

HOSTAGES TO THE PAST – POLITIZATION OF HISTORY AND RELATIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND ITS WESTERN NEIGHBOURS

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Introduction

“War is a continuation of political relations, a carrying out of the same by other means.” Carl von Clausewitz’s quote from the beginning of the 19th century is holds true even at the beginning of the 21st Century. But heated and controversial political debates connected to 70th anniversary of WWII outbreak in September 2009 and 65th anniversary of “Victory in Europe Day” in May 2010 nevertheless transform Clausewitz’s quote into “carrying out history as continuation of war by other means.”

Contending interpretations of the Soviet-German “Molotov-Ribbentrop” Pact are just a tip of an imaginary iceberg of the recent politicization of history by Russia and its western neighbours. The Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the Soviet Union was

signed in Moscow on 23 August 1939 by the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars and People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs V. M. Molotov and the Reich's Foreign Affairs Minister J. von Ribbentrop. The pact bearing their names included a secret protocol drawing the border of the Soviet and German spheres of influence in Central and Eastern Europe. In the West, the secret protocol was made public not until the end of WWII when its copy had been found among captured German documents. The Soviet Union nevertheless proclaimed it an apocryphal counterfeit and only changed its official position in late 1980s, in the age of Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika*. A special commission led by A. N. Jakovlev verified the existence of such document and in December 1989 the Council of People's Commissars passed a resolution condemning the secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

Contending perception of history

Official denunciation of the document nevertheless did not obviate the political dimension of the 1939 Soviet-German Treaty and did not debunk it from the interest of historiography. As it turned out, in majority of European countries, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact is perceived as a key tipping point bringing about all the tragic events of the WWII. It is especially true with Poland, the Baltic states and Finland which became the first victims of the Hitler-Stalin aggression. As a result, thousands of inhabitants of these countries perished, and, except for Finland, they lost their freedom and sovereignty. These historical narratives are rooted in local elite and public so deeply that they make a foundation of their politico-historical identity. That is why the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact is heavily politicized and a relevant historical research is hampered by popular political myths and legends promoted by the media. This holds true in the Russian Federation where the politico-historical identity of the elite and the public is to a large extent formed by the events linked with the Soviet-German War. This conflict, labelled as "Great Patriotic War" is perceived as the most illustrious and at the same time the most tragic part of the Russian history, leaving in its tracks millions of victims. The victory of the Soviet Union is taken for a factor legitimizing a number of Soviet Union's foreign as well as domestic policy measures passed after 1945. The "Great Patriotic War" is conceivably emblazoned with political myths and legends promoted by the media and accepted by the public.

We can only better grasp the reasons for politicization of historical events associated with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact when we subject its victims to a closer examination. Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Finland who were heavily victimized by this treaty officially

deem it a point of departure for Hitler-Stalin aggression. This interpretation has influenced 'national historical doctrines' of these countries and forms the citizens' collective identity. With the exception of Finland which does not burden its bilateral relations with the Russian Federation with historical matters, Poland and the Baltic republics often bring this question to the foreground of foreign affairs and treat it as a relevant issue.

This interpretation is nevertheless unacceptable for the Russian Federation since it interferes with her 'national historical doctrine' depicting the Soviet Union as a victim of Hitler's aggression. This philosophy interprets the 1939 Soviet-German Treaty as a reaction to the Munich Agreement signed in September 1938 between the Great Britain, France, Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. Moreover, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact is presented as an agreement guaranteeing the Soviet Union peace until June 1941, and the secret protocol is understood as a security measure shifting the Soviet borders more westward from the economic agglomerations vital to country's self-defence potential.

Institutionalization of the historical disputes

Diverging narratives of the events related to the 1939 Soviet-German Treaty are reflected not only in domestic politics and public information strategies of particular countries, but also in bilateral relations. The politicization of history of WWII in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and the Russian Federation generated an intricate complex of interconnected issues burdening their international cooperation. These problems are being repeatedly promoted in the media often in connection to either election cycle of particular countries or celebration of the public holidays and the days of remembrance. Election campaigns and historical anniversaries serve local politicians as reasons for constant public mobilization. Historical myths and legends are being exploited to influence the public opinion and to form the politico-historical identity of the population. The importance of this issue can be illustrated with Russia's decision to establish a special body to supervise the interpretation of history. On May 15, 2009 the Russian President Medvedev issued a presidential decree No. 549 establishing the "*Commission for Countering Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests.*" The commission consisting of high-ranking officials in the presidential administration, representatives of ministries and political parties as well as selected experts operates as a consulting body for the President of the Russian Federation. The commission will draft the background papers and reports for the President of the Russian Federation and

design a strategy for facing every attempt to falsify the history with the intention of damaging the interests of the Russian Federation.”¹

This decree provoked an immediate reaction in political and media circles as well as among Russian historians and political scientists. The supporters of current administration label this commission a foreign policy instrument to face the external forces’ endeavours to manipulate history of the 20th century narratives. On the other hand, the opponents proclaimed this commission represents an instrument of the domestic policy struggle and will be exploited to restrain the plurality of views and the freedom of speech in researching the past. This controversy cannot be approached from an ideological black and white perspective and, at the same time, it is impossible to take a clear stand. This is so because history is just too complex and the political life is always circulating a number of facts to be used by both sides.

The supporters of creation of the “*Commission*” maintain that in some countries, there exists a systematically organized information campaign against the Russian Federation abusing its Soviet legacy. According to Russian government circles, it was mainly Ukraine and the Baltic states who generate the media propaganda aiming to harm Russia. The former Ukrainian President Yushenko’s campaign depicting the all-Soviet famine between 1932 and 1933 as an exclusively Ukrainian example of genocide of the local population is an ultimate example of this. Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian campaigns portraying the Soviet Union as co-initiator of the WWII and characterizing it as an aggressive invading power serve the Russian government circles as examples supporting its argumentation.²

What is reality? Only relevant historical research can provide answer to these questions. Under the present conditions in the Russian Federation, Ukraine and the Baltic region, however, such a research is hampered by extremely strong politicization of the past. (Compared to these countries, Slovak-Hungarian conflict on Saint Stephen I and Svatopluk, or Magyarization and Re-Slovakization are nothing more than just a local political folklore with small explosive potential.) As regards the post-Soviet countries, in lieu of the relevant impartial historical research, we are confronted by a state-supported propagation of the version which is politically convenient. The politically controlled Russian media commit the

¹ Ukaz prezidenta Rossijskoj Federaciji No.549, 15.5.2009
<http://document.kremlin.ru/doc.asp?ID=052421>

² Pravda o vojne i mire, Rossijska gazeta 20.5.2009
<http://www.rg.ru/2009/05/20/komissia.html>

same sins which are criticized by Russian politicians in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Russian TV channels produce a number of historical and popularizing movies which offer heavily biased Soviet narratives and manipulate historical facts. These products of media are broadcast also in neighbouring countries and have a political impact on Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic states. On the other hand, these pay them back in their own coin and produce and broadcast their own politico-historical propaganda. The documents such as ‘The Soviet Story’ (2008) and ‘NKVD – Gestapo: Blood Brothers’ (2009) are perfect examples of this. They both are popularization pictures one-sidedly interpreting the Soviet past and twisting historical facts. Apart from the real Stalinist crimes, they also report on incidents which are historically and factually contentious. A vast array of Russian historians and political scientists condemn such an interpretation holding that the Stalinist regime committed so many documented crimes that coming out with virtual ones seems to be counterproductive for their objective research efforts. At the same time, these products of media buttress the Russian political forces in power which could possibly misuse the newly created presidential committee to restrain objective historical research.

International dimension

The debate surrounding the “*Commission*” does not limit itself only on the Russian Federation. What’s more, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Parliamentary Assembly added an international dimension to the ongoing discussion. This international body passed a resolution which has gone unnoticed in many European states, but nevertheless, set off a heated debate on politicization of history in the Russian Federation, Poland and Baltic countries.

On July 3, 2009 OSCE Parliamentary Assembly passed a resolution “*Divided Europe Reunited: Promoting Human Rights and Civil Liberties in the OSCE Region in 21st Century*”. This declaration contains a statement: “noting that in the 20th century, European countries experienced two major totalitarian regimes, the Nazi and the Stalinist, which brought along genocide, violations of human rights and freedoms, war crimes and crimes against humanity.” Furthermore, the resolution invited other OSCE members to comply with their commitments accepted in the 1990 Copenhagen document and to condemn totalitarianism regardless of its ideological accent. Last but not least, the resolution supported the initiative of the European

Parliament to proclaim 23 August, when the Ribbentrop –Molotov pact was signed 70 years ago, a “Europe-wide Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism.”³

This resolution has met with positive reception from Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian political circles and has been vastly promoted in the media as an example of the “European support” of their historical narratives. In the Russian Federation it raised condemning reactions from political circles with representatives of state institutions and governmental structures expressing harsh criticism of the notion that the Soviet Union was identified with the Nazi Germany. The opposition to it united a number of Russian political scientists, historians and journalists articulating that equalling the Stalinist and the Nazi regime is a distortion of political facts and a flagrant example of politicization of the past.⁴ On the other hand, a faction of Russian experts and commentators has come down on the OSCE statement, holding that it was historically correct and politically justified.

In this respect, the question of the “*Commission*” was promoted in media once again when some of the debaters called its representatives to react on the resolution of OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. These calls came not only from the lines of pro-governmental forces, designating themselves as patriotic, but also from the lines of the communist opposition. Voices of the liberal opposition expressed a deep concern that eventual action of the committee will only result in domestic censorship and jeopardize freedom of historical research.

Politicized history as virtual battlefield

Contending narratives of the past is one of the crucial problems in bilateral relations of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia on one side and the Russian Federation on the other. The problems with history of WWII cannot be avoided since, as has been mentioned, it is an integral part of the politico-historical identity of the elite and the public in these countries. The official interpretations of the events surrounding the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact are so conflicting and polarizing that they make the other side feel endangered if raised and prompts a defensive reaction. In Russia, the Polish and Baltic conception is conceived as an attempt to undermine legitimacy of the Soviet Union as one of the victors of the WWII. Conversely, the

³ Vilnius Declaration of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, 29.6 – 3.7.2009
http://www.oscepa.org/images/stories/documents/activities/1.Annual%20Session/2009_Vilnius/Final_Vilnius_Declaration_ENG.pdf

⁴ V čem raznica meždu stalinizmom i nacizmom, Jedinaja Rossija 23.08.2009
<http://edinros.ru/text.shtml?9/3732,110051>

Russian take on history is understood as a dismissal of the communist crimes and Soviet expansionism.

Membership of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in both the EU and NATO transforms their bilateral problems with the Russian Federation into a political agenda of both of the organizations involved. It is also true with the specific sphere of problems related to politicization of history which have the potential for overgrowing their current regional framework; thus far, no more than just a diplomatic and media dimension is present. The Russian Federation as a legal successor of the Soviet Union and her western neighbours did not experience such a reconciliation Europe witnessed after the WWII. Unlike Germany and her western neighbours whose historical compromise and de-politicization of the past were basic prerequisites for the future of western-European integration, in the Russian Federation, Poland and the Baltic countries, the historical legacy still burdens their mutual relations.

These differences in perception of the recent past represent a crucial narrative problem which negatively impacts the mutual relations of the EU and NATO members on the one side and the Russian Federation on the other. At the same time, these differences are one of the causes why history of the WWII is being politicized – the history which is in many countries conceived not as a resolved historical problem, but as a vital political issue. It is a collective problem of the common European past which cannot be dealt with one-sidedly. De-politicization of history is a prerequisite for creating truly constructive political relations and international partnerships. No doubt, it is a very long and painful process of coping with the past for the European countries to accomplish. This process is nonetheless a basic requirement for a stable architecture of the EU/NATO – Ukraine – the Russian Federation security triangle as well as for keeping the latent political pressures under control. The best example of this correlation is the development of Russia – NATO relations over the past two decades.

New game following the old rules

In the last two decades, the relationship of NATO and the Russian Federation witnessed many transitions and underwent several phases of ruptures and consequent rapprochement. This relationship may recall a couple where partners are too different to live together, yet they are too dependent on each other to be separated. As far as the political “psychoanalysis” is concerned, we cannot say which partner is from Mars and which is from Venus since their history has nothing to do with stellar heights; it is full of common prejudices, traumas and complexes. The long history of NATO – Russia relationship has led to the creation of

specific rules affecting their interaction. This is also true of the turn of 2009 and 2010 when the partnership experienced a certain recovery.

In the context of the Euro-Atlantic area, the Russian Federation represents an important regional power neighboring with NATO members in northern and Eastern Europe and in the Black Sea region. On the other end of the northern hemisphere, she neighbors with members of the Alliance on the border line dividing American and Asian continents. These geostrategic factors along with Russian military capacities make the Russian Federation a substantial determinant of security in the Euro-Atlantic space. In the next decade, this influence is going to remain unchanged and the member states of the Alliance and the Russian Federation will form a “security complex.”⁵

Political, power and geostrategic factors make NATO and the Russian Federation interdependent actors, which means that the degree of security of one actor is determined in part by the security of the other. Their relationship has had a long and complicated history stigmatized by different interpretation of many events of the current history as well as different perception of numerous key political issues. As the list of diverging views and interests on both sides is too long to be dealt with here, we focus exclusively on the problems which lead to the most recent rupture between the Alliance and Russia.

After the last NATO expansion, NATO’s external border moved more eastward and the Alliance became significantly more present in the Black Sea and Caspian regions. In this area, by their eastern border, NATO members witnessed the first local war of the 21st century. The immediate cause of the conflict between Russian and Georgia was a “frozen” separatist problem of South Ossetia stemming from the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, in South Ossetia a deeper problem only surfaced: pro-American strategic orientation of Georgia and prospect of her NATO membership. Moscow’s political action was, therefore, motivated by a perception of threat based on Russian perception also stemming from NATO actions in Western Balkans, especially its unilateral approach during 1999 Kosovo crisis as well as the Alliance’s power projection and use of force without UN Security Council mandate.

The war conflict itself was facilitated by two events which gave foreign policy dimension to the separatist problem of South Ossetia (and Abkhazia). International recognition of Kosovo in February 2008 and Alliance’s failure to include Georgia in NATO’s Membership Action

⁵ According to B. Buzan the “security complex” is a theoretical concept defined as a cluster of states with interconnected and interdependent security. Security problems of one country cannot be analyzed and dealt with without taking into account the problems of the other countries making part of this “complex.”

Plan (MAP) in April 2008 had fatal consequences for Tbilisi.⁶ The consequences of the Kosovo 'pilot' case along with Georgia's failure in the Bucharest Summit confronted her government with a fatal dilemma. It became increasingly more evident that Georgia's strategy of dealing with the separatist issues and Euro-Atlantic integration in parallel is not feasible. M. Saakashvili's presidential administration realized that international recognition of Kosovo doomed Georgia's prospects of sovereignty in which Abkhazia and South Ossetia would also be incorporated.

Under these circumstances, the Georgian administration decided to sacrifice an imaginary chance for reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and embarked on the realization of their second priority which was to become a NATO member as fast as possible. Political calculation of President Saakashvili who banked on the fact that aggrandizement in separatist areas would draw international attention and the confrontation of "small" Tbilisi with "big" Moscow is a proof of Russia being a threat and an argument for Georgia's NATO membership. These calculations lead the Georgian government to make a fatal decision to organize a military action against South Ossetian separatists. What played a substantial role in this decision-making were the internal political factors related to President Saakashvili's position being weakened after quashing demonstrations of the opposition in November 2007.⁷ President Saakashvili's decision to send troops to South Ossetia in August 2008 had no military objective since for Georgia such an objective was unfeasible *a priori*. On the other hand, a political objective was not only viable but also realistic – to demonstrate Russian threat to Georgia's political sovereignty and territorial integrity. A threat which is so severe and acute that it would call for an abrupt invigoration of the relationship between Georgia and NATO and make her chances for obtaining security guarantees resulting from her NATO membership more realistic. As a result, this 'political gambit' did not meet President Saakashvili's expectations because the psychological and media effect of Russian troops entering Georgia's territory was not strong enough to make member countries of the Alliance speed up Tbilisi's integration.

Nonetheless, we can find also an alternative interpretation of the Georgia – Russia conflict as a pendant to the aforementioned history. This interpretation tells of a well thought through and carefully pre-planned Russian aggravation of the situation in South Ossetia and Abkhazia

⁶ Under increasingly growing tension in South Ossetia, President's M. Saakashvili administration expected more accentuated political support than just a vague promise of Georgia being incorporated into MAP and a prospect of her possible full integration in the future as stated in Bucharest Declaration.

⁷ Korba, Matúš: Kaukazský šabl'ový tanec, *Zahraničná politika* 4/2008, Slovenská spoločnosť pre zahraničnú politiku, Bratislava 2008, s.21-24

which provoked the Georgian government to take military action. However, such an interpretation has serious flaws since it underrates political qualities and competencies of President Saakashvili's administration and it portrays the Georgian ruling elite not as "pragmatically hazardous" but rather as "naïvely stupid" and easy to infuriate.

Institutional hardware of the NATO-Russia relationship

While the debate on Georgia-Russian war is full of dispute and controversies, the impact of this conflict on the relationship between NATO and Russia is more than evident. The Caucasus crisis in 2008 led both actors to a rupture similar to the one after Kosovo crisis in 1999. The escalation of this rupture was considerably faster and it went more clear-cut since in South Ossetia it took the Russian Federation a couple of days to implement the same model which was being employed by the Alliance for several years in Kosovo. It took nine years from the military action against Belgrade in 1999 to the international recognition of Kosovo in 2008 whereas it took only two weeks from the military action against Tbilisi to the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia by Russia in August 2008.

The NATO members see the Kosovo and the Caucasus crises as two distinct cases and, according to them, it is not possible to employ the unique Kosovar model to South Ossetia. On the other hand, the Russian Federation views it completely differently: there is no substantial difference between the two crises which enabled them to use the Kosovar model as guidance for the action in Georgia. It is the perception of the procedural part of these problems which divides security thinking and strategic culture of the Russian and Western elites. The idealist NATO members interpret the nine-year-long diplomatic effort to deal with Prishtina's status as a factor legitimizing their recognition of the Kosovar independence. In an opposing view, the realist Russian Federation neglects this factor and considers recognition of Kosovo's independence as a result of a unilateral power decision.⁸

The Caucasus crisis burdened institutional mechanisms created by the Alliance and the Russian Federation after the end of the Cold War, namely the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) emerging from transformation of the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council (PJC) in 2002. This Council started to operate as soon as 1997 as a consultation body created after signing of the Founding Act on Mutual Relations between NATO and Russia. After August 2008, the NATO member countries ceased to participate on the NRC meetings because the Russian

⁸ Sanakoev, I.B: "Južnaja Osetija i Kosovo – umestny li analogii?", <http://geopolitica.ru/Articles/55/>

Federation made use of an inadequate military power in Georgia and recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.⁹

In the fall 2008 the psychological effect and the effect of media images of Russian troops entering the Georgia's territory began to lose its political relevance and member countries of the Alliance started to correct some their earlier stances. It resulted in the betrayal of the Georgian government's expectations to get their future NATO membership guarantees. Consequently, as it was agreed at the NATO foreign ministers' meeting in December 2008, the political dialogue with Russia will finally be reinvigorated. On the Strasbourg and Kehl NATO summits in April 2009 the heads of member states invited Moscow to reanimate disrupted contacts and to re-establish mutual cooperation.¹⁰

Initially, the conflict over Georgia did not have a positive outcome for the Alliance as NATO's attitude toward the Caucasus crisis was officially labelled as an example of double standards being employed in Kosovo and South Ossetia, even in western countries and Russia. In 2009 Alliance members tried really very hard to re-establish common dialogue with the Russian counterpart, the results of which became evident in December 2009 when her foreign affairs minister Lavrov appeared at the NRC meeting after one and a half year long vacancy. Accordingly, NATO's Secretary General A. Fogh Rasmussen visited Moscow in December 2009 where he had discussion with the President Medvedev, Prime Minister Putin and other Russian officials.

Even though the turn of 2009 brought a breakthrough in relations between NATO and the Russian Federation, it is still far from obviating the reasons which caused the political rupture in the past. These reasons emerged from the shadow of the Caucasus crisis and manifested themselves as soon as in December 2009 when Alliance members did not support ratification of the Russia's European security proposal to arrange relations of all countries and international organizations "from Vancouver to Vladivostok." As a result, in February 2010 President Medvedev signed the new Russian Military Doctrine. This conceptual document labelled the NATO's further expansion and an effort to move its military infrastructure closer to the Russian border "fundamental external military threat" to the security of the Russian Federation.¹¹

⁹ Korski, Daniel: Shaping a New NATO-Russia Partnership, Centre for Transatlantic Relations, http://transatlantic.sais-jhu.edu/transatlantic-topics/Articles/nato/korski_Shaping_a_New_NATO-Russia_Partnership.pdf

¹⁰ Strasbourg / Kehl Summit Declaration, 04th April 2009, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_52837.htm?mode=pressrelease

¹¹ Vajennaja daktrina Rassijskoj federacii, <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/33.html>

This has been vastly criticized by NATO's Secretary General A. Fogh Rasmussen and U.S. Secretary of State Clinton both of whom labelled the Russian viewpoint as an unrealistic anachronism since NATO does not represent any threat for Russia. President Medvedev entered the debate with the statement that the Alliance itself does not epitomize a threat but it is its eastern expansion that jeopardizes security of the Russian Federation. Given that NATO is the most powerful military-political organization in the world, it is natural, according to the Russian President, that Moscow is vigilant and considers its expansion a threat.¹²

The last initiative focused on the improvement in relations between the Alliance and Russia revealed once again Russia's totally different understanding of the NATO's motives and incentives. On the NATO foreign ministers' informal meeting held on April 22 – 23, 2010 in Tallinn, Estonia, Alliance officially proposed assistance to the Russian Federation in building anti-ballistic defence system in Europe. Initially, there were plans to discuss this offer also with Russian foreign minister Lavrov at the NRC meeting. Russians nevertheless refused to take part maintaining that they want to participate in making decisions concerning the anti-ballistic missile system and not just be put before *fait accompli* by Alliance members. The President Medvedev's statement in the interview given to local media during his Denmark visit to the effect that "the Russian Federation will only positively react to NATO's offers to participate in anti-ballistic missile system build-up in Europe" only supported this view.¹³

The most recent example of the lack of understanding between NATO and Russia is the response to 'NATO 2020' expert analysis prepared by panel of North-American and European experts led by former U.S. Secretary of State Albright. Since its launch on May 17th 2010, this analysis has been subject to heavy criticism by a number of renowned Russian foreign policy and international security experts. As the most controversial part they deemed is the 'open door' policy supposing future integration of Georgia and Ukraine to NATO. NATO's plans of expanding its sphere of interest by accepting new members and, at the same time, accusations that Moscow's effort to keep its sphere of influence in the Commonwealth of independent states is illegitimate and non-democratic are regarded by the Russian expert community as "western hypocrisy" (L.Ivashov, A.Fenenko, L.Savin, e.g.)

¹² This is one the most striking shifts in the Russian strategic thinking of the last decade. Even though the weight of Medvedev's statement may be questionable in Russian power structures, in declaratory context it means that the current presidential administration does not consider NATO a latent competitor but rather a prospective partner. According to Kremlin, the partnership will only form if the Alliance halts further expansion to the East and will not integrate Ukraine and Georgia. This is an important shift in Russia's traditional position which regards NATO as an imminent military adversary and a direct security threat.

¹³ Medvedev says Russia interested in NATO proposals on anti-missile defense, 27.04.2010, <http://en.rian.ru/world/20100427/158761782.html>

The first paragraph in the Part One of the NATO 2020 document is a quintessence of different perception of the NATO – Russia relationship, stating that “the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) enters the second decade of the twenty-first century as an essential source of stability in an uncertain and unpredictable world.”¹⁴ As regards NATO members, this quotation is the basis for their common security identity. However, as far as the Russian Federation is concerned, this quote is in a fundamental contradiction with her security thinking and strategic culture as the Alliance is still looked at as an essential source of latent danger with prospect of turning into an acute security threat against Russian interests.¹⁵

Politico-historical software of NATO-Russia relationship

The differences in perception and understanding of the common relations are caused by the differences in Alliance members’ and Russia’s interpretation of history, approach to international affairs, sensitivity to the security threats, and last but not least, in their understanding of democracy. Hence the differences in attitudes on questions of international security in Russia, US and European countries. Totally different narratives of the Cold War outcomes are thus reflected in the incompatibility of the western and Russian experts’ security thinking.

The historical events of 1989 – 1991 meant the end of the bipolar division of Europe, demise of the Warsaw Pact, the break-up of the Soviet Union and overall are in NATO member countries considered to be a triumph of the democratic West over the totalitarian superpower. The political shake-up of Europe helped to restore political independence in the former soviet satellites and push the idea of unified and free Europe forward (“Europe whole and free”). The very same historical events are taken by the Russian political elites and public as a period of reformation and democratization of Soviet Union’s contribution to the termination of the confrontation of two powers power and to elimination of the political tensions in Europe. The Russian Federation as a legal successor of the Soviet Union continued in her transformation which enabled the new European security architecture supersede the Cold War cleavages.

Such an interpretation assumes that NATO members abused Russia’s good will because they expanded their sphere of influence at her expense, building up military infrastructure by her

¹⁴ NATO 2020: Assured Security; Dynamic Engagement, Analysis and Recommendations of the Group of Experts on a New Strategic Concept for NATO, 17.5.2010
http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_63654.htm

¹⁵ Gomart, Thomas: NATO i „russkij vapros“, Rossija v global’noj politike 2/2010,
<http://www.globalaffairs.ru/numbers/43/13568.html>

borders. Renowned Russian foreign policy expert Karaganov aptly summarizes this subjective feeling which underlies Russia's post Cold-War political identity as follows: "Russian political elites have never considered themselves being defeated in the Cold War. It was them who carried out the anti-communist revolution without external stimuli. However, after this revolution, foreign countries started to treat Russia as a defeated country; the NATO expansion epitomized this treatment symbolically."¹⁶

The differing modern history narratives make up the brunt of the recent differences in the U.S. and the European NATO members' perspectives on one hand and the perspectives of the Russian Federation on the other. Furthermore, this is also matched with distinct perception of power and identity determinants of respective countries. Even though the foreign, security and defence policy of NATO members is based on an amalgamation of idealist values with power interests, what remains as a fixed accent on human rights, freedom, democracy, rule of law and free market support and protection.

In contrast, the Russian Federation sees any rhetoric that highlights the above-mentioned values as a hypocrisy disguising the power and geopolitical interests of the West. Moscow completely and unequivocally accentuates the realist imperatives of her policy. This may be in part because the Russian Federation is unable to face up to her Soviet past and still tries to find her own political identity even two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union. That is why her identity as a security actor has formed itself rather in opposition to external pressures and not as identification with coherent set of particular values and ideas. The ideological legacy of Soviet Union has not only burdened the creation of such set of values and ideas, but it also brought in scepticism of the Russian political elites and the public toward the value determinism of the American and European politics. These are the reasons why Russian foreign, security and defence policy concentrates on the pursuit of its national interests in a traditional way – interstate rivalry manifested in expanding of her spheres of influence.

The attitude of western countries toward Ukraine and Georgia as potential new NATO members is a typical example of this intellectual incompatibility reflecting itself in distinctive 'security matrices' and diverging strategic culture patterns. While in Moscow, NATO expansion is looked at through the realist paradigm as geopolitical fight for spheres of

¹⁶ Karaganov, Sergej: *Rassija v euroatlantike*, Centr kompleksnyh evropejskich i mezhdunarodnyh issledovanij, 25.11.2009, <http://cceis.ru/rus/analitic/126.html>

influence, in western capitals such a step is justified through idealist paradigm as developing democracy and stability. As it can be heard in Alliance member countries, 'neototalitarian' Moscow is trying hard to eliminate 'new democracies' by her borders, while the Russian Federation speaks about an attempt of the West 'as a Great Power' to get into Russia's 'historically formed' traditional spheres of influence.

Still, the western and Russian perspectives are both biased and their incompatibility makes for misunderstanding in real politics. NATO members hold an idealist belief that the democratic character of their political regimes legitimizes Alliance's activities and helps to export its positive image worldwide – a view that is nonetheless exaggerated and leads to ignorance of other actor's interests. Subjective factors linked with the politico-historical identity are even more relevant when trying to understand the position of the Russian Federation: her role as a security actor is biased by permanent sense of external threat specific to Russian narratives of her earlier and modern history. As a result, the Russian political elites and the public are both ruled by the belief that the Russian Federation, being surrounded by latent challengers, operates in a hostile environment, and that her external policy is an expression of struggle with relentless foreign attempts to weaken Russia's position in traditional spheres of her influence.

New game or new rules?

Mutual NATO-Russia relationship has been deadlocked in the narrative differences for two decades. Cyclical ruptures and rapprochements of both sides became symptomatic of contemporary imbalanced European security architecture. The subjective feelings of one of the actors of being marginalized and ignored will sooner or later lead to destabilization of security in Europe in the territory between the Alliance and the Russian Federation. While the ruptures related to the Kosovo crisis in 1999 and the Caucasus crisis in 2008 represent an admonitory example, the re-rapprochement of NATO and Russia demonstrate that geostrategic neighbourhood and straightforward logic imposed by the security dilemma are forcing these actors into a partnership.

The question is whether this partnership will be a happy or unhappy one. The experience suggests that neither NATO members nor Russia have been able to overcome the present narrative differences. We can conclude with the following statement: the rationale behind the recurring ruptures and rapprochement of both actors involved is that neither of them is willing to change its politico-historical identity. Unfortunately, this is all too probable and, too bad for the security in Europe.

The security debate in second half of the 20th century revolved around the concept of a total military conflict scenario which was to occur after the Cold War escalates into a 'hot' war. This debate was labelled as 'Thinking the Unthinkable.' The development of the NATO-Russia relationship over the last two decades reveals that it is increasingly more desirable to start to 'think the unthinkable' in this case as well. A group of German security experts led by the former German minister of defence Rühle and the former Inspector General of the Bundeswehr and former NATO Chairman of the Military Committee, Naumann show us how to think it. In their open letter of March 2010 they raised a question of Russia's possible NATO membership outlining the conditions to be met to integrate her.¹⁷ This question and its realization, even if it may seem unthinkable, has a potential to eliminate many of the present problems. The complete change of paradigm may indeed present an elegant way how to deal with the differences in NATO's and Russia's foreign policy discourses.

Offering the membership to Moscow would demonstrate a political will of NATO members to make a contribution to a stronger European security through reinforcing their relationship with an actor that makes up a natural part of the European 'security complex.' It would also prove that NATO's rhetoric about 'indivisible' common security in Europe is not just an empty phrase, but has a real meaning in long-term gradual integration of Russia into security structures of the West. Last but not least, such offer would make the consolidation of security of the northern hemisphere countries more feasible as these countries are exposed to the very same pressures and threats from the south.

Offering Russia NATO membership would no doubt bring about a dilemma for domestic elites – a dilemma which would determine not only the future direction of the Russian foreign policy, but would also have a huge impact on domestic politics. Rejecting this offer would considerably weaken Russia's position within the international community and would cast over the west a longstanding Moscow's claim of disregarding her vital security interests. Accepting the offer and embarking on long-term gradual integration process would strengthen Moscow's international position, but at the same time would bring about changes in domestic politics since it would impede Russian political elites mobilizing mass support behind traditional stereotypes. As a result, the change in the paradigm of NATO-Russia relationship could eventually clean the air not only for security dialogue but also for intensification of

¹⁷ Rühle, Volker; Naumann, Klaus; Elbe, Frank; Weisser Ulrich: It's Time to Invite Russia to Join NATO, Spiegel International, 8.3.2010, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,682287,00.html>

political and economic cooperation within the framework of the European Union partnership programs.

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