# The Curse of Geopolitics and Russian Transition

Fyodor Lukyanov, Alexander Soloviev


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## SURFING THE WAVES OF DEMOCRATIZATION

TRANSITOLOGY IS SO YOUNG AND SENSITIVE TO CHANGES IN THE POLITICAL situation that it still cannot define its subject matter—what exactly is "transition?" The "beginning" of transitology proper can be traced back to the 1970s, when studies drew upon the theory of modernization, which reached its acme in the 1950s–60s (Kapustin 2001, 8). In general terms, "transition" means a passage from one type of society to another, primarily from authoritarianism to democracy. But the dynamics of national development in certain countries and political systems, as well as dramatic global changes in the political landscape, made political scientists revise existing models and create new ones.

New "waves of democratization" (which Samuel Huntington, who popularized this term, understood as "groups of transitions from nondemocratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period of time and that significantly outnumber transitions in the opposite directions during that period of time" [Huntington 1991, 15]), followed in quick succession. Seva Gunitsky has looked deeper into the history of democratization and counted 13 such waves to date, from the "Atlantic wave" in the middle of the eighteenth century to the Arab Spring in 2011–12 (Gunitsky 2018, 638–39).

At the last turn of the century, some researchers noted the academic weakness of the existing model, which was often based on not-

too-reliable assumptions (Cohen 2000; Tőkés 2000; Carothers 2002; Kapustin 2001). They compared different versions of transition typology (Saxonberg and Linde 2003) and questioned even the key tenet that political transformation proceeds from an authoritarian regime to a consolidated democracy (Mel'vil' 2007, 8). Boris Kapustin viewed transitology as "a noncritical directive to consider society (primarily a postcommunist one) as transitional" (Kapustin 2001, 6). Adam Przeworski somewhat foresaw this paradox and, following Schumpeter's thought, suggested considering democracy as "a streamlined open-ended system" or as "organized uncertainty" (Przeworski 1991, 12), thus proposing the idea of "undetermined transition." Further exploration into the realm of uncertainty could render transitology completely senseless as a branch of academic science. So everyone seems to be returning to the set transition track as "development from a particular origin and towards an identified aspiration" (Haskell 2015).

Researchers generally paid more attention to internal changes (or lack thereof) in a country than to its foreign policy. On the one hand, this can be explained in the way transitology studies socio-economic processes. On the other hand, a considerable part of political realities affecting ideology and government practices, the state of society and its relations with the authorities, got no more than a cursory glance from researchers, not only in the twenty-first century (especially its second decade), with its "democratization" of foreign policy and foreign policy perturbations impacting domestic affairs, but also in the late twentieth century, at least in Russia.

Naturally, the factor of foreign policy influence on democratization (or transition) was not overlooked. Among conditions for a transition, Andrei Mel'vil' names "a favorable international context (including institutional one) to stimulate a transition from authoritarianism to more democratic forms of government" along with "normative attitude towards democracy and mass attractiveness of democratic ideals, economic inefficiency and delegitimization of authoritarianism, and practical experimenting with democratic institutions and procedures" (Mel'vil' 2000, 3–5), but in the last, sixth, place.

He also makes a proviso that "democratic transitions by definition do not guarantee a transition to democracy." He then defines the impact of the exogenous factor on transitions as "an impact of the external environment; the degree of inclusion in principal international structures and institutions; the scale of international political, economic and other forms of support" (Mel'vil' 2007, 2).

While studying exogenous factors of transition, political scientists paid the closest attention to the theory and practice of democracy proliferation, which at the end of the 1980s included various concepts of "democracy promotion." By the end of the twentieth century there had formed a rather broad system of views on how exogenous influence produced the democratizing effect. Hakan Yilmaz presented a summary of these views in "The International Context" section of the book *Democratization* (2009). Among them he named convergence, system penetration, internationalization of internal policy, and different forms of Huntington-type diffusion. He noted that these views had not developed into "widely recognized explanatory models."

With democracy having become in the twenty-first century what Peter Burnell described as a "multinational industry" with an annual turnover of $5–10 billion (Burnell 2008, 38), the democracy promotion narrative came to be dominated by the ideas of "democracy promotion" proper, "democracy protection," and "democracy assistance." The first term referred to political liberalization of autocratic regimes, the second implied assistance to consolidate democracy, and the third meant humanitarian influence on certain persons and public institutions. Democracy promotion programs did not have to be limited to the "soft power" projection alone and included such actions as "sanctions, protests via diplomatic channels, and the threat of military intervention" (Yilmaz 2009).

## UNDERSTANDING THE RUSSIAN TRANSITION

Russia is considered an undemocratic country in the sense that its transition from authoritarianism to democracy has never taken place or is incomplete. This explains the abundance of terms political scien-

tists employ to describe the Russian regime, ranging from "democradura" used by Schmitter and Karl, and "delegative democracy" offered by O'Donnell, to "authoritarian democracy" suggested by Liliya Shevtsova (Mel'vil' 2000, 14), with elements of "reverse cargo cult,"[1] detected by Yekaterina Shul'man (Shul'man 2014). Along with the terms used by political spin doctors ("managed democracy" was first applied to Russia in the early twenty-first century by Gleb Pavlovsky and Sergei Markov [Papp 2005; Pribylovsky 2005]; "sovereign democracy" was brought into wide use in 2005–2006 by Vladislav Surkov [Surkov 2006]), the variety is indeed quite wide.

One way or another, it is generally believed today that Russia has not joined the democratic world in terms of either internal system organization or foreign policy. (Apparently Russia is not regarded as a player willing to accept the "rule-based world order" shared by the United States, the European Union, and other liberal democracies.) Moreover, the prevailing perception in the second decade of the twenty-first century is that Russia either cannot—or does not want to—do so, which was first expressed by Stephen Cohen at the turn of the century (Cohen 1999, and 2000, 39). But his observations were interpreted by his colleagues as meaning that transitology equipped with its current scholarly apparatus simply was not able to assess the processes unfolding in Russia (Tõkes 2000), and contested them from this point of view (Fish 2001). More balanced, let alone more positive, assessments (see, e.g., Shleifer and Treisman 2003) were almost unheard within the general disappointment with how the democratic process was developing in Russia.

Now academic discourse has drifted into realpolitik. The US National Security Strategy (2017) named Russia and China as "revisionist powers": "Russia seeks to restore its great power status and establish spheres of influence near its borders. The intentions of both nations are not necessarily fixed. The United States stands ready to cooperate across areas of mutual interest with both countries.… Russia aims to weaken US influence in the world and divide us from our allies and partners." This rhetoric is shared by many Western political scientists.

Their Russian colleagues, however, were quick to respond likewise. As Timofei Bordachev observed, "it is Western powers that are the real revisionists seeking to revise international orders to make them more comfortable for themselves," and the main revisionist in history, "the United States, is once again leading the way by having its eccentric President Trump announce a strategy of unilateral benefits" (Bordachev 2018, 57). Unlike in real-life political confrontation, where the principle of asymmetry is gaining momentum, Russia allows itself "symmetrical responses" in academic discussions.

Henry Kissinger (2016) has summed this up well: "it is not possible to bring Russia into the international system by conversion. It requires deal-making, but also understanding." However, there is no room for understanding either in the preset models of transition or its "uncertainty." Difficulties in the academic assessment of the transition are not limited to Russia. Even in seemingly well-settled Europe, with transition processes long completed, the emergence of the Visegrád Group made political scientists talk about such phenomena as "illiberalism" and "incomplete Europe" (compounded by Russia's destructive influence) (Kazharski and Makarychev 2018).

Along with the "democratizing" exogenous effect, researchers also studied other effects that complicated or directly blocked democratic processes in the country as a whole, and in some of its regions in particular, often providing ample details of their analysis. Anastasia Obydenkova and Alexander Libman came to the conclusion that "a high volume of trade with the post-Soviet states and a low level of democracy go hand in hand" (Obydenkova and Libman 2012, 367). The problem with such conclusions, in our opinion, is that it is very hard to scale them up to the level of international trade and economic relations and international relations in general. In addition, it is not clear whether this logic is reversible or not. (If a high volume of trade with undemocratic countries goes hand in hand with a low level of democracy, then a high trade turnover with democratic countries should boost it further, should it not?) In this case, Russia's constantly growing volumes of trade with the democratic European Union (which accounts for up to 50 percent of Russia's foreign trade—even as its trade

with authoritarian China did not exceed 20 percent of that with the EU [Movchan 2016])—which did not stop before sanctions were imposed on Russia for its incorporation of Crimea, should have boosted democratization in Russia, but this did not happen.

It is also hard to compare Russia with other countries in transition because of the unique foreign policy conditions in which it exists. Even after the dramatic fall of its international status and the socioeconomic collapse following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia remained a nuclear superpower with the right of veto in the UN Security Council and a state of unprecedented geopolitical magnitude (one-seventh of the Earth's land mass, with both marine and continental resources). This gives an insight into Russian people's perception of their country's foreign policy. In this sense, there has been no transition since Soviet times. "In Russia, foreign policy occupies an abnormally significant place in public life … issues of the country's international positioning and its influence and role in international processes remain extremely important for a major part of people in Russia" (Inozemtsev 2018, 317).

Moreover, the main "focus of attention" remains on Western and US policy,[2] particularly the entrenched opinion of "the West as a single political conception, essentially an institution," which often pushed Russian experts towards methodologically erroneous generalizations. In a broader sense, Russia faced a double dilemma: the historical (almost 200-year-old) dispute over the "choice between accepting and rejecting the Western ideology and values" was complemented with a dispute over the "choice between agreeing and disagreeing to participate in the West-controlled political institutions, an option never considered before" (Miller and Lukyanov 2016, 3–4).

Inflated expectations among Western specialists (primarily media commentators, though political scientists, too, are inclined to examine these processes through the lens of preset intellectual agendas) have added to the overall negative assessment of democratization in Russia. They tended to compare Russia to an idealized image of how capitalist democracies should work rather than to how less-developed ones actually do (Shleifer and Treisman 2003, 35).

The aforementioned does not mean, however, that serious research on the exogenous geopolitical impact on the processes of transition in Russia is not possible at all. A profound analysis of the geopolitical, geo-economic, and geo-ideological confrontation in the post-Soviet space was done by Samuel Charap and Timothy Colton in their book *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia* (2017). Although their chief goal was to study the causes of the current Ukraine crisis, their detailed study of its history largely helps us to understand the origins of antagonism that, without a doubt, has had a destructive impact on both Russia's relations with the US and the EU, and prospects for Western-style democratization in Russia.

We explore the circumstances of Russia's democratic transition in the context of both changes in the paradigm of transitology (brought about, among other things, by these very circumstances) and the generally invariable concept of sovereignty that, in our opinion, underlaid (and still does) the understanding of the Russian government's foreign and domestic policy. We also take into account the mutual influence of democratization and Russia's identity (both state and national), which has had a significant impact on the nature of the "social contract" between Russian citizens and the authorities. A combination of views regarding sovereignty and identity has also affected such aspects of the transition, important for success (or failure), as "legitimacy," "justice" (including in international relations), perception of values, and ultimately the formation of ideology.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Perceptions of the new Russia's place and role in the constantly changing world have undergone equally constant transformation, which could not but translate into its foreign policy decisions. In the 1990s, political concepts were dominated by the idea of "unity" with the West, which was generally shared by both Russia and the West. Only the concepts varied (sometimes quite substantially) from

> simple incorporation into the West as a junior partner (which would have taken Russian interests into account to a certain extent) … [suggested by Z. Brzezinski in his 1994 *The Premature Partnerships* article] to more extravagant concepts of equal partnership and its institutionalization, among other things, as a union of Russia and Europe [conjured also in 1994 in N. Malcolm's *Russia and Europe: An End to Confrontation?*]. (from Bordachev 2018, 53)

In the second-half of the 2000s, this transformed into the idea of "a Union of Europe," based on what was sometimes referred to as "asset swap"—Russian natural, human, and military resources in exchange for technologies and investments from Europe. In Russia, this approach was actively advocated by Sergei Karaganov and was consonant (albeit not completely) with German Social Democrats' proposals made when Gerhard Schroeder was in office (*Annaehrung durch Verflechtung*, Frank-Walter Steinmeier's concept). These intellectual efforts were an attempt to rescue the Russia-EU partnership when it became clear that Russia's adaption to the European Union on the basis of its norms and rules (ideology of the 1990s) was not working.

Since the early 1990s, it has become a common view in transitology that the "transition" in the postcommunist countries (including Russia) should be brought to completion by compliance with the EU's standards (and admission into its ranks) or, at a minimum, with the parameters of Western countries at similar stages of development (which in itself reproduced the unilineal-evolutionistic model of history) (Kapustin 2001, 13). Germany's reunification presumably provided a universal model, which Charap and Colton, following Mary Elise Sarotte, called "prefabricated structures": "Prefab change by definition did not allow for adjustment of the formula or give-and-take among current and prospective members about its design, thus excluding countries (like Russia) that demanded a say in such matters" (Charap and Colton 2017, 45).

At first, Russia seemed to share this view too. In the middle of the 1980s, the end of the Cold War was believed to have closed the issue of Europe's defense (primarily) from possible Soviet aggression. The post-Soviet, and subsequently Russian, leadership was beginning to think that the collective West would no longer be "a potential enemy" for the renovated Soviet Union (or a new and democratic Russia).

In October 1985, General Secretary of the CSPU Central Committee Mikhail Gorbachev spoke about building "a common European home:" "We live in this Europe … We live in the same home even though some walk into it through one entrance and others through another. We need to cooperate and build communication in this home" (Gorbachev 1995). He kept clarifying this idea by emphasizing the importance of Europe for the success of his domestic policy. "We can't make it without such a partner as Western Europe" (Gorbachev 1987), the Soviet leader said, trying to convince his colleagues in the Politburo on March 26, 1987.

But Gorbachev's Soviet Union and Yeltsin's Russia preferred to ignore the fact that many people in the West considered Russia the loser in the Cold War and that this gradually became the prevailing opinion, with George H. W. Bush stating in Congress on January 28, 1992: "By the Grace of God, America won the Cold War!" (https://www.nytimes.com/1992/01/29/us/state-union-transcript-president-bush-s-address-state-union.html). Under Gorbachev (and for some time under Yeltsin), the prevalent opinion in Russia was that democratic changes in the Soviet Union and the emergence of "a free" Russia had brought the country to victory over authoritarianism, and that Russia deserved its share of praise for that. Under this approach, Russia by default was put on the same level with leading democratic countries of the world.

But in the twenty-first century, the Russian political narrative has drifted farther away from the idea of cooperation with the West ("convergence" is rarely mentioned) towards the idea of competition or even confrontation. There are several reasons for that, but perhaps

the main one is deep disappointment with the results of partnership with the West in the 1990s.

Washington's strong unilateral decisions made at that time did a grave disservice to Russia's relations with the West (primarily with the US) and particularly to its "international" democratization. The Clinton administration gave the green light to NATO's expansion, which proceeded simultaneously with the EU's enlargement. The United States was the main driving force behind the enlargement process, and the Russian government addressed its protests to Washington, not to the EU leaders. But those protests were ignored more and more often.

Another key geopolitical moment came with the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999. All this "seemed to violate the understanding that the United States would not take advantage of the Soviet retreat from Eastern Europe. The effect on Russians' trust in the United States was devastating" (Matlock 2014): while most Russians (80 percent) thought positively of the United States in 1990, by the middle of 1999 they had largely changed their minds (32 percent were friendly and 53 percent were critical). In the fall of 2018, this ratio was almost unchanged (32 percent were positive and 53 percent were negative), with resentment reaching an all-time high of 81 percent in early 2015 (Levada Center 2018).[3]

The geopolitical standoff over Yugoslavia exacerbated the political confrontation inside Russia. On April 12, 1999, the Yugoslav parliament voted for accession to the Union State of Russia and Belarus (ICG 1999, 8). The Russian Duma strongly advised president Boris Yeltsin to start the process without delay, but he blocked the motion, in yet another chapter in the history of conflict between Yeltsin and the Russian parliament.

On the whole, as Anatoly Adamishin recalls, "Russian foreign policy took the form of party politics, not of a national strategy. On the pretext of discarding ideology, many turned a blind eye to distinctions rooted in geopolitics. The nationalist-minded pseudopatriots managed to grab the banner of the country's dignity" (Adamishin 2013).

The possibility of unprovoked military aggression against a European state at the end of the twentieth century was taken as a sign of the West's readiness to go to any length in order to consolidate its dominance. Almost no one in Russia, even in the pro-Western part of society, believed the humanitarian motives for the war. In addition, the Western analysis of Russia's reaction to NATO's enlargement usually does not take into account the fact that the war in Yugoslavia, that is, the first use of force in the history of the alliance, coincided with the admission into its ranks of the first three members of the former Warsaw Pact. In other words, the North Atlantic Alliance demonstrated simultaneously its willingness to expand eastward and its readiness to fight a war. Subsequent operations by NATO or its member states (in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya) were generally viewed as a logical continuation of this process.

Looking back upon the last decade of the twentieth century, many of those who determined the essence and form of international relations at that time often speak of mistakes made by the two sides due to both the euphoric expectations of imminent democratization and the clash of contradicting interests and concepts within institutions, organizations, and political elites involved in the process.

Adamishin (2013), who was Russia's first deputy foreign minister in the early 1990s, recalls that "in practical policies a fundamental mistake was made from the outset: unconditional orientation towards 'civilized' countries, above all, the United States, became the cornerstone of Russian foreign policy. However emasculated, Russia could have laid claim to something more than being just the US' junior partner." He is echoed by his colleague Jack Matlock (2014), who served as the US ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1987 to 1991: "Even after the USSR ceased to exist, Gorbachev maintained that 'the end of the Cold War is our common victory.' Yet the United States insisted on treating Russia as the loser." In other words, it is a matter of national pride, which Henry Kissinger (2016) cautioned to avoid in relations with Russia (retroactively). Resentment can hardly be considered an effective stimulus for democratization, especially if it is

directed at its main "promoter." It echoes today in sharp assessments of the West's (and Europe's) reaction to Russia's sincere desire to join it and "become part of the political and military system" in Europe. "Shortsightedness and greed. I cannot, and do not want to, think of another way to describe the reasons why our Western partners rejected those aspirations" (Karaganov 2018).

This disappointment is not groundless. Since the middle of the 1970s, Europe had had an institution that could have facilitated Russia's integration, namely, the Conference on European Security and Cooperation (CSCE), which in 1995 was renamed as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). In November 1990, the forum participants signed the Charter of Paris for a new "united and free" Europe. It transpired later, however, that the text of the Charter contained an irreconcilable contradiction between the "indivisible security" whereby "the security of every participating State is inseparably linked to that of all the others" and the national "freedom of choice" in matters of security (Charter of Paris 1990). Russia made many attempts to address this contradiction in order to resolve it for the sake of indivisible security, but Western partners either showed no interest or, more often, regarded Russia's efforts as a malicious intent to undermine NATO. The last such attempt was undertaken by President Dmitry Medvedev in June 2008, when he presented a draft treaty on European security, but to no avail (see, e.g., Draft Treaty 2009).

The CSCE/OSCE did not become an alternative to NATO. The status of this forum was unclear to the Americans, who were gaining an increasingly strong voice in discussing the terms of European integration. In the early 1980s, "prefabricated structures" of the previous era moved "eastward and secured a future for themselves. Americans and West Germans had successfully entrenched the institutions born of the old geopolitics of the Cold War world—ones that they already dominated, most notably NATO—in the new era" (Sarotte 2009, 200–201).

Furthermore, the leaders of former Soviet satellite countries did not think that the issue of their protection from potential aggression by Russia as the Soviet Union's legal successor had been resolved. The newly born countries that were geographically nearest Russia, especially the Baltic states, came on particularly strong. Domestic political considerations in the US also played a role: the votes of immigrants from Eastern Europe and their descendants, who openly held the US morally responsible for "Stalin's occupation of European countries," were an important factor in the political campaigning. Shleifer and Treisman noted that "Russia-bashing became a way of attacking Clinton, and, by extension, his right-hand man in relations with Russia, vice president and presidential candidate Al Gore" (2003, 36). (Barely a quarter of a century on, Russia-bashing became a way of attacking Trump, who, by every measure, is Clinton's antipode).

Another obstacle (of a rather geo-ideological nature) to Russia's possible integration with Europe and NATO was the rigidity of both integration models and their advocates. The EU based its enlargement process on "insistence on the universal applicability of its internal mode of governance (i.e., the acquis)," claiming what has been termed "normative hegemony" over its neighborhood (Charap and Colton 2017, 48). While Eastern European countries were agreeable to this, Moscow was strongly opposed. "The Russians wanted to be at the table as equals, and were mystified as to why the West would not waive the usual requirements for the sake of partnership," but Europe was adamant that "institutions do not change to accommodate aspirants; the aspirants change themselves in order to become members" (48–49).

On the one hand, in the second half of the 1990s, Russia gained some geo-economic recognition from leading powers. In 1997, it was admitted into the Group of Seven, turning it temporarily into the Group of Eight. On the other hand, even though Russia presided in this international club in 2006, in many respects (including financial) it remained left out (and never missed a chance to complain about that).

Signs of progress in the democratization of Eastern European countries nudged the West to step up its efforts to "promote democracy," which reflected on the conceptual content of transitology. "In particular, the consolidation phase was too often addressed together with the transition phase (and indeed the term 'consolidology' was at times used interchangeably with 'transitology')" (Mohamedou and Sisk 2013, 19). As the same authors rightly point out, George W. Bush's political decisions—particularly the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and subsequent regime change, which the Bush administration claimed was justified by purposes of democratization—turned the very term "democratization" into a "codeword for realist pursuit of power by an ideologically driven global hegemonic pursuit by the United States" (2013, 19).

The logical result was resistance to "democracy promotion." The growth of Russia's wealth, the beginning of which coincided with the change of president, boosted its confidence in the international arena. Under Vladimir Putin, Russia was energetically regaining its lost influence in the "near abroad" and expanding and diversifying its participation in international organizations. While retaining a fairly representative level of participation in the leading international financial and economic organizations (in 2012, Russia officially joined the WTO), Russia took an active part in creating "alternative" international organizations, both economic (SCO, EEU) and military-political ones (CSTO).

According to Burnell, these factors, combined with the growing economic power and political ambitions of eastern countries (primarily China and India), undermined "the leverage that Western governments could exert on behalf of democracy promotion." The term "backlash against democracy promotion," which had become used quite widely in transitology, looked like nothing else but a "pushback against democracy itself." This can be clearly seen in the SCO's declaration of June 15, 2006, which "appeared to invoke the short step from upholding authoritarian rule at home to the collective provision of counterpromotion measures and an increase in mutual political support to one another abroad" (Burnell 2008, 36).

The program of modernization announced by Dmitry Medvedev, who replaced Putin as president, temporarily revived hopes for Russia's return to the path of democratization (in terms of both geopolitics and domestic processes). However, the war in Georgia in August 2008 and the subsequent recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia clearly chartered a confrontational course. It came to a new level of tension in 2014 when Russia incorporated Crimea amid the crisis unfolding in Ukraine. The Ukraine crisis itself, the worst between Russia and the West since the early 1980s, became the culmination of the conflict simmering since the beginning of the 1990s. The West's strong conviction that the spread of its political and economic influence to the East and the post-Soviet space was the right thing to do and had no alternative encountered Moscow's firm resolve to prevent further expansion.

## GEOPOLITICS AND "SOVEREIGN IDENTITY"

The geopolitical risks Russia is exposed to create a unique range of threats. "Russia is strategically threatened on each of its borders: by a demographic nightmare on its Chinese border; by an ideological nightmare in the form of radical Islam along its equally long southern border; and to the West, by Europe, which Moscow considers an historic challenge" (Kissinger 2016). This assessment appears to be generally accurate for both the current state of affairs and the 1990s, but it needs a slight correction with regard to China as a geostrategic threat to Russia. China has never been openly viewed by the government or experts as Russia's geopolitical competitor—not in the 1990s, when China showed no great-power ambitions and followed Deng Xiaoping's behest to "keep a low profile," nor ever since. References to the "Chinese threat" could only be found in rather marginalized sensationalist writings and rumors (Zuenko 2018).

This generates Russia's somewhat paranoid attitude towards anything that can even remotely resemble a threat, and each such threat is seen as nearly existential. For the Russian leadership, the notion of national sovereignty is the alpha and the omega of policy,

both domestic and foreign. National sovereignty is the only reliable way to carry out and legitimize policy, and ensuring sovereignty is its main and nearly only goal. Containing and countering those who are perceived as a threat to the state's ability to exercise sovereign power both within and outside the country is viewed and implemented as a fair and justified response to aggression (from Boris Yeltsin's order to shell the mutinous Supreme Soviet in 1993, to "equidistancing of oligarchs" in the early 2000s, to protection from "color revolutions" in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, to resistance to the anti-Assad coalition forces in Syria).

Modern political science accepts such an interpretation of the term "sovereignty" with a certain share of skepticism. Some experts completely deny that modern states have the actual ability to exercise unlimited sovereignty both internationally and domestically, and particularly the monopoly on the use of force (Ferguson and Mansbach 2007). State sovereignty of the Westphalian type is considered obsolete because the only real bearer of sovereignty is the people (Deyermond 2016). However, the state, even one with an "outdated" interpretation of sovereignty, does not cease to exist; both the state and sovereignty are not fixed phenomena but political processes. "The state has always had to assert and fight for sovereignty and its exclusive authority to use force in relations with both external and internal competitors" (Silayev 2014). It is true, though, that the primacy of state sovereignty often leads to personalization of policy and, consequently, to the rise of authoritarianism (Ferguson and Mansbach 2007).

The standoff between Yeltsin and the Supreme Soviet in 1993 can be considered in the context of the struggle for preserving the "functioning state," which is one of the prerequisites for a democratic transition. But one should not overlook more long-term consequences of that crisis: (1) a heavy blow to parliamentarianism in Russia, and (2) creation of conditions for the emergence of a "super-presidential" system of government, where the balance of power is shifted significantly towards the president as a separate institution of power in its

own right and the only guarantor of both the constitution and sovereignty. "Excessive" democratization in such a situation is beginning to be seen not only as a threat to authoritarianism but also as a threat to sovereignty. Burnell made a similar observation: "Quite obviously, the idea of sovereignty … poses problems for democracy promotion not least where authoritarian rulers reject the democratization agenda" (2008, 44).

The intellectual and ideological substantiation of the absolute primacy of national sovereignty in Russia evolved gradually. This evolution may as well be called "a reverse transition" from Yeltsin's call in 1990 to Russia's constituent republics to "take as much sovereignty as you can swallow" to Surkov's "sovereign democracy" in 2006 and "the law on foreign agents"—amendments to the law on nonprofit organizations adopted in 2012. They were designed to counter democracy "promotion" and "assistance" by external actors: "The purpose of the law is to reduce the influence of foreign states on the policy of the country" (Markov 2012). The political scientist known for his loyalist views essentially accused the opponents of the law of state treason: "Those who speak up against this law … want to seize power in Russia in the interests of foreign states and against the interests of Russia" (Markov 2012). Interestingly, this logic upholds the primacy of state sovereignty—any organization that "promotes democracy" acts either strictly in the interests of concrete "foreign states" or is directly controlled by them.

In the course of this evolution, Russian political scientists denied "real sovereignty" to countries that, for example, hosted foreign military bases, or had no nuclear weapons of their own (Kokoshin 2006, 54–5, 36). In 2014, Vladimir Putin remarked that any alliance belittled national sovereignty: "Thank God, Russia is not a member of any alliance and this, in no small part, is also a guarantee of our sovereignty" (Putin 2014).

As a result, the state in Russia seems to have gradually come to believe that the risk of falling into dependence and losing any sovereignty outweighs the potential benefits of a partnership. It has also

been stated, retroactively, that the preservation of Russia's sovereignty was, in a sense, in the geopolitical interest of the West: "Had Russia become part, albeit sovereign, of the West, as it aspired, the West would have preserved its military supremacy and European security would have been strengthened" (Karaganov 2018).

So, sovereignty, protected from external and internal threats and influences, became Russia's "state identity." Any attempt to change the political status quo could be regarded as a threat. The Chechen separatist movement was an encroachment on Russia's "state identity" from within (all the more serious as the Chechen separatists were backed by powerful foreign sponsors), and color revolutions were an attack on it from outside (all the more obvious as the same "democracy promoters" were among their inspirers).

"State identity" inevitably reflected on national identity. Acquiring national identity "consonant" with the idea of democratization is considered one of the key structural prerequisites for building democracy (Mel'vil' 2007, 2). Russia's problem was (and still is) not that its national identity is "dissonant" with democratization, but that it has not been "fully" acquired (although a "worthy place" in the world remains one of its cornerstones).

Debates on Russia's identity go on, both in the academic community and among legislators. At the end of October 2016, Putin gave the go-ahead to the drafting of a Russian nation law. Its initial title—*O Rossiiskoy Natssii*—is tricky to translate into English precisely. This unintended dichotomy of political vocabulary—"Russian (as a nationality), but *rossiyanin* (as a citizen of Russia but not necessarily an ethnic Russian)"—was noted by Western experts on Russia as well (Hill and Gaddy 2013, 140). The title was soon changed to "On the Basics of State Nationalities Policy" because, as one of its authors, former minister for nationality affairs Valery Tishkov, admitted, "society is not quite prepared to accept such a notion as a single nation which unites all nationalities" (Gorodetskaya 2017).

Still, this initiative looks quite justified in a "nation-state," especially one as bureaucratized as Russia. And yet again, being a mul-

tinational state with rich and diverse cultures, Russia could "qualify" for the "state-nation" model proposed by Alfred Stepan (a country with significant multicultural—even multinational—components that engender strong identification and loyalty from its citizens; see Stepan, Linz, and Yadav 2011) after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 (Miller 2008). But regional, cultural, and religious diversity against the background of the Chechen wars and growing Islamic radicalism has been viewed in Russia since the middle of the 1990s as more of a threat than an opportunity. The authorities responded to these threats by building "a vertical of power," that is, by consolidating sovereignty in the capital and rolling back local elections.

## VALUES, IDEOLOGIES, AND INSTITUTIONS

"Sovereign identity" further reinforces the idea of Russian exclusiveness, already deeply entrenched in Russian society. This belief can be traced in popular opinion political and social journalistic materials (*Why Russia Is Not America* by Andrei Parshev [1999]) and philosophical pursuits (Alexander Dugin's works after 2000). It also helped mold, and assert, the perception of the West in Russia as the Other. The West was doing the same with Russia by finding a "symmetrical" niche for it (Haskell 2015; Kazharski and Makarychev 2018). This generated a "negative synergy" of mutual resentment.

It is noteworthy that the West viewed Russia as a threat, even in the 1990s when it was weak (practically a failed state stuffed with nuclear weapons); in the 2000s as a revanchist power under the dictatorship of former security service officers (Shleifer and Treisman 2003, 3–4); and in the 2010s not only as a "revisionist" but also as an expansionist power, ready (and able) to stand against democratic states both in its "near abroad" and globally (the Middle East, Latin America, East Asia).

But the West's political decisions in Yugoslavia (1999), Iraq (2003), and Kosovo (2008) showed that self-proclaimed champions of "the rule-based world order" and liberal-democratic values were ready to break generally accepted rules in a bid to assert these values. A ma-

jor erosion of the world order, followed by an erosion of international institutions, coupled with the "globalization paradox" described by Dani Rodrik (the impossibility of combining all three components at the same time—deep economic integration, sovereignty, and democracy) shook the sociopolitical foundations in the leading countries themselves (Miller and Lukyanov 2016, 5). This, in turn, called these very values into question, putting people in a state of "reverse cargo cult" (Shul'man 2014) as noted above.

In the context of international relations, Ivan Krastev calls it "aggressive mimicry"—strategic imitation for the purpose of discrediting the (liberal Western) model, including "imitation of hypocrisy" (Krastev and Holmes 2017). The results of the Cold War are being reevaluated under Putin as part of this narrative: from being the West's ally in the fight against totalitarianism (the winner), Russia turns into the loser, unfairly. Under Putin, Russia has become a nation of motivated revenge-seekers. "In the 1990s, Boris Yeltsin's Russia wanted to imitate the West, its values and institutions; today Moscow is focused on mirroring Western policies with respect to Russia, doing to the West what Russians believe the West is doing to them" (Krastev 2017).

In the context of "democracy promotion," Russia has had to stand against an efficient expansionist value/ideological system (accepting it would mean dropping all leadership aspirations, even regional, which runs counter to the tasks Russia has set for itself in the international arena). This system, as described by Charap and Colton, formed quite naturally under the influence of three factors. One was a "guilty conscience over having let down inhabitants of Eastern Europe in the past … and deciding the fate of post-war Europe over the heads of the countries affected." The second was the embrace of "Wilson's intellectual inheritance—belief that the expansion of international institutions and the promotion of freedom in economic and political affairs (under US leadership) could increase global peace and prosperity." The third was more practical (yet, still somewhat value-oriented in nature)—a "bigger footprint for the Alliance would lock in previous American gains, maximize American power and facilitate American do-gooding" (2017, 43–44).

Moscow had neither the time nor the ability to respond to this system with anything more sophisticated than its own "Make Russia Great Again." "Great-power-ness" was traditionally understood as power and status. Relatively recent public opinion polls showed that 68 percent of Russian people feel most proud of Russia's political influence in the world, 85 percent feel most proud of its armed forces, and 72 percent feel most proud of its scientific and technological achievements, that is, mainly of state attributes (Levada Center 2015). In other words, the Russian authorities' "archaic" (as seen by liberal political scientists) understanding of sovereignty and its main manifestations is largely shared by the people.

Paraphrasing David Brewster, who wrote about India's painful colonial experience, one can say that being wary of succumbing to foreign influence (both political and institutional), Russia "placed national sovereignty above liberal values" (Brewster 2011, 835).

Russia's conservative-populist foreign policy agenda evokes varying degrees of trust among political scientists. Some view it mainly as "an instrument for addressing domestic issues" (Shevtsova 2015); others see it as the natural (albeit imposed) development of the structural image of the world order close to Russia, that is, "a nation-state." But, of course, no one disregards practical considerations either: Russia is looking for "voices that reject current bellicosity and call for dialogue with Russia … [for] any point of influence in the European theater" (Laruelle 2018, 4–5).

From our point of view, one can speak about a dual characteristic of Russia and its leaders (for both historical and geopolitical reasons) and a departure from "Eurocentrism" (Miller and Lukyanov 2016). Even West-friendly Russians feel the civilizational difference. This can be clearly seen in the results of public opinion polls conducted in November 2008 in the European part of Russia. Respondents were asked to name the values and attributes they thought were most characteristic of Europe and of Russia. For the EU, they chose a market economy (56.9 percent), human rights (48.4 percent), rule of law (41.8 percent), economic prosperity (39.9 percent), and democracy (37.6 percent). The corresponding values were attributed to Russia

in much lower percentages, especially economic prosperity, rule of law, and human rights. Russia's highest attributed values were: tolerance (36.3 percent), respect for different religions (33.5 percent), peace (32.8 percent), respect for different cultures (30.2 percent), and preservation of cultural heritage (26.4 percent) (Tumanov, Gasparishvilii, and Romanova 2011).

This controversial approach to basic attributes of democracy is clear with regard to human rights and freedom of speech. As the public opinion polls cited above demonstrate, although the "grassroots attitude" toward human rights does hold them in high esteem, they are not regarded as inherent to the Russian political system. The official attitude toward human rights was recently stated by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev: "While the Russian Constitution recognizes and upholds human rights, it established limits to the claims on the protection of these rights. It does not recognize the rights which clearly contradict traditional values of Russian society. Thus, the very idea of human rights acquires a new perspective … and signifies a unique, original and unconventional attitude to human rights" (Medvedev 2018, 11). Meanwhile, a recent (June 2018) poll by the Obstchestvennoe Mnenie (Public Opinion) Foundation revealed that 35 percent of respondents believe that human rights are duly respected in Russia, but 52 percent of respondents have a contrary opinion (FOM 2018). The Russian political establishment traditionally scorns extremely unfavorable assessments of the situation with human and civil rights in Russia made by the international human rights watchdogs such as Freedom House, deriding this institution as a "longtime tool of the US foreign policy, a straight-out 'activist cudgel'" (Zubchenko 2007).

Officially, activity of such organizations is regarded (especially after 2011–2012) as subversion against the state and a threat to its sovereignty. This was stated outright by the new Russian ombudsman (Tatiana Moskalkova, a one-star police general in retirement), who took the post in 2016: "Today human rights advocacy is widely used by the Western and American structures as a means of blackmail, speculations, threats, directed to destabilize and put pressure on Rus-

sia. But the commissioner for human rights has at her disposal plenty of tools to counter these efforts" (TASS 2016). In fact, state authorities have seized on the nominal task of defending human and civil rights from citizen organizations, effectively twisting the meaning of human rights activism and replacing it with the task of defending state sovereignty.

A similar situation has developed with the rights of free speech and freedom of the press. Reports and ratings by international organizations (Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, Reporters Sans Frontières, and others), which indicate a low level of freedom of speech in Russia, are in effect bluntly renounced in official rhetoric as being "purely populist and 'ordered fudge' in the interest of the Western intelligence services" (Demchenko and Kostina 2017). In addition, more than a third of Russians (35 percent) were certain that the authorities do not infringe on freedom of speech or constrain the media. This figure is drastically lower than that registered in 2000 (58 percent), but still is considerably high (Levada Center 2016). At the same time, Russian state authorities and media affiliated with official Moscow do not hesitate to loudly decry every impediment put on the RT television network's activities in the West, while proclaiming in the so-called "patriotic media" the idea of "Russia as the last stronghold of [true] freedom of speech" (Babitskiy 2018).

Overall, the concept of sovereignty has clearly affected Russia's attitude toward institutions that comprise the sociopolitical framework of the transition in general and of democracy in particular. If an institution threatened sovereignty—or if its implementation appeared to require some amount of sovereignty to be ceded—it was a bad institution ("foreign agents of influence"). If it threatened sovereignty but had to be implemented anyway, then its simulacrum had to be created (competitive litigation, competitive political campaigning, etc.).

It seems Russia has never been good at conducting international policy of a minor state with minor countries. "The traditional 'great power management' mindset of Russian foreign policy makers

forbids them to think in terms of equal relationships with anyone but great powers. From their perspective, the 'dwarf states' (*karlikovye gosudarstva*) of Central and Eastern Europe can be seen as geopolitical instruments but never as true partners" (Kazharski and Makarychev 2018, 3).

Nevertheless, as Charap and Colton rightly point out, "for quite a few years, Russia had an often unhappy but nonetheless functional relationship with the Euro-Atlantic institutions." These relations began crumbling in the middle of the 1990s with the start of the geopolitical "zero-sum game" for influence in post-Soviet Eurasia (2017, 26).

The devastating consequences of those games led to further mutual alienation, resulting in mounting conflicts in the Council of Europe and its parliament (PACE), the abolition of the priority of international law in Russia in 2015, and more. But by that time, "big-league geopolitics" had already hit full stride around the world. Confrontation began to be seen as "systemic" or rooted in the nature of international relations. Realpolitik triumphed.

## CONCLUSION: A NEVERENDING STORY

By and large, it would be senseless today to reproach politicians of the 1990s for the geopolitical "Russian roulette." One can only try to learn the lessons of the past. We would rather agree that "even if Russia had sought membership of NATO or the EU, the organizations would not have been able to absorb such a large country with the multiplicity of economic, social and security problems that would have come with it—unless they were to change dramatically to accommodate that challenge" (Charap and Colton 2017, 49).

Obviously, the geopolitical confrontation generates and reinforces myths and ideologemes associated with "sovereign identity." They are translated into domestic policy as well, impacting the "social contract" and its implementation, as well as real and perceived benefits from the development of socioeconomic processes.

While forming a system of interconnected threats and opportunities regarded by the authorities both objectively and subjectively,

international relations affect national identity. Essentially, the "friend or foe" coordinate system, which has gone far beyond the Cartesian plane, determines both the "zero point" and the bias error.

Examining a transition in any form outside of economic realities can make research purely descriptive from the methodological point of view and its results short-lived. Present-day mass media are so adept at constructing "reality" that they can convey practically any image of the future to society. For example, this one: "In a world of severe competition, authoritarian states, which are more capable of concentrating resources and conducting a consistent long-term policy, have an advantage over modern democracies … Russia needs another fifteen years of peaceful development. As a result, we will become more humane and more democratic, while our European neighbors will inevitably become more authoritarian" (Karaganov 2018).

The school of political realism, confrontational by nature, may be nudging political scientists (primarily Russian ones) towards interpreting key processes in international relations through the lens of certain aspects of confrontation. Contemporary political thought in Russia, dating back to Hegelian dialectics with its unity and struggle of opposites, seems to prefer the part of it that deals with the struggle. Confrontation presupposes mobilization. Mobilization presupposes unity. Unity, in turn, presupposes suppression of internal competition, freedom, and opposition.

At the level of systemic generalizations, the economic essence of democratization has been boiling down, almost since Adam Smith's time, to an increase in the number of economically active and free actors in the general polity of a concrete state (even in the context of its relations with distant and immediate neighbors): the larger their number at all levels of the economy, the more likely is a transition from an authoritarian regime to democracy, even though this postulate, which for a long time was considered unshakable, is beginning to be questioned too (Mel'vil' 2007, 6).

But international relations in general, and their geopolitical component in particular, can only determine certain peculiar fea-

tures of this transformation, often unique for a specific country at a given time. In the long term, however, economic factors (particularly current and prospective assessments of gains from certain political decisions) are likely to remain the yardstick of democratization in general and of transition in particular.

As for the prospects of transition in Russia, if a transition is understood (in a simplified form, as many political scientists do) as westernization, they can be described as follows: "When and if Russia westernizes, it will be on Russian terms" (Kimmage 2018). In broader terms, "Europe will have to recognize that its dialogue with Russia will have to be revised. Not because the apprentice has mastered all skills (or not mastered them at all). This is not the key issue any more. The simple reason is there is no apprentice as he no longer wants to be a member of the guild and achieve the guild's recognition" (Miller and Lukyanov 2016, 23).

Russia's cyclic historical development suggests that the issue of another "transition" will again enter the political agenda, probably after the end of Putin's term of office. Both in Russia and in the West, there are those who already speak about "a new Gorbachev" coming into the picture. But even if one assumes that Russian society will keep moving along the same path, with the same constant swings as before, the external context will make those swings largely meaningless. Even relative transition successes in the postcommunist world were directly linked with the integration of countries in transition into Western institutions. In Russia, this issue has never been given much thought. And now that the liberal world order is eroding, it is losing its relevance completely, as there is nothing to integrate with. Asia's rise and the shift of the political and economic focus to the East may turn Russia's historical swinging between the pro- and anti-Western positions into something that has nothing to do with the real state of world affairs. Moreover, changes in the West itself indicate that a transition can go not only from authoritarianism to democracy but also vice versa. So Russia will most likely have to look for a different coordinate system for its inevitable transformation.

## NOTES

1. "Reverse cargo cult" is a belief typical of the political elites of catch-up countries (and actively conveyed to society) that democratic institutions that do not work in these countries do not work in developed countries either but the latter are very good at hiding this fact. This is more of a journalistic than an academic notion, but we think it describes quite well the attitude towards liberal democratic institutions that prevails among Russian elites and developed during the painful process of transition.
2. Preeminent Russian focus on US policy (in the realm of international relations in particular) in part is inherited from the Cold War–period "great power politics," when the US and USSR were major competitors on the global stage. Yet in modern times it owes much to "democracy promotion" and the Russian political establishment's resistance to it (see below). Geopolitically, Washington, as the chief sponsor of "democracy promotion," was bound to become the main object of interest of Russian policymakers.
3. Miller and Lukyanov give yet another important characteristic of Russians' current attitude towards the West: while fluctuations in the number of negative responses can be blamed on mass media propaganda, the number of those thinking positively of the US remains unchanged. In other words, less hostility by no means breeds friends. Instead, a noticeable growth occurs in the number of indifferent people, and even those who are friendly towards the West remain rather detached (2016, 14).

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