

Interests and Influences within Russia's Foreign Policy

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EVELINA VILKAITE, SEP 14 2012

Since the collapse of communism, Russia has endured a confusing process of self-definition. After becoming free from a zero-sum relationship with the United States of America during the Cold War and losing its identity as an Eurasian imperial state, Russia had to find itself and redefine its interests (Mankoff, 2009: 11). However, it seems that one thing has not changed – Russia's efforts to influence and control previous satellite states still are among the most significant aspects of Russian foreign policy. While talking about the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union, Russia's president Vladimir Putin said that 'For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the first real step has been made towards restoring natural economic and trade ties in the post-Soviet space' (Buckley, 2011). However, it is quite obvious that there was nothing natural in the Soviet Union, therefore Putin's statement sounds a bit controversial if not ridiculous. On the other hand, it would be difficult to deny Russia's influence on the post-Soviet states, especially Ukraine and Belarus, as well as the Baltic states. In my essay I am going to discuss and analyse what Russia's interests and influences are.

First of all, Russia has a large quantity of natural resources – especially oil and gas – and it gives Russia the leverage to influence and control neighbour states. For many post-Soviet states, especially Belarus, Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Russia is one of the most important, in some cases even the only energy provider. Therefore 'manipulating gas prices, and through them the structure of the political landscape in Ukraine, is just about the most effective tool that the Kremlin has available' (Trenin, 2009: 6). The gas Cold War of January 2009 was not only an important event in Russian-Ukrainian relations, but it also affected Europe, which was left freezing without gas. Moreover, manipulating prices is not Russia's only measure to ensure its leverage over the post-communist states. Gediminas Vitkus argues that 'Russia's attempts to hinder, in every way possible, the implementation of alternative pipeline projects, which circumvent Russia. It is not so much of an economic policy of the states, but a part of Russia's foreign and security policy' (Vitkus, 2009 : 22). That was the case even in 1990, when after Lithuania's declaration of independence Russia interrupted the supply of energy resources for three months. Therefore finding another source for supplying oil to Mažeikiai Oil refinery – Būtingė terminal was built to pump oil from the Baltic sea (Vitkus, 2009: 28). The slightly complicated case of Mažeikiai Oil refinery being privatized, sold and re-sold left a chance for Russia to buy the company, in this way taking over Lithuania's energy sector. However, a Polish company PKN Orlen offered the highest price – there was a bit of scepticism about that decision since Orlen had not owned oil companies before. However, the purchase was highly politically motivated – since Poland was 'the only country in the region that did not permit Russian companies to break into its energy markets, the takeover of the Mažeikių nafta was strategically important for Poland in order to restrict the impact of Russian companies in the region' (Vitkus, 2009: 31). The reply from Moscow was the suspension of the oil supply through the Druzhba pipeline with the official reason being a 'pipeline leak', however, the prevailing opinion was that the oil suspension was politically motivated, because it happened just a couple of weeks after the takeover by PKN Orlen. The name of that extremely significant pipeline 'Druzhba' (friendship) becomes ironic because of the constant conflicts.

Secondly, Ukraine is probably the most significant sphere of Russia's foreign policy. Zbigniew Brzezinski, former US national security adviser, famously noted in a 1997 book that 'without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire' (Olearchyk, 2011). The recent case was Yulia Tymoshenko allegedly abusing her power as Ukraine's Prime Minister by illegally forcing a deal between Naftogaz (Ukraine's national gas and oil company) and Russia, it ended in Tymoshenko being sentenced to seven years in prison. To some extent it was just a political move of President Yanukovich, but the international implications, as well as Yanukovich's ties with Vladimir Putin, cannot be denied.

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The trial of Tymoshenko was a bold breach of democratic values and human rights, therefore it worsened Ukraine's relations with the European Union. As the expert of Moscow's Carnegie Center Olga Shumylo-Tapiola argued in October of 2011 that Tymoshenko's case meant that the official visits would be postponed, the signing of Association Agreement with Ukraine was unlikely to be ratified by national parliaments of member states and it would make Ukraine's prospects of deeper integration with the EU possible only in distant future (Shumylo-Tapiola, 2011). The recent developments of Tymoshenko's hunger strike and her accusations of being beaten while in jail resulted in boycotts of EU leaders against the Euro 2012 tournament. Luke Harding, a reporter of 'The Guardian' in Kiev, said that 'for President Yanukovich, Euro 2012 was a unique opportunity to sell Ukraine to the world: as a modern, peaceful, pluralistic, EU-aspiring nation, with a rich history and culture. Instead, his government is now staring at a PR disaster' (Harding, 2012). It is arguable to what extent Yanukovich's decisions are influenced by Putin, but the goal of Russian foreign policy has been achieved – Ukraine is no longer perceived as a possible EU member, at least in the near future. 'What signal do you send if you include a country into this new form of co-operation when it is one of the worst worldwide in terms of business climate, corruption, has significant problems with democracy and rule of law, and is persecuting the former government? What signal does this send to northern Africa or Belarus?', rhetorically asked Nico Lange, head of the Ukraine office of Germany's Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung foundation (Oleynych, 2011).

Since Russia's foreign policy can be described as preserving its influence and importance over the post-Soviet region, any move of the post-Soviet countries towards the integration to the West results in Russia's efforts to interfere. For instance, according to Dmitri Trenin, 'one of the main goals in 2008 became to disrupt the granting of NATO Membership Action Plans (MAP) to Kiev and Tbilisi. The stakes were extremely high: had the MAP been adopted, the process of integrating the former republics of the USSR into the Atlantic alliance would have become irreversible' (Trenin, 2009: 2). Also, Vladimir Putin 'took the unprecedented step of traveling to the NATO summit in Bucharest to personally warn Western leaders against taking in and welcoming an "unstable Ukraine" and a "warring Georgia"' (Trenin, 2009: 3). In contrast to its opposition to further NATO expansion, Russia has not raised any objections about the prospect of Ukraine's membership in the EU (and for economic reasons, might even support it), though the development of EU's defence capacity is a concern for Russia (Mankoff, 2009: 155). Moreover, Putin introduced ideas about the unity and integration of the post-USSR states, the Eurasian Economic Community being the best known one. Obviously, all the states saw this organization as a test for their independence and none of them wanted to join – in this way they would become Moscow's satellites (Trenin, 2009: 4). It is closely related with the New Great Game – the fight over oil, influence and power in Central Asia between the global powers – for Russia, having Asian states in the Eurasian Economic Community would mean strong ties between them and Russia. Therefore having close relations with these countries would strengthen Russia's position as a regional and global power. Dmitry Trenin explains that 'Putin wants even more: a "Eurasian Schengen" (free movement of people among the three countries, built on the example of the European Union) by 2015, followed by a currency union and, ultimately, full economic integration. Indeed, Putin wants to restructure Russia's relations with the former Soviet states to create not merely a bigger market, but eventually an economic bloc-cum-security alliance' (Trenin, 2011), as a balance to closely integrated – through NATO and European Union – Europe.

To conclude, it is obvious that Russia still is one of the most powerful global players, even though the power is partly achieved through threats to economically and politically weaker states, as well as through leverage of having gas and oil resources. Moreover, it could be argued that Russian foreign policy is based on the belief that Russia still has the right to impose its interests on the post-communist states as if they still were Moscow's satellites. However, the scope of Russia's interests and its foreign policy is too wide to make any generalizations or conclusions. Senator of the United States Gordon H. Smith sums up the importance of Russia: 'Whether you look at Russia from a military perspective, a political perspective, or an economic perspective, for the past 100 years Russia has simply played an enormous role in world affairs' (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2006: 3). Trenin sums up Russia's current situation: 'In present-day Russia, the idea of national interests remains the most popular and most often used, but it is obviously based on national egotism rather than on the creation of social well-being. Russians need to understand in which spheres they would be able to play the role of a global or regional leader' (Trenin, 2009: 10). However, further development of Russia's foreign policy and its future as a global power remains relatively difficult to predict.

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