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The Last Year of Soviet Inertia

This article addresses the radical changes in Russian foreign policy that took place in 2014. By the end of 2013, Moscow had exhausted the potential for progressively raising its international status by evolutionary means. As 2014 approached, Russia started to define its own habitat. The trigger was a clash between comprehensive and mutually exclusive integration projects.

The year 2014 marked the end of an entire epoch in the history of Russia, the post-Soviet space, and perhaps Europe. To describe the new period we can use old stereotypes like “Cold War” or think up trenchant new labels; the chief point is that the model of relations between Russia and the West that has lasted almost a quarter of a century is dead. It was called “strategic partnership”—a concept overused and discredited to the utmost after the Cold War. It was considered that precisely this must be the norm, for what would we have otherwise? Confrontation? There is no reason for any such thing because the big confrontation is over and history has “ended”: on the other side there remain only “regular guys” who need to be shown the true path. Rivalry? What

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for? After all, there exists a correct model, based not on a zero-sum game but on an arrangement in which all participants win. Simply neutral relations based on coexistence? Well, how can that be? If a correct model exists, then it must be disseminated: it is a sin to sit with folded hands and watch the floundering of nations that are still unable to enjoy all the advantages and privileges of the bright new world. Some may have fallen prey to delusion, others to ill will. In general, we must help.

The events of 2014 broke the picture of unidirectional historical progress and gave rise to the other extreme. Now everyone has zigzagged back to realism and started talking about “the return of geopolitics,” “the revenge of history,” and so on. True, no one knows what to do with this situation, as many habits have been lost and—the main thing—people are very reluctant to abandon the hope that “it has all settled down.”

However, this concerns the side that won the Cold War and then tried for a couple of decades to remake the world in its own image and likeness. On the other side of the imaginary front line everything was different.

The year 2013 was the apogee of Russia’s “peaceful” development, of the restoration of its foreign policy capacities after the collapse at the beginning of the 1990s. Not coincidentally, it was precisely at this moment that the Kremlin won its most resounding diplomatic victory by preventing a NATO military operation against Syria and putting forward a plan (which was then successfully implemented) for the destruction of Syria’s arsenals of chemical weapons. Even the numerous opponents of Vladimir Putin acknowledged that the Russian proposal was elegant and effective; it saved Barack Obama and many others from the enormous problems that intervention in Syria might have entailed.

In parallel, Russia played a very important and constructive role in setting in motion the diplomatic marathon to resolve the Iranian nuclear problem—a matter of the greatest global significance.

Interesting processes were also under way at this time in the post-Soviet space. The issue of the European Union signing

association agreements with a number of former union republics was for a long time of little interest to Russia. The Kremlin expected that measures within the framework of the Eastern Partnership program, though aimed at displacing Russian influence, would probably remain at approximately the same level of bureaucratic “integration” as various earlier undertakings. The Kremlin also expected that the effort to establish closer ties with Ukraine—and this was the pivot and chief goal of the Eastern Partnership—would reach an impasse, because the Ukrainian leadership would yet again start to “dodge” (a favorite expression of Viktor Yanukovich). The subordinate status of Ukraine would thereby be preserved, and further steps and actions would still be determined by purely situational circumstances and not by the scheming of grandees.

Toward the middle of 2013, however, the Kremlin came to realize that the situation was more serious than it had thought. First, the European Union (EU) for internal reasons of its own (a foreign policy success was needed to brighten up a rather grim picture of the EU’s development) was making serious efforts to achieve its goal in Ukraine. Second, the agreement for association with the EU and a comprehensive free trade zone would give Ukraine no special privileges, but it would bar its participation in other integration projects—above all, the Customs Union or Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) initiated by Russia.

In fact, this was the main impulse behind the subsequent events that led in 2014 to the Ukrainian conflict and to a serious shift in the balance of interests throughout the former Soviet Union. The EU strongly pressed Kyiv to decide the direction of its future development just when Russia for the first time in the whole post-Soviet period was formulating a serious albeit imperfect integration proposal. The project for Eurasian integration is qualitatively different from past integration initiatives because in many of its elements it reproduces the European model of a unified normative base to which the national legislation of participating states must be adapted, with the gradual transfer of part of their sovereignty to supranational bodies. Participation in such a project cannot be confined to a mere declaration: it requires

“immersion.” And after the European Commission in the person of its chairman, José Manuel Barroso, unambiguously declared that Kyiv could not combine participation in two unions and would therefore have to choose between them, Moscow resolved to fight for the “jewel” in the integration crown, which according to the original design was to be Ukraine.

The November 2013 volte-face of Viktor Yanukovych, who repudiated his commitment to sign the agreement with the EU literally two weeks before the ceremony, was the catalyst for the devastating events that were to unfold in the following year. As of December 2013, Russia had every reason to be pleased with the results of its foreign policy. In a certain sense this was the pinnacle of the entire post-Soviet epoch. Moscow had proved that it was again able to exert a substantial influence on both world and regional politics and demonstrated a quite diversified set of policy instruments, including effective diplomacy, as well as firmness in the face of external pressure (2013 was also the year of the Snowden affair).

Despite Russia’s superficial success in the post-Soviet space, the year 2013 showed that this region was in the throes of irreversible change. For two decades, counting from the time when more or less stable state formations began to emerge from the initial chaos, the territory of the former Soviet Union had been an arena for the constant clash of diverse internal and external interests. This had led to upheavals of various kinds, up to and including civil and interstate wars and changes of regime. On the whole, however, the entire enormous territory continued to be perceived as a part of the world undergoing an interminable transition to an uncertain destination. Given the exceptional importance of the Eurasian continent from any point of view, whether that of geopolitics, transit, or resources, this could not go on forever. And it was precisely in 2013 that the leading players started to try to define their own vision of the future.

In this context, it is characteristic that besides Russia and the EU, which proposed competing projects for the western part of the post-Soviet space, China too should have given voice to the Eurasian idea. In the autumn of 2013, at just the time when Russia

and the EU were coming to blows over Ukraine, chairman of the People's Republic of China (PRC) Xi Jinping was in Astana announcing the Economic Zone of the Silk Road—an ambitious initiative to turn China toward the west, in the direction of the Caucasus, Asia Minor, and Southern Europe. At the time, this was viewed with curiosity but without special attention, especially because—like all other Chinese projects—at the initial stage it looked like a flowery exercise in rhetoric rather than a practical program of action. By 2015, however, it was already clear that the project was acquiring substantial practical content: China is offering a fundamentally different pattern of interaction, demonstratively distancing itself from the type of competition to which Russia, Europe, and the countries located between them have grown accustomed. The project proposed by the PRC (large-scale investment in infrastructure) does not exclude but “skirts round” all other projects and is ready, where possible, to absorb them into itself, especially because no one is able to compete with Beijing in terms of the scale of resources that it can commit. In other words, the other players (Russia, the EU, the United States) act in Eurasia primarily by means of political instruments, and this causes friction. No one promises much in the way of money. China, by contrast, offers “live money” urgently needed for the development of all the countries along the “Silk Road” (from Central Asia through the Caspian region to Southeastern and Southern Europe) and shows complete indifference regarding what sort of political model exists in one or another country.

The reconstruction of the Silk Road extends Chinese economic influence into troubled regions (from Central Asia to Greece, the Balkans, and Iraq), the problems of which are not likely to be solved by Moscow, Brussels, or Washington. Nor does China intend to assume political responsibility for these problems, but it is quite capable of responding to the needs of the territories concerned in ways that also serve its own advantage.

The PRC is also moving in a western direction in part because its expansion in the Asia-Pacific Region is provoking an increasingly open confrontation with the United States—a confrontation that China, at least for the time being, wants to avoid. However,

the engagement of Chinese interests in the European space again brings Beijing into conflict with Washington. The first clash is already under way: the involvement of Germany, France, Italy, and Great Britain in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which Beijing is creating in parallel to the Western financial institutions, is a cause of deep displeasure in Washington.

Moscow has already announced its accession to the AIIB, which will also be a source of investment for the Silk Road project. Beijing considers it important that the AIIB should be a multilateral institution (albeit under its own leadership) in order not to provoke accusations of Chinese economic expansion. The Silk Road, of course, also encompasses countries that Russia would like to see in the EAEU. Beijing does not seek the normative-legal unity of the entire Eurasian space, nor does it formulate criteria for accession. It simply wants to invest a great deal of money on its own conditions and in accordance with its own political and economic priorities.

It is noteworthy that it was precisely in 2014 that Russia's conception of integration acquired a definite vector of development. This is because before the Maidan and the events that followed, the name "Eurasian Union" was misleading. The focus of attention was Ukraine—in other words, the integration project concerned not Eurasia but Europe. Now that it has become clear that reliance cannot be placed on Ukraine, the development of the EAEU can proceed only in the Eurasian direction. True, the prospect of its fusion with the Chinese undertaking is already not just likely but almost inevitable.

The year 2014 marked the end of two decades of development of the post-Soviet space. This is not especially reassuring. Strange as this may sound, that period was in its way stable: the configuration that resulted from the disintegration of the Soviet Union was not subject to doubt. Thus, Armenia, despite the obvious real circumstances, does not recognize Nagorno-Karabakh. Even the war of 2008, whose results led to Russia's granting recognition as independent states to formations that had been part of Georgia, did not become a Rubicon. It is noteworthy that even highly placed Russian officials in conversation with the author did not exclude

the theoretical possibility that at some future time—“if Tbilisi makes proposals that impress Sukhumi and Tskhinvali”—Georgia may be reestablished within its internationally recognized borders. It is easy to see that the decisions of 2014 concerning Crimea do not leave even hypothetical room for such reflections—unless, of course, we anticipate not just a change of regime in Russia but the end of its current form of statehood.

It is in its own way logical that the apogee of Russia’s policy toward the post-Soviet space in 2013 should have been succeeded by the storm of 2014. Moscow had exhausted the potential for progressively raising its international status by evolutionary means; a ceiling had been reached and further upward movement required an attempt to break through that ceiling with a sharp thrust of the head. The results of this still have to be assessed. However, linear development has ended.

In the twilight of the Soviet era the edifice of the Union started to sway when it began to crumble around the edges. However, the final blow against the Union was not struck by nationalists in the Caucasus or in the Baltic states, and certainly not by nationalists in Ukraine, where there was no trace of any real struggle for independence. The Soviet Union was destroyed by the Russian Federation, which enthusiastically supported forces that considered preservation of the Soviet Union to be pointless and unnecessary.

The Soviet Union was doomed at that moment when Russian political forces ceased to associate themselves with the Union Center, albeit for different reasons—the democratic progressives for one set of reasons, the communist reactionaries for the opposite reasons. In this situation Gorbachev’s desire to follow a middle-of-the-road centrist line proved fatal. The will of the Russian establishment—the old establishment, striving to hold on to power by isolating the experimentally inclined general secretary, and the new establishment, quickly learning to stand on its own feet and eagerly reaching for the steering wheel—destroyed the Soviet empire. From this point of view it is quite natural that twenty-five years later a new Russian leadership, successor to the leadership that ended the history of the Soviet Union, should take the next step in the same direction.

The reasons and motives are not of such fundamental importance. The fact is that it was precisely the leadership of the RSFSR that took the initiative in abolishing the union state. The subsequent convulsions and zigzags of Russian society, which many people in the world and in neighboring countries interpreted in terms of imperial ambition, in fact reflected the painful process of overcoming the instincts and reflexes of empire in favor of some sort of very vague and even unconscious understanding of nationalism.

The Ukrainian conflict flared up inside the core of the previous—not just Soviet but also Russian imperial—statehood and, however the conflict may end, that statehood is probably gone forever. It is of symbolic significance that the men who met at a hunting lodge in the Belovezh Forest to abolish the Soviet Union did not risk raising the Crimean issue: the main concern at that time was to eliminate the Union Center and transfer sovereignty—that is, the plenitude of state power—to the union republics. In 2014 the mine exploded, setting off a chain reaction. The year 2013 was the last year when it still made sense to talk about a struggle for influence over the post-Soviet space as a whole. Not coincidentally, the trigger was a clash between comprehensive and mutually exclusive integration projects. And just when Moscow had hardly had time to savor the taste of victory and was counting on a break in post-Soviet attitudes after the Ukrainian volte-face, its opponents delivered a counterblow (by this I do not mean that the Maidan was organized by the CIA, as many people in Russia suppose; I have in mind the logic of revenge for Russia's sudden triumph in Vilnius that has permeated the whole of Western policy toward the chaos in Ukraine). In response Russia again staked everything, repudiating the written and unwritten rules of post-Soviet coexistence. Only now have we opened the Pandora's box that we have tried to keep out of our thoughts since 1991.

In deciding to annex Crimea and then justifying the decision before a global audience, Russia changed the approach that it had followed after the Cold War. Of the two equal but conflicting principles of the UN Charter—the territorial integrity of states

and the right of nations to self-determination—Moscow officially chose the second. That is, not the conservative principle to which it had previously adhered, but the transformative principle that welcomes change in borders.

Support for self-determination as a legal principle was backed up by the powerful impulse of national romanticism generated by Vladimir Putin's "Crimean" speech about the Russian World. All of this taken together created the impression of a great power committed to full-fledged revisionism, frightening not only the West but also and above all the countries of the post-Soviet space.

In fact, there is no question of a large-scale revisionist agenda. As 2014 approached, Russia embarked on the path of self-determination, with the emphasis on *self*—: it started to define its own habitat (*areal*), its own moral-political and cultural space, without any attempt to check this definition against the opinions even of its loyal neighbors. The "Russian World" is not a zone of influence that Russia seeks to retain, let alone a program of imperial expansion. It is the outline of national limits—not so much an administrative border as a mental boundary that cuts off "others." In this way the Kremlin again, as it did almost twenty-five years ago, took a step toward the abolition of commonality. Then it was the common state that was abolished; now the time had come to abolish the residual commonality that by force of inertia survived the abolition of the common state. And the projects that were topical up to that moment are probably already losing their significance. I refer not only to Eurasian integration but also to the "Eastern Partnership" and other palliatives proposed by the EU. This does not mean that there will be no other projects; however, the logic generated by the Cold War and by the disintegration of the Soviet Union is nearing exhaustion. In this sense, the arrival of China with its quite different thinking is more than symbolic.

And perhaps in time we shall come to recall 2013 as the last year when a single commonality was still palpably present on the territory of the former Soviet Union—not friendship and unity but the sense of a shared (albeit also extremely conflict-ridden) agenda. By February 2014, this sense was already rapidly dissipating.