



Oleg KONDRATENKO

Taras Shevchenko National University, Institute of International Relations, Kyiv, Ukraine

Questions of Internal Geopolitics of the Russian Federation

Problematyka wewnętrznej geopolityki Federacji Rosyjskiej

• Abstrakt •

W artykule poddano analizie istotę wewnętrznej geopolityki Federacji Rosyjskiej oraz jej wpływ na rosyjską politykę zagraniczną. Wskazano, jak na tle rosyjskiego nacjonalizmu zaktywizowały się nastroje separatystyczne wśród mniejszości narodowych, zwłaszcza na terenach północnego Kaukazu (Czeczenia, Dagestan). Ich zaostrzenie doprowadziło do dwóch wojen czeczeńskich oraz wzrostu niezadowolenia z polityki rządu centralnego w Tatarstanie oraz we wschodniej i południowej Syberii. Jednakże po okresie wstrząsów politycznych i gospodarczych w latach 90. ubiegłego wieku Rosja nakreśliła plan powrotu do statusu mocarstwa. Ważnym czynnikiem dla rządu rosyjskiego jest popieranie przez ogół społeczeństwa prowadzonej polityki zagranicznej. W artykule wykazano, że poziom poparcia wyborczego prezydenta Rosji jest wyraźnie związany z powodzeniem działań Federacji Rosyjskiej na arenie międzynarodowej. Kreml w aktywny sposób podsyca i wykorzystuje mocarstwowe aspiracje społeczeństwa w celu legitymizacji działań mających przywrócić „niesłusznie odebrany” status potęgi. Dlatego też ekspansjonistyczna strata

• Abstract •

The essence of the internal geopolitics of the Russian Federation and its influence on the foreign policy of Moscow is analyzed in the article. It was found that on the background of Russian nationalism the activation of separatist sentiments in the Russian national autonomies had occurred, particularly in the North Caucasus (Chechnia, Dagestan). Eventually, it caused two Chechen wars, as well as to the formation of dissatisfaction with the Center's actions in Tatarstan, South and East Siberia and others. However, after internal politics and internal economy shocks of the 1990th Russia has outlined a course to restore the status of a great state. An important factor for the Russian government is the support of its foreign policy by the population. It is traced that the level of electoral support of the Russian president entirely depends on the success of the Russian Federation on the international arena. Kremlin actively cultivates and uses imperial mood of society in order to justify the return of its “unjustly deprived” great power status. Therefore, governmental expansionist geostrategy obtains active support among the intelligentsia and broad social strata.

tegia rządu spotyka się z aktywnym poparciem wśród inteligencji oraz szerokiego przekroju społeczeństwa.

Słowa kluczowe: geopolityka; geopolityka wewnętrzna; polityka zagraniczna; nastroje społeczne; autorytaryzm

Keywords: geopolitics; internal geopolitics; foreign policy; social attitudes; authoritarianism

The internal processes of the state directly influence the formation of international activity and the implementation of the foreign policy strategy. The geopolitical possibilities of any country, including the Russian Federation, are directly dependent on public opinion and the level of support for the authorities. International and foreign policy of the state significantly depends on the internal processes of transformation and internal state as a whole. Thus, internal processes are known to affect proportionally the formation of international activities and implementation of foreign policy strategy. In this context, the idea of internal geopolitics, relations between territorial administrative center and the periphery was established. Thus, from the optimization and building relationships between the administrative units, the periphery and the center depends the internal stability of any state, as well as the stability of its foreign policy. Also, geopolitical opportunities of any country, including RF (Russian Federation), directly depend on public attitudes and the level of governmental support. In the domestic policy of Russia we can observe significant problems, while in foreign affairs and geopolitics this country shows strength defending its position and interests. Generally, the geopolitics of Russia can be regarded as imperial, primarily because the Russian people have imperial mentality, mind, character, and so on. P. Goble, a famous American political scientist and analyst, has noted: "Russia became an Empire before the Russians consolidated as a nation, and psychological limits of the state and Russian identity has always been problematic for Russia, as it has always been, until recently, Empire with a center and periphery" (Goble, 1993). Russia as almost all the major states has its geopolitical special feature and identity related primarily to the specific national force that despite the transformation of ideologies actually have not changed over the centuries.

The issue of internal geopolitics is developed by a cohort of domestic and foreign scientists. In Ukraine geopolitical issues are studied by such scientists and experts as: V. Gorbulin, A. Bulvinskyi (2016), M. Doroshko, I. Melnychuk, G. Perepelytsya (2015), I. Pilyayev (2015), L. Chekalenko, S. Shergin, M. Shulga (2006) and so on. Among the scientists who were engaged or are actively engaged, however briefly, in the questions of domestic policy in their research are Russian

scientists such as V. Dergachov, O. Dugin (2010), S. Karaganov, N. Narochnyt-ska, G. Nuryshhev (2013), S. Panarin, D. Trenin (2009), V. Tsymburskiy (2007) and so on.

Finally, we can highlight the cohort of foreign scientists who in some way touch on the issues of Russia's internal geopolitics and the impact of the internal state on its foreign policy. These are scholars: Z. Brzezinski, M. Goldman (2008), L. Coodrich (2016), A. Kukhins, M. McFaul (1998), M. Nicholson (2001), A. Motyl (2007, 2012, 2016), V. Sperling (2015), A. Stent (2015), J. Stern (1994), J. Sherr, G. Friedman, C. Freeland (2014) F. Hill (2004) and many others.

Russia, after the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR, lost its national identity and is in search of the theoretical basis for the idea of identifying as a nation state. It is determined that geopolitical identity is a result of the cognitive, value and emotional process of awareness of belonging to a certain community, as well as its place and role in the system of state interaction (Zhade, 2011).

Eurasian geographical location, the vastness of the territory with its harsh climatic conditions and rich natural resources, a huge length of the borders, poor communications, low population density and a number of other factors have made a significant impact on the formation of political consciousness and RF system, and thus upon its foreign policy. Permanent centralization of political power that was aimed to neutralize foreign threats eventually negatively affected the modernization of the country on all stages of development (Luk'janovich, 2004).

Russia started its formation as a centralized and ideocratic state, as sacral Empire in the 16th century. This state can be described as colonial Empire with expansionist politics that started in the 16th century. It is associated with a series of conquests of Ivan the Terrible. As Russian scientist M. Ilyin had noted, "...the image frontier empire has spawned a special formula of Russian geopolitical destiny. This model has an explicit centrist character, separate regions of Russia form a kind of islands, and Russia itself is expanding, transforming the territories annexed to those islands, striving to withdraw, but within the island named Russia" (Il'in, 1997).

Since early 1990s Russian foreign policy formation was held in the conditions of economic crisis and political transformation. "Sick Man of Eurasia" and "grey area breaking threats" – such terms could describe that political, economic and geopolitical position of Russia on the international arena. As the British politician G. Sherr said: "...in the 1990s Russia did not resemble the state, but rather the arena of struggle between the influential groups for wealth and power, often at the expense of the country" (Sherr, 2013). In late 1993, when the conflict of Russian President Boris Yeltsyn and the Duma turned into an armed suppression of the

anti-president block it became obvious the first signs of post-Soviet democracy will disappear soon. Such tactics of Boris Yeltsyn can be regarded just as the first step to the establishment of authoritarianism in Russia (McFaul, 1998). At that time liberals and reformers were defeated, and those who benefited from these events were the statesmen, who wanted to see Russia a great state again. However, in spite of this alarming bell of authoritarianism, the West generally supported Boris Yeltsyn, as in the actions of the State Duma it saw a rematch of 1991 August coup and the danger of communists' restoration, which could facilitate the full or partial revival of the USSR. In this situation, the United States relied on RF rapid liberalization in the context of structural and functional political formation of the CIS (Stent, 2015).

Awakening of Russian nationalism ultimately served to intensify separatist sentiments in the national autonomies, in particular in the North Caucasus (Chechnia, Dahestan), which eventually led to two Chechen wars, as well as to the formation of discontent by center's activities in Tatarstan, Southern and Eastern Siberia and others. Alarming for Russia can be Volho-Ural region where practically all deposits of energy resources are concentrated. Thus, in the 1990s nationalist groups in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and so called Confederation of Peoples of the Caucasus announced the formation of its own armed forces, its own currency and so on. Tatar nationalists keep the idea of creating Turkic (Tatar-Bashkir) Idel-Ural republic. In the beginning of 1990s Tatarstan introduced its own emblem, anthem and constitution, and the idea of realization of state sovereignty in this country is still very relevant even though the latter is in complete incorporation of Russia and has no external, out-of-Russia boundaries unlike Chechnia or Dahestan. Besides, under the slogan "Enough to feed Moscow!" can be actualized the project of Siberian Republic, even though the viability of this Republic is under question (Stern, 1994). Thus, we can conclude that there is a risk of separatism within the so-called Turk wedge "Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Yakutia, the Far Eastern Republic", although the Far East has no distinct signs of separatism at present.

One can say about the so-called "quiet German annexation" of Kalininhrad territories, as the number of German population is constantly growing from 1.5 thousand people in the beginning of 1990s to 10 thousand in the beginning of 2000s. Dependence on German investment projects and loan programs is increasing. There is the possibility of a referendum of the ethnic Germans. EU enlargement to the east is gradually transforming the Kalininhrad exclave to the enclave, surrounded by Poland and Lithuania and located 400 km away from the main Russian territory. Out of 950 thousand of its inhabitants, 425 thousand live in Kalininhrad. According to various sociological data, 80% of young people living

in Kaliningrad have not been to Russia and the exclave itself is surrounded by more developed countries. In short, the population of Kalininhrad region is looking rather to the West than to Russia (Neymysheva, 2003).

Russia's strategy to transform Kalininhrad to European Hong Kong with a special international legal status has failed. That is why Russia has no other options than to transform Kalininhrad region to a naval base, which gives it a certain geopolitical prerogatives, as this territory is geographically close to the developed European countries. Also, being on the joint of EU/NATO and the Eastern Europe this region became a place-based of Baltic Fleet. After all, Russia took over Soviet ethics in order not only to consolidate their statehood and territorial integrity, but to unite different territories along its environs (Coodrich, 2016). These traditions that have gained importance in the heyday of Eurasianism, were based primarily on common Slavic and Orthodox identity. Recently Russia finally abandoned expectations of universal values of freedom, democracy and human rights. Dogma of national idea for Russia became actually patriotism and belief in the special missionary of Eurasian civilization (Surkov, 2006).

However, there are different types of Russian nationalism, the most radical of them seems to be the concept of creation of a purely national state – Russia only for Russians. The expressions – “stop to feed the Caucasus!”, “bloody foreigners!” became the indications of such public mood. Nationalists of this kind do not reject the collapse of the federation for the sake of the Republic, what will prevent the onset of the Caucasus and Central Asia. In turn, orthodox communists just as Eurasians, on the contrary, are trying to assert the revival of Empire in its “natural borders” including former socialist countries. For all, the struggle of Eurasians, Imperials and statesmen with Russian nationalism is seen as a struggle for the Russia's integrity and preservation (Gadzhiev, 2013).

The period of 1995–1998 was marked with the aggravation of separatism and economic crisis, better known as the currency default. On this background the internal politics situation was getting worse and the rating of the President Boris Yeltsyn fell to an unprecedented 3%. Revenue of funds to the federal budget actually has stopped, and the promised aid package from the IMF Russia was not received due to total corruption in higher and middle echelons of authority. In general, Russia was on the brink of collapse (Coodrich, 2016). The difficult situation in the state eventually forced Boris Yeltsyn and his surroundings to run the mechanism of power transmission to chosen successor and the chief of the FSB/ /FSS (Federal Security Service) – Vladimir Putin. On the background of a collapsing economy, Russian society was in need of a strong leader. Vladimir Putin gained his popularity being on the prime minister post. He stated: “Russia was

and will remain a great country... Russia is experiencing one of the most difficult periods in its long history. Perhaps, for the first time in last 200–300 years it is facing a real danger of being in the second or even third tier of the world”. The response to this threat, according to Vladimir Putin, had to be the idea of providential mission and specific identity of RF. The idea of Russian exclusivity served to strengthen personal power factor (*Byl li vzlet Vladimira Putina*, 2015). However, according to L. Shevtsova, this policy promotes its transformation into “a lonely state” and these actions do not contribute to the credibility and image in the international arena (Shevcova, 2010).

Vladimir Putin after the official coming to the Kremlin in March 2000, from the first years of his presidency had to focus primarily on the internal problems of Russia – carrying out radical political and economic reforms to overcome the problems of separatism and others. As a result, the new Russian leader quickly obtained the image of a leader who turned the destruction of the state in the opposite direction, passing a number of program ideas, among them the revival of Russia as a great power (Nicholson, 2001). On May, 27, 2002 *The New York Times* had noted: “49-year-old Vladimir Putin two years ago became the President thanks to Boris Yeltsyn. The new leader of the country is too popular, however, remains a mystery... After 15 years of chaos that prevailed during the reign of Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsyn, Russians like the sense of order that Vladimir Putin has brought” (Rukavishnikov, 2005).

Active emergence of free associations of citizens and civic organizations to some extent contributed to the public discussion of Russia’s foreign policy, world politics, the modern world and the place of Russia in it. However, the establishment of liberal democratic institutions was short. In fact, since the beginning of 2000s the process of liberalization collapsed and transition to permanent centralization of power started. That was despite the fact that during the 1990s Russia has strived for integrating into Euro-Atlantic institutions. For example, before the strengthening of authoritarianism in 2000 about 55% of Russians believed that Russia should join the EU, while about 30% had the opposite opinion (Pilyayev, 2015). But now Russia no longer considers itself as part of a European or Western liberal-democratic society. The evidence of it became permanent declarations of Russian establishment to set a special kind of liberalism – based on authoritarian principles. Also, more than half of Russians consider Russia’s friendship with leading European countries impossible.

So, nowadays Russia has got actually one-party system, as the only political force is political party “United Russia”, which practically turned into a pocket party of present regime. In turn, Russian President has authority similar to Gen-

eral Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had and the FSS is just a branch of the Soviet security structures – KGB/CSS (Committee of State Security). O. Motyl, American political scientist, Professor of Rutgers University marked that Vladimir Putin had started the final dismantling of democratic institutions and the formation of an oppressive, hyper national regime (Motyl, 2016). De facto there was a restoration of the authoritarian regime in the form of nationalist kleptocracy. Some scientists compare it with fascist Italian-style authoritarianism (Brzezinski, Zubov) interspersed with Soviet totalitarian heritage or call it protofascism – as a “soft” form of fascism in comparison with European fascist regimes of the 1920s–1930s. (Motyl; Inozemcev, 2016). After all, Western scientists have started to name RF a fascist country since 2007, preferring “to call things by their names rejecting the illusion and complacency”. However, some analysts predict two scenarios for Russia: the full consolidation of society and the transformation into a purely classical fascist state or its transformation into an authoritarian country with an unstable regime (Motyl, 2007).

Taking into consideration the necessity to strengthen the power in Russia the former first deputy head of the Presidential Administration V. Surkov, the author of the “sovereign democracy” concept suggested the idea of three features of the Russian political practice: the desire for political integrity through the centralization of government functions, idealization of purposes of political struggle, the personification of political institutions (Surkov, 2006a). Referring to the rejection and unwillingness of Russians to accept democracy of the Western type, as well as on the background of the debates among elites who arrived to rhetorical question: “Who lost Russia?” this concept of “sovereign democracy” has become a kind of appeal to the national characteristics and historical traditions of Russia as a great state (Lapina, 2009). Harvard professor R. Pipes notes that since 1991 Russia creates a mixture of tsarist regime, communism and Stalinism mainly by strengthening the authority system and its institutions. In his opinion, Putin’s Russia is a return to the dictates of the all-mighty state and society where anti-liberal attitudes prevail (Pipes, 2004). His opinion was also confirmed by British politician George Sherr: “Vladimir Putin has resorted to the old method, tested by Stalin – the restoration of the «vertical power system» as a way of returning to Russia its rightful place in the international arena, especially in the former Soviet Union” (Sherr, 2008). It should be added that more than 50% of Russians consider Stalin an outstanding political leader.

In conditions where the oligarchic group increasingly claimed to be power, Putin sharply limited his influence on decision-making in the state due to the so-called mechanism of “equilibrium” of power from powerful economic groups

to “voluntary” exile, in order to gain an image of the oligarch (V. Gusinsky, B. Berezovsky) or the arrest of the least loyal rich (M. Khodorkovsky). Putin’s gesture then served a hard warning to the oligarchs who, through their own capital, tried to influence the political system contrary to the will of the Kremlin (Goldman, 2004). At the same time, in order to limit the influence of the oligarchs on the public opinion, the state was hit by media-holding companies controlled by them. However, the situation has become buoyant, since a rather narrow circle of oligarchs close to the authorities (M. Friedman, V. Potanin, V. Alekperov) became head of the PPG and gained considerable influence in the field of extraction and export of raw materials (Grinberg, 2007). In other words, the oligarchy loyal to the Kremlin, which was formed back in the 1990s, was given access to the free disposal of Russia’s natural and financial resources in exchange for loyalty and support for Putin’s policy (Javlinkij, 2015). Given the latter, the Russian state is becoming increasingly fragmented between the center and the periphery, between the elite and the lower strata, between the rich and the poor, between Russians and non-Russians, etc. (Moty’l’, 2016).

After a series of arrests, including Mikhail Khodorkovskiy, the Russian leader has become less popular in the West; however, he improved his rating in Russia. For the confirmation of the image of a strong leader, apart from the defeat of disloyal group of wealthy statesmen, Vladimir Putin actively limits the influence of regional leaders and demonstrators actions. In short, through a series of internal transformations Vladimir Putin strengthened international and geopolitical status of RF. In Russian society Vladimir Putin has got the reputation of a leader who brought Russia out of chaos, overcame Russian oligarchy and returned its rightful place on the world stage (Sherr, 2013). Moreover, Vladimir Putin appealed to Russian concept of a “state”. This situation contributed Putin’s strategy for Russian unification and the strengthening of the identity of society in the context of its consolidation around a strong leader who represents law and order.

Consequently, the key pillars of the support of President Vladimir Putin’s power are the power structures (KGB colleagues), the closest representatives of FIGs, the so-called system liberals (writers, artists, scholars, economists and all “legal oppositionists”, who show support or loyalty to Putin’s regime) and to a lesser extent organized crime. Taking the presidential chairmanship for the second time, Putin began to put on strong positions with or in relation to special services such as O. Bortnikov, S. Ivanov, S. Naryshkin, D. Rogozin, and others. Most representatives of his own environment Vladimir Putin transferred from St. Petersburg to Moscow at that time, thereby changing the officials who have kept their positions since the time of Boris Yeltsin. Since the beginning of the 2000s, law enforcement

officials, finding themselves in key positions, began to strengthen their influence in all government and in some areas of business (Stent, 2015).

However, the prospect of radical transformations surrounded by Putin is becoming more and more visible. Evidence of this can be personnel changes that began in 2016. Special attention of analysts on this background attracts the change of the head of the administration of the President of the RF S. Ivanov, who was considered as the representative/head of the radical wing of the “hawks” in the formation and implementation of the strategy of foreign policy of the RF, more moderate and one of the best administrative technocrats A. Vaino. Also the State Duma of the Russian Federation instead of the intelligence officer S. Naryshkin was headed by a technocrat V. Volodin, who actually led the last elections to the State Duma and provided the result necessary for the government (Bershidskij, 2016). Presumably, Vladimir Putin is finally trying to consolidate the power and decision-making system in his own hands, and thus eliminates the leading positions of immigrants from the security forces that can interfere with this process. In any case, the Russian president relies on a rather narrow circle of advisers, none of whom is in a position to question his proposals and decisions. Western experts, such as G. Allison and D. Sims, believe that in Russia’s ruling establishment there are still pragmatists who can prevent the unfolding of Russia’s full-fledged war with NATO and the US (Allison, Simes, 2015).

On the pages of authoritative British newspaper *Financial Times* we could find a brief description of the Vladimir Putin regime. In particular, the publication stated that Vladimir Putin and his entourage from the former KGB along with the loyal support of wealthy statesmen were able to renew a “soft” version of authoritarianism after the collapse of the USSR. Moreover, the president and his entourage have significant financial preferences and business opportunities. The discussions about compliance of Putin’s surrounding with state and private interests, which actually controls the Russian economy are ongoing. The President’s entourage tries to demonstrate that their own interests and state interests intersect at the point of stability and sustainable development. After all, high oil prices in the last decade showed the desire of the Russian elite to enrich and transform Russia into a powerful state. On this background, Vladimir Putin spins a cult of nationalism for cohesion of Russian society in front of “rise of pressure” and “aggression” of the West, and the government tries to show it as a new challenge. Recently, Russian nationalism started to obtain alarming signs of political and mass hysteria. However, the situation in the Russian economy can cause strong dissatisfaction with Putin’s entourage, which has privileged access to natural resources of the country and accumulates capital in Western banks by selling these resources. The latter is

due to the fact that reduced oil price does not bring the dividends to Russian big business as it was before the crisis (Freeland, 2014).

Putin's power gets the features of the imperial signs, extreme centralism and bureaucracy. This situation was an internal Russian security challenge that exceeds the overall external challenges. Well-known Russian economist and Mikhail Cherkasov on this occasion said: "The enormous concentration of power in the hands of the ruling elite, inevitably leads to its decay, a huge bureaucracy, inevitably generates large scaled corruption, conflicts between different peoples of the empire, caught in an unequal position, claim to world domination – an objective basis of Empire's death" (Cherkasov, 2008). For example, only during the 1991–2007 the number of officials in Russia increased from 950 thousand up to 1 million 750 thousand people, despite the fact that the total population of Russia in this period decreased to 6 million people. As at all times, the key figure of imperial state remains unchanged, the supreme ruler, sovereign, and in fact "a good king", who creates and is responsible for the fate of domestic and foreign policy. Thus, in recent years Russian government completed the implementation of the concept of "illiberal" or "managed democracy" (Bul'vins'kyj, 2016).

According to experts, Russia needs to win in local conflicts in order to maintain the current authoritarian regime. For example, it is traced that Putin's rating is growing during the acute confrontation with internal or external enemy, or in front of threats to national security. Putin's actions on the post of prime minister in 1999 were supported by 80% of Russians. It allowed him to win in the first round of the presidential elections in March 2000. In the early years of his presidency Vladimir Putin had to put all his efforts in order to prevent further deterioration in the political and economic sphere and to prevent the disintegration of the state (Goldman, 2008).

Another reason for such a sharp rise in the rating of Vladimir Putin has become a tough response to the bombings of apartment buildings in Moscow, Buynaksk and Volgodonsk in 1999. These events activated the counter-terrorist operation in the North Caucasus, known as the Second Chechen War. The active phase of this war began in October 1999 with the invasion of federal troops in the Chechen Republic. Finally, economic growth due to high oil prices allowed to pay pensions and to increase salaries in various industries, as well as in the budget sector, which also contributed to the support of Putin's policy. All this ensured the rise of popularity of the new Russian president, whose rating fluctuated between 70%–80% (Hill, 2004). Another such example was the special operation in Georgia in 2008 after which the level of Putin's support came to an unprecedented 88% (Vladimir Putin was on the Prime Minister's post for the second term) that helped him to get

ahead of Dmitriy Medvedev, the President of Russian Federation (*Rejting Putina: anomalija ili zakonomernost?*, 2014).

Russia's rejection of liberal-democratic model can be partly explained by the complexity of managing the largest country in the world. Administrative division that includes so many regions with cultural and ethnic diversity only complicates public administration of such large state as RF¹. The problem is that main territories of modern Russia (77%) are located in Asia, where only 20% of its population live (*Suchasny'j administraty'vno-terytorial'ny'j ustrij*, 2015). Being afraid of disintegration and separatism because of excessive powers of federal institutions, Vladimir Putin has consistently implemented a course to curtailment of democratic institutions and strengthening of presidential power. Putin's aim was centralization by strengthening political and financial control over the Russian regions. After all, centralization was necessary for administrative structures and for consolidation in making decisions concerning foreign affairs. A significant moment was minimizing participation of regional elites in this process. Thus, in 2004 the election of governors of RF was abolished. In this regard, the institute of authorized representatives of the President of Russia – "povpredov" was established. Obviously, their main objective was to monitor the situation in the regions on behalf of the Russian President and to inform the federal government about the local situation. In short, the appointed envoy had to determine the ability of governors to lobby interests of Moscow in regions (*Insty'tuty' prezy'dents'kogo vply'vu*, 2010).

In 2006 the activities of civic organizations were legally restricted in Russia. According to the report of the "Freedom House" organization in 2013 Russian press freedom index was at 176th position out of 197 countries (Bul'vins'ky'j, 2015). In 2015, according to the organization "Worldwide Press Freedom Index" Russia was on 152nd place out of 180 possible in the world rating of countries in terms of press freedom (*Reportery bez granic*, 2015). In 2017, *The Economist* placed Russia 134th out of 167 possible in the Democracy rating. Apparently the level of centralization of power and curtailment of democratic freedoms in Russia is one the highest in the world, thus it directly affects the formation and implementation of RF foreign policy strategy.

Therefore, Russia's population is actually excluded from the political and social processes and has no influence on key decisions. In this regard, Russians as well

¹ Nowadays Russian Federation consists of 83 federal subjects: 21 republics, 46 oblasts (regions), 9 krai (regional administrative unit), 1 autonomous oblast, 4 autonomous regions and 2 federal cities.

as the population of other former Soviet countries stand out by virtue of low self-organization and say they have no influence on the decisions of the authorities. Thus, they remove the responsibility for the events in their own country and its politics in the world arena. However, as noted above, an important aspect of Russian policy is the support of the first person and its actions inside and outside the country by the society (Perepely'cya, 2015). Overall, the impact of public opinion on politics can be traced not only in the government's pressure on the society, but also manifests itself in political parties and organizations, through the media, during the electoral process. Today foreign policy issues and security problems are not the prerogative of top officials, as they are "being discussed by the press and the street" (Rukavishnikov, 2005).

In recent years, the support of Russian leadership course contributed to the emergence of such a phenomenon as "krymnashyzm". In general, the Crimea has the exclusive/sacred significance for Russia, especially for the imperial code and to support sentiment in society. Russian Imperial thinking and increased support of the regime, as it is proved, is shown with a "small victories" of Russia. According to sociological data to 2011 the number of disgruntled with RF policy was over 60%. During 2008–2012 Vladimir Putin has lost the third part of his electorate and it looked like Russian regime is in deadlock. After all, there is the assumption that presidential elections in March 2012 Vladimir Putin had won with the use of fraud. If in January 2014 only 29% of Russians were ready to vote for the current president, with the annexation of the Crimea, according to Russian Center for Public Opinion (RCPO), Putin's rating increased from 60.6% in February to 82.3% at the end of March 2014 up to 89.9% in October 2015 (Sperling, 2015).

Simultaneously with the annexation of the Crimea, even against the background of deteriorating of economic situation, rising prices and the depreciation of the ruble, there was improvement of social attitude to the majority of public institutions (Petrov, 2014). Therefore, it should be noted that the annexation of the Crimea acquired mainly domestic policy content and was necessary for the Russian President to improve his rating among the Russian society, who expressed in such a way "pride for their country". The latter also allowed Vladimir Putin to regain the status of the leader who saved Russia from collapse and total defeat on the international stage. According to J. Friedman's statements, Putin's image is based on a rigid foreign policy and the economy indicates that before intervention to Ukraine his ratings were not too high (Fridman, 2015). In addition, an explanation of the high rating of Vladimir Putin is a forcing media propaganda in society that there is no alternative choice of leader. Also, media uses existing people's complexes and phobias, most of which were formed during the Cold War. Along

with active participation of the media the illusions of social stability are created. In general, Russia's domestic policy that defines its foreign policy depends equally on the president and the Russians themselves (Volkov, 2015).

In Western experts' opinion, Vladimir Putin built a regime authoritarian in its essence, however unstable in its content. The first sign of fragility and ineffectiveness of Putin's regime, according to Alexander Motyl, was a series of mass demonstrations in Russia at Bolotna Square and Sakharov Avenue after the elections to the State Duma on December 4, 2011. The reason for the mass public discontent became apparent fraud during the electoral process. After these elections the ruling party "United Russia" "won" the most votes – 49.3%. Quite a large scale public disturbance has also been (the mass meeting "March of millions") after the presidential elections in March 2012. As a result, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitriy Medvedev executed a castling maneuver and Vladimir Putin exchanged post with Dmitriy Medvedev (Motyl, 2012). Particularly active was Russian middle class and young people, who do not agree with the results of elections in which Vladimir Putin won 71.31% of public support though his popularity fall by an average of 20%. According to L. Shevtsova from 2011 after events at Bolotna Square and Sakharov Avenue Russian government took a course on further strengthening of authoritarianism in Russia. Such actions of Kremlin influenced on Russia's foreign policy that eventually resulted in the geopolitical expansion (Shevcova, 2014a). Another signal for government became mass anticorruption meetings in more than hundred Russian cities on March 26, 2017 after exposing by Alex Navalny the corruption schemes of Prime Minister Dmitriy Medvedev. In all, Russian experts argue that there is no alternative way for RF apart from authoritarianism and "managed democracy" and the only replacement of authoritarianism in this situation can be chaos and anarchy.

Supporting the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine should be seen as an attempt by the Russian leadership to preserve the Putin system of authoritarianism in conditions of economic recession and the imposition of sanctions. Regarding the events in Ukraine in 2014 as an American scenario, it was decided in Russia to launch a special operation to destabilize Ukraine to close its path to the EU and NATO. At the same time, Russian society was supposed to demonstrate that Russia thus protects compatriots in Crimea and Donbass from Ukrainian nationalists, as well as opposes the United States, and in particular the expansion of NATO to the borders of the Russian Federation (Shevcova, 2014b). In this case, Ukraine became for the Kremlin the so-called "laboratory", through which it tries to calm down Russia. That is why the scientific and expert community is increasingly inclined to believe that Russia's resolution of the war against Ukraine

is primarily due to internal political considerations – to prevent the Square in Russia (Moty'ł, 2015).

With the deterioration of the domestic situation in Russia, Russian leadership is resorting to a certain time to divert the population from social problems through the exploitation of a nostalgic thesis about the peculiarity and passionarity of Russia, which, as a pivot of Orthodoxy, is in a hostile environment, opposes the scandalous West, and so on. In view of this, the so-called passionarity of Russians is often used by the Kremlin to infiltrate anti-Western sentiment. In addition, all local conflicts are interpreted by the Russian media as a US policy aimed at isolating and destroying Russian sovereignty. Consequently, one of the main components of Russia's internal geopolitics is the creation of an enemy's image in order to consolidate/mobilize Russian society around the ruling regime (Umland, 2015).

According to a survey conducted by the said organization Levada-Center in October 2015, 29% of Russians said that Russia's relations with the US were hostile, and another 45% were tense. In recent years, in the circles of the Russian elite and society, there has been an increase in the number of those who consider the post-Soviet space to be a zone of special national interests of Russia. So, according to sociological studies of the same Levada-Center, 88% of the representatives of the Russian elite and 81% of the Russian society believe that Crimea's accession is legal. In addition, 76% of Russian elites and 53% of Russian society consider the Russian operation in Syria to be legitimate, as well as aimed at neutralizing the terrorist threat. Moreover, against the backdrop of Russia's participation in the conflict, Russian mass media broadcast propaganda about praghristian solidarity of the Russian and Syrian peoples. In this sense, the situation is similar to 1999 when Russia's negative reaction to NATO's operation in Kosovo was observed (*Strategija – XXI: versija dlja obsuzhdenija*, 2014).

In the end, under the conditions of incitement of anti-Western propaganda, Russian mass media receive their public support for ideas of Eurasianism and great power. According to sociologists, the ideas of Eurasianism find support in Russian society, but this in no way affects the size and qualitative influence of Eurasian organizations on political processes in the state. In general, according to sociological surveys, the majority of Russians admit that "Russia is an Eurasian civilization that combines East and West" (*Grazhdanskie, jetnicheskie i religioznye*, 2006). At the same time, in 2002, 35% of the respondents considered Russia to be equally European as well as Asian. Traced in this and deeply paternalistic traditions in Russian's society, since more than 50% of respondents seek to see Russia primarily a strong and large, and not a developed and prosperous state (Kolosov,

2003). In 2014, according to various sociological institutions with the annexation of Crimea, the number of Russian citizens who wish to see Russia as a great power increased to 67% (*Vse men'she rossijan*, 2016).

Russia's radical steps in the global arena in defending its geostrategic interests largely depend on a society's demand for revisionist policies, which are the basis for obtaining a *carte blanche* for freedom of action. It is the sense of despair that the loss of greatness of the state that prevails in Russian society determines the expansionist motives of Putin as the first person of the state. In view of this, the myth of its messianic mission of an international state-building role in the unification of all the Slavic and Orthodox peoples continues to prevail in Russia. Neo-Imperial features of social psychology of the contemporary Russia can be considered as a consequence of national consciousness, which was formed during centuries of history (Sestanovich, 1996).

According to sociological data, an average of 35% of Russians believe that Russia should restore the status of a superpower owned by the Soviet Union. As many Russians claim that Russia in the twenty-first century should get into the circle of 10–15 most economically developed and politically influential countries in the world. In addition, 16% would like to create a core of integration in the post-Soviet space, and then take a seat next to the United States and the European Union. In the end, only 7% of Russians surveyed do not want Russia to set global strategic goals (Maruev, 2007). Also, according to surveys conducted in the first decade of the 21st century with the participation of the Russian Academy of Sciences within the framework of research on energy and the environment, 38% of the Russians polled considered not the development of democracy as the priority, but the great-power status of Russia, which best suits their interests or the interests of their families. At the same time, more than a third of Russians supported state regulation of the energy sector, and for 68% of respondents, the idea of foreign investment in this sector of the economy is completely unacceptable (Jaffe, 2009).

About 47% of Russians prefer to see Russia an empire that would significantly exceed the current territorial boundaries, reaching the size of 1917. In general, 58% of Russians believe that some of the territories of neighboring countries should be Russian. In addition, 53% of the respondents interviewed, aged 18 to 29, are precisely those imperial positions that can not but cause anxiety for neighboring post-Soviet states before Russia's likely territorial expansion (Zhelis, 2010).

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Thus, Russia became a totally authoritarian state, where the power institutions took under strict control the formation of geostrategy, its implementation and decision-making of foreign policy in general. The coming to power in 2000 the former head of the FSS – Vladimir Putin marked the beginning of systematic alignment of autocratic authority, based on the support of a narrow circle of statesmen and colleagues from the CSS, which actually became a social and political support of the current regime. Over-centralized organization of power that is completely closed on the president and his surrounding often promotes false strategic algorithm of actions in the international arena and doesn't help to make smart decisions concerning protection of national interests. The current Russian society is characterized with imperial consciousness, caused by the nostalgia for the superpower of the Soviet Union. Due to it, the Kremlin actively cultivates and uses imperial mood of society in order to return to RF the “unjustly deprived” great power status. That is why the expansionist geostrategy of power is actively supported both among representatives of the intelligentsia and the broad social strata. In particular, about 60% of Russians want the entry of neighboring states or parts of their territories into Russia. Most Russians tend to see their state as a great world power instead of a technologically advanced economy.

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