employing a "carrot and stick" policy toward the near abroad. His new approach is exemplified in the case of Ukraine. He showed great respect for Ukraine by visiting Kiev first as the Russian

president. However, at the same time, he told the Ukrainians if they cannot settle their fuel bills, Russia would accept payment in the form of a share in Ukraine's oil pipelines. The goal is clear: if Russia ends up legally controlling the pipelines, Ukraine will lose some of its independence.

11. V. Putin and Ukraine

Ukraine is probably the best example of the new pragmatism in Russian policy toward the near abroad under Vladimir Putin. When V. Putin became the president of Russia, Russian-Ukrainian economic relations were in decline due to protectionism on both sides. However, Russia remains Ukraine's largest economic donor both in terms of state debt and energy. The energy debt of Ukraine has reached an astonishing 3.5 bln USD (Tarr 2016). Exploiting its near monopoly on Russian gas transit, Ukraine has delayed on repayments apart from the siphoning of 2 to 3 bln m^3 of gas. There were several proposals for debt repayment that were never executed. On the other hand, given the state of its own economy, Russia could no longer afford to subsidise Ukraine. Recognizing the need to put pressure on Ukraine, V. Putin adopted a "no more free lunches" policy rather than his former brotherly attitudes towards Ukraine. Measures were taken to dismantle the donor-recipient model of economic relations between Russia and Ukraine, primarily by decreasing Russian dependence on Ukrainian transit. Alternative gas transit routes – e.g. through Belarus and Poland – were planned and executed.

Russian electricity supplies and deliveries of fuel for nuclear power stations were stopped or suspended by Russian producers who did not receive payments. In early December 1999, Russia imposed on Ukraine an oil and electricity embargo in order to persuade it not to steal gas from the pipelines. Also, during debt negotiations, Russia consistently tried to pursue an agenda that seemed to be coordinated with business. This contrasted with the earlier tradition in which all talks ended with Ukraine's promises to pay later and Russia's readiness to accept payments of (almost any) kind. In other words, ever since V. Putin's coming to power, Russian policy towards Ukraine has been more economically driven and aimed at promoting Russian business interests in Ukraine. It was clear that V. Putin was stepping up pressure on

Ukraine. Russia pressured L. Kuchma to fire Ukraine's pro-Western Foreign Minister, B. Tarasyuk, in 2000, and Prime Minister V. Yushchenko in 2001. In January 2001, Moscow and Kiev reportedly signed a 52-clause classified military agreement, giving Russia considerable influence over Ukrainian military planning (Szénási 2016). Clearly, Ukraine is under pressure to re-align itself more closely with Russia. This may be subtly aimed at alienating Ukraine from NATO. On the economic front, Russian companies are on a buying spree to gain control over the electric grids, oil and gas pipelines, and aluminium refineries, which will economically further link Ukraine to Russia. Russian companies are spending hundreds of billions of US dollars to acquire these assets. As it was predicted, Kiev turned towards Moscow by signing major intergovernmental agreements in June 2001, including gas transit agreements for 15 years, cooperation in the military-scientific sphere, steel, shipbuilding and many other fields of interstate cooperation (Szénási 2016).

Throughout V. Putin's presidency, Moscow has maintained a strategy toward Ukraine based on the notion that both countries' national identities are artificial. In a form of what T. Snyder refers to as the "politics of eternity" (Merutiu 2021), V. Putin frequently invokes the ideas of thinkers stressing the organic unity of the Russian Empire and its peoples – particularly its Slavic, Orthodox core – in a form of what he calls the "politics of eternity", the belief in an unchanging historical essence.

V. Putin's address on the 21 February 2022 was particularly venomous. V. Putin has long asserted that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people" and that their shared past means that they should share a single political fate now. During a meeting with then-US President G. Bush in 2008, V. Putin allegedly said that "Ukraine is not even a country" (Merry 2015: 53). In his March 2014 speech to the Russian parliament announcing the annexation of Crimea, he also referred to Russians and Ukrainians as "one people" and he has returned to the theme in subsequent years, most notably in a six-thousand-word article titled "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians" published in July 2021 (Sauvageot 2020: 145). V. Putin also stated in his pre-invasion speech that the current Ukrainian state was a creation of the Soviet Union and that it should be renamed after its putative "creator and architect," Bolshevik leader V. Lenin.

The last three decades, particularly after the 2014 "Revolution of Dignity" and the accompanying Russian annexation of Crimea and intervention in the Donbas, have seen a substantial consolidation of Ukrainian civic identity. This Ukrainian civic nation includes not just Ukrainian speakers in the west but also much of the Russian-speaking but increasingly bilingual east. A generation has grown up in an independent Ukraine that, for all its shortcomings, has retained a solid democracy and is becoming more European in its view (due, in part, to Russia's active intervention), even as V. Putin's Russia remains obsessed with quasi-imperial great-power dreams. The current conflict has strengthened the bonds between Ukrainians from different regions, languages and religions. It has also made the divide between Ukrainian and Russian identities even stronger.

12. Conclusion

For the majority of the 1990s, Russia's foreign policy toward the near abroad was in flux. Ever since 1991, Russian foreign policy has been concerned with the challenges posed by Iran, Turkey, as well as Belarus and Ukraine in the near abroad (Gjorshoski 2020). Though this threat did not take on dangerous dimensions during the last decade, Russia cannot remain complacent about these challenges. Russia continues to be very concerned about the spread of Islamic fundamentalism from Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey to Central Asia and also, possibly, to the Muslim populations inside the Russian Federation (Modebadze 2020). This concern, together with the absence of clear border demarcations within Central Asia, was cited as one reason that Russia remains intent on defending the outermost border of Central Asia, an objective that has been used to justify the continued presence of Russian guards on Tajik borders and now in Ukraine.

The establishment of equal relations between Russia and the former Soviet republics is greatly hindered by the Russian desire to continue to see these countries as exclusively within the Russian sphere of influence and geopolitical interests. On many occasions, Russia has not hesitated to use military force to protect the Russian-speaking populations in the countries of the near abroad, just like in the recent invasion of Ukraine. In fact, the military doctrine approved by the Russian Federation Se-

curity Council in 1993 specifically mentioned this right to defend Russian minorities. This doctrine has been executed by Russia on several occasions, as seen in the cases of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Ukraine. The Near Abroad states have criticised Russia for interfering in their internal affairs.

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