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**RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY IN
A WORLD IN CRISIS:**

A Long Path to Fluid and "Normal" Relations

Francesc Serra Massansalvador



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Miami - Florida European Union Center

University of Miami
1000 Memorial Drive
101 Ferré Building
Coral Gables, FL 33124-2231
Phone: 305-284-3266
Fax: (305) 284 4406
Web: www.miami.edu/eucenter

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RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY IN A WORLD IN CRISIS

A Long Path to Fluid and "Normal" Relations^{1, 2}

Francesc Serra Massansalvador³

Transition from the Putin administration to Medvedev took place, in a friendly way and with huge popular support, between December 2007 and March 2008. The parliamentary elections on December 7, 2007 gave a landslide victory to the ruling party United Russia, with 64% of the vote and 306 of the 450 seats at stake. On March 2, 2008, a triumphant Dmitry Medvedev received 70% of the popular vote in the presidential elections. Afterwards, and as announced beforehand, the outgoing President, Vladimir Putin, took office as the new Prime Minister. The highly-popular President Putin, who has never had to face a runoff election and to whom much of society attributes Russia's return to economic prosperity and national pride, solved in this way his continuity in power, since his withdrawal as President was required by the Constitution after exhausting a second consecutive term. Medvedev being then under close watch, few observers however could give an accurate portrait of this 42 year-old politician, more linked to academic and intellectual circles than his predecessor, but had also been the all-powerful chairman of Gazprom, the strongly state-controlled company that shapes much of the internal and external policy of Russia. The new President insisted that he would keep the general lines of Putin's policy ("Putina"), a hardly suspicious statement, considering the long career undertaken by the two leaders together. However, everyone thought it unlikely that Putin, who had so reinforced the Russian presidency and had turned the Prime Ministry into little more than a technical office, would assume a secondary position. The *polnomochiya* or division of powers between the two positions was apparently scrupulously respected, but the charisma of the former President had not disappeared from people's minds or the public sphere. This situation led in practice to the existence of an unprecedented tandem in Russian politics. Nevertheless, the inner image and, especially, the image abroad of Russian power had changed substantially, at least in principle. The differences in appearance (Medvedev looks more flexible and malleable, as compared to Putin's more aggressive and assertive style) seemed to augur a more friendly, tolerant and receptive attitude of the new administration.

One might say, however, that the plans established by this agreed-upon transition by the new President, especially in terms of Russian foreign policy, have been superseded by recent events. Medvedev's first year in the presidency coincided with a transformation of

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³ Francesc Serra Massansalvador has an MBA degree in International Studies at Fundació CIDOB (Barcelona, Spain) and a Ph.D. degree on International Relations from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB, Spain). Professor of International Relations at UAB since 1996, he is a permanent collaborator with Fundació CIDOB and Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals (IBEI). He is been a *visitant researcher* at the universities of Bogazici and Marmara, Istanbul (2009) and Miami, Florida (2010). He is also the author of the book *Rusia, la otra potencia europea* (Bellaterra, Barcelona 2005) and coordinator of *Chechenia, rompamos el silencio* (Icària, Barcelona 2008).

the image of the international community at home, and more specifically a change in Russia's relationship with the world. From an international point of view, 2008 was characterized by the start of the global financial crisis, by the final phase of the Bush era (with its own characteristics), and by the election of Obama as the new White House incumbent. From Moscow we perceive clear indications of Russia's new positioning in the global arena in the near future, due to a series of events that affect the country directly. In particular, 2008 and early 2009 brought forth a number of unexpected challenges for the new Russian administration, which have created an image of Russia abroad that is far more aggressive than the one desired by the Kremlin. These unforeseen challenges can be grouped around three major events that placed severe conditions on Russia's short-term foreign policy. These three key events strongly affecting Russia and its international relations during Medvedev's first year of Presidency are 1. the conflict with Georgia, 2. the severe financial crisis, and 3. the renewed tensions seen in January 2009 due to the supply of Russian oil and gas to Western Europe.

Below follows an analysis of Russia's policy in relation to those areas considered as priority for its diplomacy: formerly Soviet territories, Western Europe, and the position of Russia as a world power. Finally, we will analyze the impact of the first year of Medvedev's administration with regard to further Russian attitudes towards the international arena.

The Georgian conflict: the limits of imprudence

Perhaps Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili wanted to go down in history by choosing August 8th, 2008 as the day when his country would regain sovereignty over some territory internationally recognized as Georgian, but which lay beyond his governance by a strange mixture of forced agreements, Russian blackmail, and international connivance. Perhaps he thought that the world would be watching the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games, and thus his actions would go unnoticed. More likely, he expected that the West would support his bold decision and would not allow Russia a strong response that could put into question international law. However, when Georgian forces shelled South Ossetia in preparation for the invasion, the result was not only the automatic reaction of the Russian army, but also grave international tensions in which Russia had to face, once again, the criticism of the international community. Despite Georgia's argument, pointing out Russian rearmament, the truth is that Moscow reacted to the surprise attack with haste and little reflection, in a manner consistent with the reactive tone consistent with Russian diplomacy. Tiny, impoverished Georgia had to withdraw its troops and saw its own capital, Tblisi, under threat of a terrible occupation. At the same time, Ossetian and Abkhaz rebels, aided by the Russian offensive (or counteroffensive), advanced their own positions, and thousands of Georgian civilians suddenly became refugees. The West, in whose support Saakashvili had been so confident, deployed its diplomatic apparatus, but not with the weapons Georgia was longing for, except for the late and ineffective landing of some NATO troops.

Russia acted like a wounded bear, and wanted to show consistency with the victimization speech acts, it had used in previous years, such as when referring to the case of South Ossetia and Abkhazia: should any foreign power intervene in areas under

Russian influence, or populated by Russian citizens, the Kremlin would not hesitate to react according to its capabilities. Just months before Russia had angrily protested the international recognition of Kosovo. In a new argument, Russian diplomacy stated that if we allowed such a violation of international law in the Balkans, they would interpret it as a precedent applicable to the Caucasus. Hence to Moscow there was an internationally recognized precedent for applying the right of unilateral self-determination. In their opinion this made the Georgian intervention an unacceptable interference.

The other bases, on which Russia supported its reaction, were the role of Russian “peace-keeping” forces as guarantors of the treaty of armistice for the area, signed in 1992, and the alleged genocide being committed by Georgian forces. Of course, Tblisi should have denounced the treaty before its intervention, but the conditions, under which Georgia was constrained to accept it at that time, were far from friendly, in the midst of a civil war with rebel forces directly financed and armed by Moscow. On the other hand, it is hardly admissible that any international peacekeeping forces have the right to act with unlimited force, as claimed by the Kremlin. As for the argument (frequently used lately) of genocide as a justification for one's actions - setting aside for a moment the controversial definition of this term – it could be argued that there was an “awareness campaign” circulating in the Russian media about the excesses committed by Georgian forces. Final accounts, including the ones made by the Russian media, provided much lower figures as to the number of casualties and the destruction caused by Georgia (HRW, 2009). But the Russian military response did not wait for verification of the facts, hidden under the “war fog” as described by Clausewitz. And the argument that South Ossetians citizens have Russian passports, although true (Russia delivered thousands of them without prior warning years ago), raises important issues concerning the right of a State to protect its citizens beyond its borders.

From a military point of view, Russia had it easy in the conflict: The simple fact that Georgia did not receive any strong international support is also a Russian victory. Both parties accepted the mediation of N. Sarkozy on behalf of the European Union, but the resulting "Treaty of the Six Points" implied asymmetric conditions, which clearly benefitted Russia. However, the Kremlin has not shown much of triumph, and the aftertaste of defeat (or at least a lack of victory) is common to all parties involved (Antonenko, 2008). Russia agreed to withdraw from all occupied territory, and did so even before the deadline set in the agreement. And despite the havoc caused by recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the Kremlin did not even press its staunchest allies for support on this initiative. Somehow, the bombastic language used during the conflict has significantly relaxed. Since then Russia recognized the need to resume a more flexible dialogue, especially after perceiving an position from the West (in particular the European Union) not likely to unconditionally support Georgian requests.

However, the military adventure of August 2008 may have cost Russia much more than originally thought. True, the Kremlin has maintained a position of firmness and consistency; but this was at the expense of newly tense relations with the outside world, which is not in Russia's interest to jeopardize. The armed response was, undoubtedly, an option Russia wishes to maintain. Once the need is produced, and an armed response used, the limits of this option become clear. Although considering Russian interests, there was no other response to the reckless Georgian attack considered,

unless a message of weakness would be conveyed. But both Russia and the West have realized along the way the need for greater communication and trust in order to avoid further imprudence and new excesses by both parties.

The global crisis and its impact in Russia

The fragility shown by Russia after its military victory in Georgia is only understandable if we consider the country's social and economic situation. To "release" Ossetia or to take Tbilisi would not bring clear benefits to Russia from an economic point of view, much less from a political one. Instead, the country needs of trading partners, and a stable and reliable international image, after this was put into question by the Georgian adventure. In fact, 2008 was a very sensitive year for the Russian economy. While it is true that during the first Putin presidency Russia depended excessively on the export of hydrocarbons, in recent years the country has tried to diversify its exports by "reindustrializing" itself. In any case, Russia needs the world to rely on its ability, either as a trading partner, or as a country in which to invest, and therefore needs to be perceived as a peaceful country (an image, which the conflict in Georgia put into question), and as economically sound (this has also been compromised).

During the Putin era, Russia's economy continued to growth and project confidence. This was due largely to the stimulus of the (almost) continuous growth in oil prices. When Putin came to power in 2000, Russian GNP grew at a rate of 1%, and in 2007 it was growing at 8% - although in 2008 this index dropped down dramatically: People living under the poverty line were 30% when Putin began the Presidency, and 14% when he left. In 2007, Russia had the third largest reserve of foreign currency in the world, after USA and China. Russia had succeeded in 2006 to repay its debts with the IMF and the Club of Paris (23 US\$ billion) well in advance. It attracted foreign investment of US\$45 billion in 2007, almost double than the previous year, while Russian investment overseas neared US\$60 billion since 2000 (Sinatti, 2008; Tabata, 2006). However, these optimistic trends appear to have led in 2008 and 2009 to a harsh economic reality, not only due to the global crisis, but also due to purely domestic factors.

We can identify five major factors underlying the fragile situation of the Russian economy. First, Russia is experiencing a record stock market crisis that has forced several closures of the Moscow stock exchange; the latter has had a total loss of more than 70% of its value during 2008. Second, the military budget has been increased markedly since Medvedev's access to the presidency at the expense of increasingly necessary social spending. Third, inflation has soared dramatically, to reach levels of 13%, when the official forecast was 8.5%. Fourth, the price of oil, one of the pillars of Russian economic growth, has fallen more than 50% in just a few months during the summer of 2008, and has kept steady but fragile afterwards. And finally, an impressive capital drain has taken place: an estimated 25% of foreign investment has left Russia during 2008 along, half of it during the Georgian crisis. Some of these factors have been reinforced by the Caucasian conflict, while others are a reflection of global economic turmoil. All took place since early 2008, and have been increasing over the course of that year and the next.

Hence Russia, which in February was being considered by the IMF as a world power with great growth prospects for the coming years, has been driven to an extremely fragile economic situation, endangering not only its global position, but also its internal stability. The Russian economy experienced 5.6% growth in 2008, already leaving behind the excellent figures of the previous years, but in 2009 growth was negative: -5% according to IMF data. While economic breakdown was common to many developed countries due to the global crisis, the Russian recovery seems to be very slow: the projected growth of the Russian GDP for 2010 is only 4%, and the IMF-forecast for 2011 is even lower at 3.3%. GDP per capita in Russia, which reached a peak of US\$ 11,700 in 2008, dropped to US\$ 8,700 in 2009, and it is not expected to reach the 2008 peak before 2011.

Of course, the evolution of the global economy brings reason for optimism, but it is clear that the prospects are not so good for a non-stabilized economy like Russia. On other occasions (1992, 1998) international economic institutions, mainly the IMF and the European Union, have come to the aid of the Russian economy in need of external support. In the current crisis, that aid is complicated by the existence of a global crisis that has strained the capacity of these institutions to provide assistance to every emergency situation, many of them in the area of Russian influence. As a result, Russia faces the most recent and, simultaneously, the most persistent historical ghosts: poverty. At the mercy of the global economic recovery, Russia needs to urgently stabilize its own growth and to recover the confidence not only of investors and foreign politicians, but also, and above all, of its citizens.

The gas crisis: a crisis of confidence

In January 2009, two serious problems occurred with the distribution of Russian gas to Western Europe, originating in the new energy contracts concluded between Russia and Ukraine. Gazprom, the Russian oil and gas company, aimed to collect US\$2.1 billion owed it by its Ukrainian counterpart, Naftogaz, and at the same time seeking to reevaluate its energy supply prices. When Kiev was subjected to these new gas prices, they could barely cope with them (although they were relatively discounted by a ratio of 1 to 2.5, compared with international rates), and tensions rose sharply with the supplier, Gazprom, and the state behind it, Russia. Moscow accused Ukraine of "stealing" gas and "obstructing" a supply plant, causing outages in Western Europe. In retaliation, it decided to cut the international pipe lines passing through Ukraine. As a result, several European countries, especially in the Balkans, Hungary and Turkey, were severely affected, because their energy supply, both for industrial and for domestic purposes, depends on Russian gas supplies via Ukraine. Through that pipe line, as much as 80% of all Russian gas is exported to Europe. This led to a real humanitarian crisis in the affected countries in the middle of a hard winter, with a severe economic crisis in the making. This was not the first occasion in which such problems occurred, however we witness every winter some equivalent situation, in which politicians and European societies are compelled to rethink their energy dependence on Russia. The debate usually focuses on whether it is necessary to remove the obstacles encountered by Russian gas to reach Europe or, on the contrary, whether the dependence on Russian oil and gas should be abandoned by

diversifying Europe's energy supply. Once again energy supply routes were front-page news as an issue of strategic importance for Europe.

Russia is also using a Northern pipeline (*Yamal*), which delivers gas mostly to Germany and Poland via Belarus and the Baltic. A third route is the *Blue Stream* pipeline, which crosses the Black sea in the direction of Turkey. In the future, there are plans to build the *Nabucco* pipeline, which will connect Turkey and Central Asia with Austria, and to strengthen the *Yamal* pipeline in order to cross the Baltic Sea without passing through any intermediate countries. But while the first project is generally interpreted as a threat to Russian interests, the *Yamal* is strongly supported by *Gazprom* and the Kremlin. There are also several other projects that try to diversify energy supply by creating pipelines to Algerian and Libyan gas, such as *Galsi* and *Transmed*, supported by Italy, and *Medgaz*, funded by Spanish companies (Sagers, 2007).

The gas crisis ended after a few days, largely due to pressure from the European Union, but the underlying problem persists. It is no longer true that Europeans prefer a "Christian Orthodox" rather than a "Muslim" source of energy (Moisi, 2005). They want to have a reliable source that does not threaten the economic growth and welfare of European countries. In this context, Russia accuses Europe of mistrust: only such distrust may be behind energy route projects such as the BTC (Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan pipeline, whose purpose is to transport gas and oil from the Caspian Sea and Central Asia by bypassing Russia), and the Nabucco pipeline (which favor Ukraine and Turkey as alternative energy routes). Several observers, and entire sectors in Europe (Loskot, 2005), however, have reciprocally accused Moscow of bad faith, and desiring to ensure energy blackmail, after attracting Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to its interests through the Turkmenbashi treaty of 2006 (which ensures priority supply of Central Asian gas to Russia), as this deviates gas from the path that would lead to Baku and from there to Western Europe. The gas crisis of 2009 has put these suspicions on the table - and also the common Western will to overcome them. As Europe's energy needs and Russia's need to sell it represent convergent interest among them, these periodic crises only hurt both sides.

In this regard, it should be noted that, contrary to some perceptions in Europe, the Russian economy suffers from excessive, even uncomfortable, dependence on energy exports, with clear ramifications for its national policy. According to International Energy Agency 2008 data, Europe received some 30% of its energy supplies from Russia, while hydrocarbons account for about 70% of all Russian exports to the European Union, with the energy sector representing 25% of Russian GDP. This lack of proportion is even more highlighted by the presence of the state holding *Gazprom*, which alone accounts for 8% of Russian GDP. This company is currently under significant control of the Russian government, to the point of where one might even speak of an interconnection between it and the Russian government, even leading them to alternate their leaders. This practice stems from the Yeltsin era, when the company founder, V. Chernomyrdin, served for a long time as Prime Minister (Ahrend and Tompson, 2005; Milov, V. et al., 2006). Medvedev also left the presidency of the gas group for the presidency of the Russian Federation, and was replaced at *Gazprom* by former Prime Minister V. Zubkov. The weight of this company in the economy and Russian politics is obvious, and as a result much Russian foreign policy is decided at *Gazprom* headquarters. As this company is interested in selling, particularly to Europe, it needs a good neighbor

policy that promotes trade, and avoids further misunderstandings and tensions, for the sake of the Russian economy, the welfare of its citizens—and corporate profits (Balzer, 2005).

Russia and Europe, forced to agree

The foregoing leads us to ponder the importance of relations between both parts of Europe as a mutually beneficial project. The crises experienced in recent years have shown a new paradigm in relation to others with previous periods of tension between Moscow and Brussels: there is now a desire for overcoming misunderstandings immediately, and for maintaining privileged relations between both powers, regardless of the other smaller players' interests. In the past two decades, the crises between Europe and Russia were deep and serious; in the two interventions in 1994 and 1999, which Russia made in Chechnya Europe denounced what were considered violations of human rights and excessive use of force. Russia, meanwhile, viewed these concerns as unacceptable interference, the result of mistrust and an implicit desire to limit Russia's actions, not only in the international field, but even in its own area of sovereignty.

Later, in 2004 the European Union, submerged in serious internal divisions over the European Constitution and U.S. operations in Iraq, reacted equivocally to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. The leader of the revolution, V. Yushchenko sent a message of hope to Ukrainian society about early accession to European institutions, which these institutions were unable to deny, causing outrage in Moscow and a crisis of confidence that took time to be repaired. What for some Europeans (especially in the East) meant the defense of citizens' rights and the sovereignty of States, represented for Russia new interference over their sphere of influence: Russia felt that it could claim its rightful status as a regional power, as well as traditional links to the surrounding area. There were often accusations of manipulation of public opinion and imperialism, which deepened the gap and mutual mistrust. This position is often fueled by the historic distrust felt by the countries of Eastern Europe that, until two decades ago, saw Russia limiting their sovereignty and freedom. Thus, in May 2001, the then President of the Czech Republic, V. Havel, stated in front of the candidates for NATO membership (the "Vilnius Ten") that he was convinced that Russia, not being a country either Western or European, should not receive special treatment from Western organizations. When, under the Obama administration, the U.S. proposed the withdrawal of the anti-missile defensive shield project, over twenty former presidents, prime ministers and ministers of foreign affairs from Eastern Europe expressed their concern publicly.

This dynamic of misunderstandings and accusations contrasts vividly with the intensification of economic ties between both ends of the continent. Today, Russia is a major trading partner for the European Union, while the European Union is by far Russia's first economic partner. These bonds of interdependence are extremely strong: over 60% of Russian exports go to EU; of these exports, more than half are hydrocarbons. Russia supplied the EU about 32% of its oil and 42% of its gas imports in 2007. Similarly, the EU represented about 40% of Russian imports; overall, Russia is the third largest trading partner of the EU, after the U.S. and China, with 6.2% of EU exports and 10.4% of imports, according to European Commission data. The main exporters to Russia in the European Union are Germany (32%), Italy (10.6%), Finland (8.6%),

Netherlands (7.6%) and France (6.5%), while the main importers of Russian products are Germany (20.6%), Netherlands (12.1%), Italy (9.6%), Poland (6.9%) and UK (5.6%).

This data serves to draw a geography of European countries according to their relationship and dependence on Russia, a geography that becomes visible in every crisis between the European Union and Russia, and which has been repeated in recent tensions around Georgia and the gas. Thus, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, having strong commercial ties with Moscow, form a kind of pro-Russian lobby, ready to appease the wrath of other, mainly smaller, weaker countries from Eastern Europe (specially Poland, Lithuania and the Czech Republic), which feel threatened by the energy dependence or by the Russian giant's strategic projects. France, with its historical ties to Moscow, would be the traditional mediator in times of crisis, while Britain, with its marked Atlanticist policy and low energy dependency on Russia, tends to keep its distance from the Kremlin. This is reflected in the EU's complicated power geometry: countries interested in maintaining good relations with Moscow are usually the most powerful, while the most committed to an anti-Russian front are the Eastern countries, not very influential, but whose inexperience led them in 2004 to endanger the EU joint position with their militant attitude in favor of the Ukrainian nationalism. Despite demonstrating their belligerent position again during the recent crisis (and thus Baltic and Polish leaders, along with the Ukrainian President, visiting Tbilisi during the Georgian crisis), these countries often maintain now a more moderate attitude with respect to Russian actions and, above all, coordinate their own actions with the European Union to avoid further friction, as recently highlighted by the Russian president himself (Medvedev, 2008).

Russia and Europe have traditionally viewed each other with caution, though with a desire for closer relations. It has been stated variously (Fischer, 2009) that the treatment which the West accords Russia ranges between the "difficult partner" and the "strategic adversary". Still, despite periodic tensions, it is now clear that an eventual confrontation between Russia and Europe would be highly detrimental to both, and is thus carefully avoided. On the contrary, there is a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, establishing a highly ambitious framework for cooperation between the two parties. It is so complete as to be unmatched by any other agreement reached between the EU and any non-candidate country (Lynch, 2003). While it is true that this agreement was difficult to adopt (signed in 2004, it was not ratified until 2007 due to the Chechen crisis), it is also true that, after over two years past its expiration, the Agreement remains unchanged because of the difficulties in negotiating a new text. Yet both sides agree on the need to stress their cooperation regardless of political difficulties, as demonstrated by the strengthening of economic relations in recent years. This trend seems to have been facilitated also by the EU's attitude shown with respect to the Georgian as well as the gas crises, an attitude closer to appeasement than to confrontation.

Is there an area of Russian regional influence?

One of the main issues that regularly make Russia confront other powers, as we have seen, is the definition of a Russian regional sphere of influence. In the latest crises in Georgia and pertaining to gas exports this concept was implicit, as well as, of course, in previous crises around the "color revolutions" of 2003 and 2004. Essentially, Russia claims to have regional leadership based on three central ideas: a) the traditional ties of

these countries with Russia (and thus the claim that it is the will of much of their societies to maintain those links); b) the nature of Russia as a "great power", something which, in their view, would allow Russia to sustain a particular influence over all geographically closer countries, as any other great power would; and c) the complementarity of the Russian economy to the markets and raw materials of these countries. We must add one important symbolic element, connected with the first concept: the majority of Russian people (and most of the other societies involved) still consider the Russian historical space (i.e. the former Tsarist Empire, the former USSR) as their primary identity reference. Therefore, any denial or threat to Russian influence on this area is to be considered a "national" affront and an "unnatural" attitude (Massie, 2001).

In this context, the "color revolutions" in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004) could be interpreted largely as an interference, or perhaps a conspiracy against the legitimate interests of Russia. The pusillanimous attitude of the EU during these revolutions was seen, at best, as a lack of sensitivity, in the worst case, as a betrayal (Schmidtke & Yekelchik, 2008). In the most recent crises, however, the European Union seems to have learned its lessons, and it has carefully avoided provoking Russia. The wishes of Georgia and (to a lesser extent) Ukraine to get closer to the West have not received the same level of support as on previous occasions. In fact, the solution to these crises was brought in both cases by ignoring Georgian and Ukrainian demands. These two countries have learned a harsh lesson that despite their strong political will, the support from their populations (especially in Georgia), and the apparent legitimacy of their demands, their governments should refrain from acting unilaterally. Western Europe does not want to damage its good relations with Russia, which have such profitable results, at the whims of some much less productive and influential countries.

As for the Russian sphere of influence itself, it suffers from chronic disorganization. Russian media often refer to the historical space referred to above as the "near abroad", in order to make it coincide with the former USSR. Since the Baltic countries have broken any links with Moscow, the twelve remaining republics were coupled in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). However, this community has failed as such in its most basic aspirations, and it works just like a regular summit meeting of their leaders. In addition, Turkmenistan and Ukraine recently announced their desire to exit into observer status within the CIS (a status not recognized by the CIS charter), while Georgia left the organization altogether in August 2009. Lacking any organizational cohesion, Russia continues to exert its control over the CIS area by means of specialized treaties concluded among groups of states through complex, aggressive, and coercive diplomacy (Trenin, 2008), and above all, by the existence of an international consensus that implicitly tolerates that control.

The latest events happened in 2009 bring about some contradictory prospects: on the one hand, Ukraine seemed to overcome the effects of the 2004 Orange Revolution, and the Russophile Viktor Yanukovich was elected as the new President. The new agreements reached by Yanukovich with Russia on the energy and strategic fields may announce a period of apparent peace and stability in the region; but Ukraine is far from having reached any political and social consensus on the issue of the Russian influence. In any case, both the EU attitude of ignoring Ukrainian claims for joining European institutions, and the rampant economic crisis in the country were crucial for this political change to happen. On the other hand, in 2009 we witnessed some interesting steps in

Moldova, Central Asia, and Armenia tending to skip, or at least dilute the overwhelming Russian influence in those areas, usually by seeking closer links to the European Union and other Western European organizations, mainly on economic and energy grounds. As a general conclusion, we can say that the Russian regional influence area is far from consolidated, but that Western institutions will hardly make any substantial move to promote their presence in the area.

Russia in the world

Since its new foundation in 1991, Russia has struggled to maintain its status as a great power, and at the same time maintain a happy coexistence with other powers. This arrangement, however, has not always been easy, as the latest crises have demonstrated. We have witnessed the complexity of the relations between Russia and the European Union, which are mostly governed by a spirit of mutual cooperation. Relations with the United States, however, present some particularities that make dialogue between the two powers frankly difficult and tense. It should be noted, however, that in the final phase of the mandates of Bush and Putin, both leaders had reassumed a level of confrontation that not long ago seemed a thing of the past. After a meeting in November 2001 between the two leaders in Texas, there was a period of fruitful collaboration, undoubtedly due to a matching vision of the world that privileged security and the fight against terrorism. At that level of understanding, we saw examples of collaboration, such as during the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Russia's "constructive opposition" to the invasion of Iraq, or the participation of both powers in the "Quartet" to find solutions to the Middle East conflict.

But tensions between Moscow and Washington soon reappeared, something apparently inevitable, given the privileged nature that security matters mean on both their agendas. Following a gradual rise in tension, four basic issues can be found in 2008 that provoked confrontation between Russia and the United States and, by extension, between Russia and NATO: a) at the NATO summit in Bucharest in April, the Alliance approved the installation of the missile shield in Poland and Czech Republic, a decision that Russia considered an affront; b) at the same summit, the U.S. supported Georgia and Ukraine's candidacy for membership in the Alliance. Although this application did not materialize as yet due to European opposition, Washington adopted a clear speech of acceptance of these candidates, that was detrimental to the interests and sensitivities of Russia; c) in what may be interpreted as perhaps the most daring act of provocation to Russia since the Cold War, U.S. supported independence for the Serbian region of Kosovo. Although it is true that most EU countries did the same, Moscow saw this move as an Atlanticist maneuver seeking Russian diplomatic marginalization; and d) during the Georgian crisis, the U.S. diplomatic support for Tbilisi forced OSCE and NATO to take position in the conflict, and managed to make the Alliance land some weaponry on behalf of the Georgian government, soon after the military phase of the conflict was over.

This confrontation of Russia with the United States is not new, and it reflects the distinction Russia makes between "the friendly West with whom we can work" (i.e. the EU) and "the hostile West with whom mutual threats can arise" (i.e. NATO) (Serra, 2005, p. 223-35; Smirnov, 2002). However, even if there is no such economic dependence with America as there is with the EU, Russia is aware of the need for a common understanding between the two powers. Since the Georgian crisis, the Kremlin

knows it cannot afford any more confrontation, or even to prolong what has been called Russian "capability to act as a nuisance" (Moisi, 2006). On the other hand, Moscow can no longer use the threat of having an "Asian" backing, as Yeltsin did periodically, especially with Primakov as Foreign Affairs Minister (Duncan, 2005). Following the Georgian crisis, Russia only managed to obtain ambiguous support from China under the Treaty of Shanghai—far from the clear alignment that was no doubt expected. Other international support for its actions was scarce and predictable (Belarus, Venezuela, Cuba), and thus far only tiny Nicaragua has recognized the “new states” of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, existing only under the protection of Russia. The Kremlin maintains an independent foreign policy and this independence has allowed it for example, to maintain an extensive trade with Iran, or to sign military treaties with Cuba and Venezuela. At the same time, its position of engaging into multilateralism and condemning United States actions has led Russia to maintain closer contacts with other emerging powers, such as Brazil or India (Donaldson & Noguee, 2005).

In brief, Russia wants to maintain its own weight in the world, and to keep the ability to exert particular influence over weaker countries while talking as an equal with the biggest powers. However, Russia is aware of its structural weaknesses in an increasingly interdependent world economy (Cooper, 2006), and knows that it cannot have a position of leadership beyond the region, which is commonly attributed as its natural expansion area - sometimes, as discussed above - not even in that region. Russia is growing increasingly aware that it needs to become involved in global economic and political strategies, as it is true that Russia is still the object of great distrust to Western actors. But Russia equally must overcome its own doubts and distrust towards the outside world, so that it can generate a feeling of reliability. The last two years have provided serious lessons in this regard. Let us hope that the lessons learned and the experience gained, coupled with the current international situation of economic crisis, may lead to a new scenario of cooperation and dialogue.

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