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DIFFERENT FOCI OF FOREIGN POLICY ANALYSIS IN „FOREIGN AFFAIRS”: RUSSIAN POLICY TOWARDS THE WEST IN 1999–2013

ABSTRACT

Articles in *Foreign Affairs* have always been an informative collection of opinions, which allowed understanding how the U.S., and especially its intellectuals that comment on international relations, perceive other countries and their foreign policies. Then when an international crisis comes, such as the one in Ukraine in 2014 and the subsequent annexation of Crimea, one wonders if the Western analysts might have predicted such outcome. The article analyzes more than three dozen *Foreign Affairs* publications from 1999 to 2013 and concludes that the authors held rather close-minded views when it comes to foreign policy analysis. They did not present a holistic standpoint, but tried to answer all questions with only a limited number of tools and foci. It is also concluded that combining the realist, liberal internationalist and constructivist attitudes would have allowed for a more comprehensive analysis of the process of creation of Russian foreign policy.

Keywords: Russian foreign policy, international relations theories, Foreign Affairs, foreign policy analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

The journal of the Council on Foreign Relations, *Foreign Affairs*, is a renowned source of relevant, albeit subjective, analyses and commentaries on the U.S. foreign policy and international politics. The published articles are not scientific in nature, although many present a viewpoint that is based on some kind of theoretical or methodological framework. That viewpoint is often enthymematic, although features of specific schools of thought can be observed by a reader well-versed in the paradigms of international relations (Bieleń, 2011).

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This is especially visible in articles covering grand-scale international politics, e.g. relations between global powers or states that are aspiring to become one.

This article shows how the authors of *Foreign Affairs* constructed the narrative of the U.S.-Russian relations with a focus on Eurasian issues leading up to the events of the Crimean crisis. Even a superficial analysis shows that different aspects of foreign policy creation were taken into account, especially when formulating foreign policy recommendations for the U.S. government. Having had synthesized a frame of thought for different types of articles, it is then possible to say if the analysts had misjudged the policy of Kremlin in the long-term perspective, despite having all the necessary knowledge available.

The article is comprised of two parts. The first one describes commentaries and opinions that focus on systemic factors in international relations. Those factors include the expansions of NATO and the EU, U.S. foreign policy or Western support for the “color revolutions” in post-soviet countries. The second part of the article deals with Russian *Innenpolitik*. When attempting to understand and counteract Russian foreign policy, these authors focus on the nature of the Russian political system, immaterial factors like ideas and public opinion, which shape the nation’s identity. It is important to remember, that all information and opinions written here are those of *Foreign Affairs* analysts of the time and might be now known to be untrue or wrong.

2. OUTSIDE OR INTERNATIONAL FACTORS

When looking back at the outside pressures put onto the Russian Federation from the international system, one would point to the expansion of NATO and the EU as the main factors contributing to the resolute and sometimes aggressive Russian foreign policy. However, during the first years of the new millennium, *Foreign Affairs* analysts almost did not pay any attention to how the expansion might be seen inside Russia and what reaction it might provoke.

2.1. NATO EXPANSION AS A POSSIBLE ROOT CAUSE OF RUSSIAN AGGRESSIVE FOREIGN POLICY

The first article on how NATO expansion could affect western relations with Russia in the analyzed period appeared as late as in 2008. Asmus (2008) suggested a verification of the post-cold war vision for Europe’s future, claiming that the old point of view was obsolete. He observed that Russia was becoming an independent Eurasian power with its own model of development, different to liberal democracy. Moreover, the country was using geopolitical maneuvers, which in the Western world were supposed to stay buried in the past. Thus the expansion of Western structures did not bring Russia into the “end-of-history” world, but actually was seen as an outside threat and could further strengthen the Russian feeling of isolation (Blaney III, 2008). Newhouse (2009) pointed out, that the risk related to NATO expansion had been obvious from the start, but got neglected because of the actions of specific lobbies in Washington. His views were opposed by Asmus and Rosner (2009), who claimed that the expansion had a strong moral and strategic basis and was not forced by the national lobbies from Eastern European countries.

The dissatisfaction of Moscow with NATO expansion became obvious to *Foreign Affairs* analysts some time later. Kupchan (2010) explained, that the West consciously ignored Russian discontent, because it had the dominant position over an economically and militarily weak state. Only in the 21st century the repercussions became evident, when Russia began rebuilding its economy and becoming a world player once again. Interestingly, Kupchan suggested that the only way to remove any future threats to Euro-Atlantic stability from the Russian Federation was to include it in NATO.

2.2. THE AMBIVALENT U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONS

Obviously, the U.S. foreign policy was the main focus of *Foreign Affairs* analysts and they were all conscious of the fact, that the U.S.-Russian relations will shape international politics in the 21st century. After the 9/11 attacks, most attention was paid to the Middle East and not Russia, but Colton and McFaul (2001) quickly suggested a strategic alliance between the U.S. and Russia in their “war on terror”. They observed that this war and a possible alliance would benefit Vladimir Putin in his own campaign against the Chechen rebels, but would also let the West promote more of its values in Russia. The authors emphasized the early support from the Russian president after the terror attacks and the empathy and solidarity shown by the Russian people.

Later, from 2006 onwards, the antagonism between the two countries became more evident to the analysts. According to Trenin (2006), the Russian Federation was now openly trying to be on the level of the U.S. and China, rather than Brazil and India, while the West was still operating on obsolete paradigms and unnecessarily procrastinating the solution of important issues in Eastern Europe. Trenin wrote that the open-door policy of the U.S. and hope that Russia would improve itself on its own both proved to be wrong. Larrabee (2006) noticed that Washington slept through the rising amount of Russian interference in Eastern Europe and the tightening cooperation between Russia and Germany. He suggested that the U.S. should counterbalance the Russian involvement by supporting the Eastern European countries, helping them join NATO and the EU and further promoting Western values. On the other hand, Simes (2007) concluded that such policy would bring back the cold war tensions and that the blame for the deteriorating relations lies on both sides. If left to themselves, they would make it more difficult to work together on global matters, such as nonproliferation or containing rogue states. The relations did eventually drop to a new low, not seen since the cold war, after the Russian war with Georgia, as noticed by King (2008). According to him, the South Ossetian crisis became a turning point, in which Russia began ostentatiously ignoring international institutions. He claimed that the U.S. actually helped to provoke that situation by unconditionally supporting the controversial Georgian government and they had not done enough to strengthen the international institutions in time.

In an interesting and important article Sestanovich (2008) declared that the constant pestering of Moscow with democracy, trying to include Ukraine and Georgia in NATO, planning to create the ballistic missile defense in Eastern Europe, recognizing Kosovo as an independent state – would not be worth the eventual damage to bilateral relations and possible casualties. He also observed that the West, by interfering in Moscow’s sphere of influence, unknowingly generated geopolitical tensions, which could later become a source of international crises. What is worth noting, Sestanovich reminded that realists had been trying to dissuade Washington from this policy course, although to no avail.

The presidency of Barack Obama brought a renewed interest in the U.S. policy towards Russia, with the most popular phrase of the season – reset – being the focus of *Foreign Affairs* articles. The meetings between both new presidents, Obama and Medvedev, became business-like and the American leader abstained from using harsh rhetoric, as observed by Legvold (2009). The U.S. was now actively trying to include Russia into the WTO, renew nonproliferation cooperation, work together to stabilize Afghanistan. Re-prioritizing Russia was recommended by Simes (2009). However, Charap and Petersen (2010) claimed, that Washington should work alone with smaller Eurasian states, while mostly ignoring the geopolitical realities of Eurasia.

When it came to appraising the reset, Mankoff (2010) had high hopes, especially since a stronger and more cordial relationship between Russia and Western powers would enable the former to save its economy, which once again became less competitive in international markets. He saw improved trade relations between the U.S. and Russia as the first and best step to undertake. However, Shleifer and Treisman (2011) hinted at the ignorance of American politicians and commentators, who did not understand the root causes of the Russian politicians' behavior. According to these authors, trying to explain that behavior by psychological means was pointless, but instead it should be seen as an emanation of Russian national interests and those were definitely opposite to the interests of the U.S. Still, they saw Russia as a rather weak state with no big geopolitical ambitions, which would not try to reacquire Ukraine or Crimea.

The end of the reset was described by Kuchins (2012), who anticipated another deterioration of the U.S.-Russia relations. He pointed out that Vladimir Putin felt that his power was most threatened by the U.S. policy, which became apparent after accusing Hillary Clinton of supporting the opposition and also after the sour greeting of the new U.S. ambassador to Moscow. After the unsuccessful reset, Aron (2013a and 2013b) called for a “strategic pause”, which would allow both sides to reevaluate their priorities and gather arguments for eventual negotiations.

2.3. UKRAINE AS A KEY CHESS PIECE

Some analysts noticed that Ukraine was becoming a source of additional tension between the U.S. and Russia in 2007. Simes (2007) wrote about how supporting the Orange Revolution was an open attempt to limit Russian influence in the region and that the fact would not go unnoticed in Moscow. He concluded that Washington seemed oblivious to the scale of emotive reaction that supporting Ukraine would create. Trying to bring Ukraine into NATO and financial support of the pro-Western NGOs was sure to provoke negative reactions from Moscow, especially when taking into account its disdain for Ukraine and discontent with its very existence (Sestanovich, 2008).

Ukraine was later described as a key element of European stability and the reason for Western leaders to remind themselves of the rules of geopolitics (Karatnycky & Motyl, 2009). The country was a new, albeit still very weak, member of the international community, whose future was still uncertain. What is extremely important, Karatnycky and Motyl drew three distinct possible visions of the future, one of which included active Russian interference in the rapprochement between post-soviet states and the West, which could culminate in military action, such as intervening to protect the Russian-speaking minority in Crimea or supporting separatist tendencies in eastern Ukraine.

Another accurate prediction about Ukraine's future came from Menon and Motyl (2011), who once again emphasized the country's importance in the zone between the EU and Russia. Its instability would prevent the relations between the West and Russia to ever become normalized. The trial of former Prime Minister Tymoshenko and the very pro-Russian policies of then President Yanukovich made the future difficult to predict, although the authors hinted at a possible Russian intervention.

3. INSIDE FACTORS OR INNENPOLITIK

The in-country factors of Russian foreign policy got almost as much attention as the typical geopolitical issues in *Foreign Affairs*. Among these were the relations between the government and society, the role of the oligarchs and ideology as possible sources of foreign policy influence.

3.1. RELATIONS BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT AND THE SOCIETY

During the time when the anti-terrorist alliance between the U.S. and Russia was being formed, analysts began noticing the worsening state of democratic institutions even in the first years of Putin's presidency (Colton & McFaul, 2001). They pointed out his indifference to human rights, especially in Chechnya, the strengthened security apparatus, persecution of journalists, activists, religious figures or academics. Moreover, the oppressive policies did not damage the president's popular support, leading the West to think that the Russian people need and want a strong ruler, who would bring their country back to power. This phenomenon was thoroughly analyzed by Treisman (2002), who concluded that the aggressive foreign policy of the Russian president, coupled with a revived economy, were the actual causes of his popular support. This may have created a conviction in Putin that his foreign policy is true to his people's demands. Shleifer and Treisman (2004) drew a conclusion that the oppression of media or government interference into the election process was a normal political behavior in developing countries and the Russian case was not even the worst in the world.

The undiminished popular support of the Russian president interested also those analysts, who were openly critical of the Russian government. Pipes (2004) noticed that moving away from liberal democracy, the oppression of media and democratic institutions and human rights issues were mostly ignored by the public. Researchers showed that the Russians were experiencing an identity crisis, to which the easiest solution was a kind of international posturing and having a strong leader and military that would make their country a respected member of the international community. Moreover, the Russian people showed signs of feeling threatened from all sides of the global chessboard and any authoritative leader could easily funnel those feelings into support for controversial policies, both foreign and domestic.

Mendelson and Gerber (2006) admitted that while the academic community in the U.S. was well-informed and worried, the government in Washington was ready to call the democratic and market reforms in Russia as complete, mostly because of being overwhelmed by the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan. This was a kind of a turning point, after which almost all analysts in *Foreign Affairs* called Russia an authoritarian state with an authoritarian version of capitalism, which could also become a revisionist power (Gat, 2007). Once again it was emphasized, that the Russian people needed that kind of political system, because they saw

it as the only way to restore their country's power (Logan, 2007). McFaul and Stoner-Weiss (2008) wrote that it could be the other way around – the president might be escalating the feeling of being threatened by outside powers to strengthen his grip on power, not bring Russia back to being a global power.

During the presidency of Medvedev, some analysts have already discerned the imminent return to power by Putin, even amidst rising social unrest. Although some authors were hopeful that the protests were a sign that the people are done with Putin and becoming more of a civil society (Dmitriev & Treisman, 2012), most others claimed that the protests were bound to fail, considering the still high popular support for the former president (Stoner-Weiss, 2011), the small involvement in politics of most Russian people (Lipman & Petrov, 2012) and bad decisions of the protest instigators (Roxburgh, 2012). The middle ground was the prediction that the unrest will at least force Putin to carry out some democratic reforms (Yaffa, 2012). In the end, he returned as president and continued his domestic and foreign policies, once again using any Western interference to nurture the anti-Western and anti-U.S. rhetoric (Treisman, 2013).

3.2. THE ROLE OF THE RUSSIAN OLIGARCHY IN FOREIGN POLICY CREATION

In the late 90s, Aslund (1999) noticed that the Russian economic elites, adept at using the flaws of the economic system to their benefit, began to gather much political power. Not only did they shape domestic policy in order to expand their private empires, they also influenced foreign policy, i.e. in order to attract foreign capital to be used and appropriated. Then when Putin came to power, analysts were trying to predict how he would deal with the entrenched plutocracy. Wolosky (2000) considered the elites to be a threat to the democratization and westernization of the Russian society, and even to the U.S. national interest, if they continued to control the government and its foreign policy. He thought that the new president would be unable to rein in the oligarchs without outside help.

Eventually it became obvious that Putin only replaced the old oligarchs with those who shared his views or were going to be instrumental to his hold on power (Treisman, 2002). The announced fight against corruption was only a pretentious political act, although the president was not the only one to blame for the *status quo*, because the oligarchic system was the legacy of earlier governments. Shleifer and Treisman (2004) even wrote that the rising inequality and concentration of wealth was a part of the rationalization of economic activity, typical to developing countries.

Goldman (2004) wrote an interesting article, in which he analyzed the issue of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who was an example of an oligarch that rose to power quickly, while being in open opposition to the president. He concluded that politics had little to do with his trial, but the whole situation was a means to retake big businesses by the government or people from the security apparatus (*siloviki*). This allowed the central government to dominate the energy sector, which could later be used as a tool of foreign policy. The aforementioned *siloviki* and their political influence were described in *Foreign Affairs* by Russian authors in much detail (Soldatov & Borogan, 2010; Soldatov, 2011).

3.3. IDEOLOGY AS A FOREIGN POLICY INSPIRATION

The role of ideology and religion in Russian politics was most often analyzed by those *Foreign Affairs* authors, who originated from Eastern Europe or those who worked in the region. They were the ones who quickly noticed the rise in popularity of a specific geopolitical concept and ideology – eurasianism (Clover, 1999). The ideology was garnering support among both the radical parliamentarians and intellectuals, including the military elite, members of the Ministry of Defense and numerous party leaders. It promised a return to former greatness, while emphasizing the cooperation of Eurasian nations. As Clover (1999, p. 10) put it, “Eurasianism therefore manages to be imperial without being nationalistic, messianic without being overtly chauvinistic.” He was also the first *Foreign Affairs* author, who wrote about Alexander Dugin and Alexander Prokhanov. Dugin had been propagating the idea of an inherent conflict between liberal and traditional powers, West and East, and proposing an anti-Western alliance with Russian leadership. Clover anticipated that eurasianism would become the future of Russian foreign policy.

The sense of a civilizational mission of the Russian elite was also noticed by Legvold (2001), who wrote about the problem of national identity and the global role of Russia. According to him, the Russian elites felt that they were entitled to shape the events in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Middle Asia. Legvold (2009) returned to the analysis during the reset and observed that Russian foreign policy was still accompanied by a lot of emotions, caused by traumatic events of past decades and the continuing problems with determining the country’s global purpose.

Laqueur (2010) was another analyst who wrote about eurasianism (neo-eurasianism) and the Russian’s ambitions of being the “Third Rome.” He concluded that the nation’s current self-isolation was much stronger than their sense of solidarity and friendship with the West, resulting from decades of anti-Americanism among Russian scholars, who saw the Islamic world as a more peaceable ally than the West and used the Russians’ innate penchant for conspiracy theories. The role of religion was also analyzed by Kizenko (2013), who observed that the Orthodox hierarchy, with its ultraconservatism and nationalism, was an ally of the ruling elite in all matters, both domestic and foreign.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The amount of knowledge possessed by the analysts writing for *Foreign Affairs* was considerable when taken as a whole. There were authors, writing from a clearly realist perspective, who focused on systemic factors of foreign policy creation and who explained the aggressive Russian policy with outside pressures like the expansion of NATO. Others, basing their opinions rather in liberal internationalism, saw the expansion of Western structures as a chance to instigate democratization and liberalization of Russia, culminating in its inclusion in those structures. These were the authors who also showed much worry about the state of Russian democratic institutions and suggested that harsh domestic policies came hand-in-hand with aggressive outside behavior.

Some analysts focused on the ideological side of things. They understood that ideas shape how a nation and its elites perceive the outside world and their own place within it, thus drawing conclusions from a constructivist perspective. They noticed the rise of eurasianism

and wondered whether it was the ideology that shaped foreign policy or did the establishment use the ideology to justify its controversial actions.

To summarize, it is obvious that the U.S. intellectual elite was well-informed about the factors which shaped Russian foreign policy in Eastern Europe, although they viewed it from their own, sometimes very self-contained, point of view. Each of the authors focused on a few single issues, while ignoring others. Most of them were right and gave relevant opinions, but what was lacking was a holistic perspective. It was therefore not very surprising, that they were unable to provide coherent and accurate predictions, which culminated in their inability to explain the Crimean crisis (Walewicz, 2016). It remains to be seen whether there was any lesson taken from this case and if the *Foreign Affairs* analysts will verify their attitudes and intellectual tools when trying to explain and predict other important global and regional issues (Middle East, China) that Russia has been and will be involved in, especially taking into account the fact, that Vladimir Putin may very well continue being president and base his foreign policy on the same known premises.

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