

Still out in the cold? Russia's place in a globalizing world

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Abstract

This article examines some of the implications of current debates in international relations for Russian foreign policy. The focus is on Russian foreign policy analysis and not the international relations debates per se. The article begins by discussing the way Russian policy is fractured along the dimensions of security, economics and cultural identity – each corresponding to a different geopolitical vector. The second half discusses how recent developments in international security impact on Russian foreign policy debates.

1. Introduction 1

Twenty years after the emergence of the Russian Federation from the rubble of the collapsed Soviet state, Russian foreign policy still lacks a sense of direction. Its trajectory is the object of intense and contentious debate both amongst outside observers and Russians themselves. The Russian state has certain deep structural characteristics that arguably make it particularly ill-suited to the challenge of adapting to the changing dynamics of the international system over the past two decades.

The most important political and economic relationship is that between Russia and its European neighbors. However, a complex set of institutions and ways of thinking dating back to the Soviet period are hindering Russia from embracing its European identity. During the 20 years that have elapsed since the Soviet collapse, Russia–European relations seem to have stumbled from one crisis to the next, ranging from the dismantling of war memorials in Tallinn to interruptions in the flow of natural gas supplies through Ukraine. Commentators often attribute these problematic relations to a quixotic quest by President Vladimir Putin to restore Soviet power, and to reverse the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which he famously referred to as “the greatest political catastrophe of the 20th century” (Putin, 2005). In reality, however, the problems in the Russia–European relationship are the product of deep structural processes and extend well beyond the specific issues that are the cause of the latest round of contentious diplomatic exchanges between Moscow and its Western neighbors (Leonard and Popescu, 2007; Antonenko and Pinnick, 2005).

The standard story is that the collapse of communism enabled most of the former members of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe to regain their European identity and integrate with European economic, political and military structures. However, as the core institutions (the European Union and NATO) spread east, it became clear that the Russian Federation itself would not – could not – be integrated into those structures as a full and equal member anytime soon. In the 2000s there was a growing sense that the European Union (EU) had reached the limits of its original integration model, after the rejection of the proposed new constitution by voters in France and the Netherlands in 2005 and the watered-down nature of the Lisbon Treaty that was finally adopted in 2009. Europe's eastward integration seemed to hit a wall after the incorporation of the Baltic states into the EU in 2007. In the wake of the August 2008 Georgian war even the prospects for the entry of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova into NATO or the EU had dimmed (not

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to mention Belarus, or the other states of the Caucasus and Central Asia). The Greek debt crisis that erupted in 2011 challenged the future of the Eurozone itself, and served to confirm the sense that further EU expansion was not in the cards. The model of Europeanization through incorporation into the European Union could presumably still work for the remaining small nations of the Western Balkans, but looks increasingly unlikely for countries such as Turkey, Ukraine – or Russia.

2. Finding a place in the global system

In the wake of the Soviet collapse, Russia initially thought it could maintain its role in the international system as a great power roughly equal in status to the United States. Russia's new leaders believed that its place at the table of the leading powers was assured; that Russia could and should be a rule-maker and not a rule-taker in the international system. To some extent, the US abetted them in this view – with the aim of securing Moscow's cooperation in controlling nuclear proliferation and other US strategic priorities ([Talbot, 2003](#); [Goldgeier and McFaul, 2003](#)). In the course of the 1990s, however, the implosion of Russia's economy and the fragmentation of its political order showed the recovery of great power status to be an unrealistic expectation – but neither the Russian political elite nor public opinion were willing to acknowledge this state of affairs ([Gvosdev, 2004](#)). A 2003 poll which offered respondents a choice between being a Great Power and a high standard of living found 43 percent opted for the former and 54 percent for the latter.² A January 2011 Levada Center poll found that 78 percent of respondents supported the idea of Russia restoring its status as a “great empire” and only 14 percent were opposed ([Levada Center, 2011a](#)).

A second-best strategy that Moscow pursued in the late 1990s – as a way back to superpower status – was the promotion of a multi-polar bloc to oppose US hegemony. This proved equally unrealistic: China was heavily reliant on its deepening trade relationship with the US and eschewed balance of power politics; while India was also liberalizing its economy and building closer ties with the US. Europe itself showed no interest in breaking the trans-Atlantic alliance. The peak of multi-polar aspirations came in February 2003 when President Jacques Chirac and Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder stood together with President Vladimir Putin in opposing the launch of the Iraq war, but that proved to be a fleeting moment. Having failed to prevent the US from invading Iraq, the other countries fell back into the pattern of cooperating with the US in trying to handle global challenges.

The 2000s saw a doubling of Russian GDP and the stabilization of Russia's political system under the semi-autocratic leadership of Vladimir Putin. But these generally positive domestic developments did not translate into a breakthrough on the international front. On the contrary, Russia's recovery from the chaos and uncertainty of the 1990s somewhat paradoxically led to a deterioration in relations between Moscow and its Western partners. ([Tsygankov, 2006](#); [Legvold, 2007](#); [Kanet, 2007](#)). A Russia that was politically stable and economically resurgent was assumed to be one which would be more willing to project power abroad. Indeed, analysis of “aggressive actions” by Russia in the 2000s seemed to show a strong correlation with changes in the global energy price ([Szrom and Brugato, 2008](#)).

This trajectory of events left Russia isolated and anxious: excluded from the key economic and security institutions on the European continent, and frankly a marginal actor on the world stage. For 90 percent of the world's countries, this peripheral status is actually a quite normal state of affairs. But for Russia, it is something new and disturbing. This sense of marginalization means that Russia is seen as a source of instability in the international system, since outsiders fear it may take drastic steps in a bid to restore what it sees as its rightful status. It is also a threat to Russia's domestic political stability, since there have always been close ties, historically, between Russia's international role and its internal political order. A key element in any Russian leader's legitimacy is their ability to maintain the country's prestige and security on the international stage. There is a risk that a Russian leader may behave more aggressively

abroad in order to bolster his status at home. This situation is not unique to Russia, of course, but it is more acute there, given the paucity of other forms of leader legitimation, such as competitive elections, and given the tradition of an assertive foreign policy that occasionally involves invading neighboring countries.

It seems clear that the incipient rivalry that evolved within the “tandem” leadership of President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has also spilled over into their respective positions on foreign policy. Medvedev's aggressive stance after the August 2008 Georgian war and his precipitate recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states would be one example. In March 2011 Putin said that NATO's intervention in Libya “reminds me of a medieval call for a crusade.” Days later Medvedev disagreed, without mentioning Putin by name. He said “it is unacceptable to use expressions that essentially lead to a clash of civilizations — such as ‘crusade’” ([Levy, 2011](#)).

3. The three faces of power

Russia stands at the intersection of multiple narratives in the broader debates about international security. Russia's problems are not unique to Russia, but are reflective of deep structural changes in the international order that have occurred over the past 20 years.

The international system itself is a complex and fluid entity. The complexity consists in the existence of multiple and parallel levels of interaction: public and private, corporate and individual; physical and ideational ([Cerny, 2010](#)). Simply put, we can say that there are three levels of interaction in the international system: military power; economic flows; and the realm of culture and identity. These frames roughly correspond to the familiar triptych of international relations theory: Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism ([Snyder, 2004](#)). But while theorists deploy these competing paradigms to try to explain the behavior of states in the aggregate, at the level of the global system, this paper is focused on the conflicting pressures facing decision makers within a single country. Over the past 20 years Russia has seen radical shifts in its assessment of the content and relative significance of these three policy domains.

Military power has shifted from the core priority of the Soviet leadership to a factor of indeterminate importance in the new Russia. Moscow no longer has to concern itself with deterring an attack from the US, or from any other state. Some Russian military thinkers still voice fears about a possible future US military threat – hence their opposition to US missile defense deployments. Since 2000 this issue has become the main stumbling block in US–Russian diplomacy – despite the fact that the actual strategic threat to Russia posed by such systems is zero. Russia's real security concerns are battling Islamist terrorism emanating from the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East, and preventing the further consolidation of a US military presence around Russia's periphery – again, in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The US military “encirclement” of Russia is more a diffuse strategic or economic challenge than a direct military threat. Europe and to a lesser extent the US considers it important to reduce dependence on Russian energy by diverting new energy exports from Azerbaijan and Central Asia away from Russian territory.

Economic flows have seen substantial shifts since 1990 ([Aslund, 2007](#); [Aslund and Tsyvinski, 2010](#)). The disintegration of the Soviet economy and the socialist trading bloc meant the replacement of a fairly autarchic economic system with a Russian economy much more open to and dependent on foreign trade and capital flows. Foreign trade as a share of Russia's GDP went from 17 percent in 1990 to 48 percent in 2009 ([World Bank Development Indicators, 2011](#)). This process of economic opening took place in a spontaneous and chaotic manner, seemingly beyond the control of the Russian state and society, but in fact reflective of deliberate decisions by Russian elites to internationalize certain economic operations – to ease licensing, to reduce tariffs, to abolish capital controls and so on. The institutional structure and

sectoral composition of the economy also underwent radical changes: from central planners to freewheeling oligarchs; and from a broad industrial base with considerable technological innovation, to an economy heavily dependent on resource exports.

It is in the vexed area of **cultural identity** that the uncertainties wrought by the transformations in the military and economic realms come together ([Tolz, 2001](#); [Tsygankov, 2006](#)). Russian identity was vested in Soviet identity: as citizens of a superpower state that had created the world's first proletarian state, beat back the fascist menace, launched Sputnik, inspired revolutions around the world, and contended with the US for global influence. All of that came to a crashing halt in 1991. By the Putin era, it would come to be accepted as a proud part of Russia's past, with the rewriting of history books to highlight Soviet achievements ([Sherlock, 2011](#)). But playing the role of an ideological superpower is not part of Russia's present, nor its future. In the 1990s Russian society embraced some aspects of Western culture while expressing dissatisfaction with others. Personal freedom, the market economy, mass consumerism, and the latest technological gadgets were all enthusiastically embraced. Other features of Western life such as growing social inequality, increasing economic insecurity, deteriorating educational standards and a rise in immigration were reluctantly acknowledged by the majority of Russians as part and parcel of modernity, while a radical minority sought to push back against these trends. This pattern of acceptance and rejection is a common enough picture in all countries of the world exposed to globalization. But few of those countries have experienced the shock of transformation from an ideologically-defined Soviet superpower to a Russian Federation shorn of half the population and one third the territory of its previous incarnation.

Adding to the confusion is the lack of a clear explanation for *why* this wrenching post-Soviet transformation occurred. At least in a country which undergoes a regime change after a popular revolution (such as Iran in 1979) or defeat in war (such as Germany in 1945, or Iraq in 2003) it's clear what happened and why. There is no such ideological closure in the Soviet-Russian case. There was no mass uprising in Russia itself in 1991. Russia was on the winning side in World War Two – and Russians still do not see themselves as having “lost” the Cold War. On the contrary, they believe that President Mikhail Gorbachev was in the process of agreeing to reform the Soviet Union to enable it to play a different game, with a new set of rules, when a series of inexplicable events abruptly led to the Soviet collapse ([Suri, 2002](#)). At that point, so their argument goes, the US reneged on its previous approach and instead unilaterally declared itself the winner in the Cold War. Russia sees the preservation of NATO – while the Warsaw Pact was dissolved – and its enlargement to include former Soviet bloc countries as a betrayal of the entente between Gorbachev and the Western powers, under which he agreed to the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Europe ([Kramer, 2009](#)). The last US ambassador to the USSR supports this Russian interpretation of the end of the Cold War. Jack [Matlock \(2010\)](#) writes: “We had told them we wanted a Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals and we end up re-dividing it, just pushing the line further and further east, to their disadvantage.”

4. The geopolitical context

One way of interpreting the distinctiveness of the Russian dilemma is to suggest that there is a specific geographical vector associated with each of these three policy domains, as represented schematically in [Table 1](#). All countries, of course, face geopolitical considerations corresponding to their unique location on the planet's surface. But the sheer extent of Russia's territory, spreading across the northern half of the Eurasian land mass, makes its geopolitical dilemmas particularly variegated.

Table 1. The salience of issue dimensions in Russia's world view with respect to different partners c. 2011.

In relation to	Military	Economics	Culture/Identity
US	Strong	Weak	Weak
Europe	Moderate	Strong	Moderate
Asia	Weak	Moderate	Weak

[Table 1](#) is based on a subjective ranking of Russian priorities as estimated by the author. (The precise ordering of the various categories is less important than the thought-experiment of producing the table.) The table yields something close to a Condorcet paradox – the ranking between military, economics and identity is different for each geographic region.³ This means, according to the original Condorcet voting paradox, that Russian leaders face a serious coordination problem, with the potential for an endless cycle in which policy jumps from one domain to the other. The US is the most important partner if military issues are salient; but Europe is uppermost if economic or identity issues are uppermost. Attention will shift back and forth under the influence of exogenous events, or reflecting the rise and fall of political clans, bureaucratic structures and interest groups in Moscow associated with the respective positions.

Thus Russia's geopolitical schizophrenia reflects deep structural trends in the global system and is not solely the product of forces internal to Russia, such as bureaucratic incompetence, factionalism within the ruling elite, or opposition from interests in society at large – though these factors, of course, are also in play, and serve to increase the volatility of Russian foreign policy.

4.1. The military dimension

With respect to military ties, since 1945 there has been a clear division of labor between the US and the EU, with the US delegated to play the dominant role in Western security. This mutual understanding was institutionalized with the creation of NATO in 1949, the result of their shared fear of potential Soviet aggression. However, the relationship changed over the course of the Cold War and beyond. As [Howorth \(2009\)](#) notes, “NATO was originally devised as an alliance for delivering American security guarantees to Europe, but it has gradually transmogrified into a body geared to delivering European support for US global strategy.”

By the 1990s the US and Europe had developed competing – or perhaps complementary? – views of the nature of power in the international system. “Americans are from Mars, and Europeans are from Venus,” as Robert [Kagan \(2004\)](#) famously put it.⁴ The US is the lead power in NATO, possesses a full-range nuclear arsenal, and has the capacity and political will to project military power around the globe. In contrast the European Union evolved as a trading bloc, protected by the NATO shield and US nuclear saber. The EU does not have its own army or nuclear deterrent ([Sheehan, 2008](#)). Even to fly its peacekeepers around it has to rent heavy transport aircraft from the US, Russia or Ukraine, while the NATO operations in Libya could not have gone ahead without US reconnaissance assets and drone strike aircraft. And over time, as the Cold War recedes into the past, the capacity gap is widening rather than diminishing. In 2010 NATO's European members spent an average of just 1.7% of GDP on defense, compared to 5.4% in the US ([Fidler and Macdonald, 2011](#)). The EU's introduction of a Common Foreign and Security Policy in 1999 has failed to produce a substantial change in this state of affairs. EU policy impotence reflects public opinion in the member states. A 2009 poll asked whether the use of force can ever be “necessary to obtain justice.” Seventy-one percent of Europeans said ‘no,’ while 71 percent of American said ‘yes’ ([German Marshall Fund of the US, 2009](#)). Given this state of affairs, it makes perfect

sense for Russia's military calculations to be overwhelmingly focused on the US – while its economic ties are overwhelmingly with the EU.

The most popular strategic frame used to explain Russian foreign policy is that of the former superpower driven by *ressentiment* to regain its lost status (Lucas, 2009; Bugajski, 2004). While recognizing that global power projection may be beyond Russia's current capacity, attention focuses on efforts to establish Russian dominion over the countries of the former Soviet Union – what came in the 1990s to be called the “near abroad” (*blizhnee zarubezhie*). Vladimir Putin himself has almost never used the term, presumably because it sounds demeaning to his CIS partner countries, and implies that they are less sovereign than the “far abroad.”⁵ The preferred term by the Russian Foreign Ministry these days is “near neighbors,” perhaps echoing the EU's European Neighborhood Policy, launched in 2003.

Medvedev (2008) muddied the waters in a speech he delivered in Sochi on 31 August 2008, in the aftermath of the Georgian war. He spelt out five principles of Russian foreign policy, to wit: the supremacy of international law; “unipolarity is unacceptable”; “Russia does not want isolation”; the protection of life and dignity of Russian citizens “no matter where they live”; and “Russia has areas of privileged interests” in the post-Soviet space. The fifth point was immediately seized on by foreign commentators as proof of Russia's neo-imperialist agenda. Medvedev's comment is typically translated (even by the *New York Times*) as claiming a “sphere of influence” even though the actual word that Medvedev used was “interests” – which is not the same as “influence.” ‘Interests’ is much less pejorative: one can have mutual economic interests, for example. In fact neither Medvedev (nor Putin) has ever used the phrase “sphere of influence,” except in a historical context, such as referring to Nazi Germany.

The main themes in Russian security policy as of 2011 – the war in Georgia, the NATO campaign in Afghanistan, and US plans for missile defense (in roughly descending order of importance) – all revolve around US interests, with Europe playing a subordinate role. Europe, in the form of French President Nicholas Sarkozy, played a pivotal (and commendable) role in arranging a ceasefire in the Georgian war and persuading Russia not to march on Tbilisi and topple President Mikheil Saakashvili. But it was the US, not Europeans, who had been rebuilding the Georgian army and pushing for Georgia's entry into NATO – steps that fueled Saakashvili's recklessness.

The US, obviously, is the key player in Afghanistan,⁶ and had the most to gain from persuading Russia to allow land and air transit of troops and equipment across Russia to complement the precarious access through Pakistan. Medvedev's granting of such concessions during President Barack Obama's trip to Moscow in July 2009 was one of the main fruits of Obama's efforts to “reset” US–Russia relations. By 2011 50 percent of US troops and 20 percent of US equipment headed for Afghanistan was transiting Russia via the Northern Distribution Network.

The plan to install a US ballistic missile defense system in Europe was designed to deter a possible missile strike from Iran. It is a by-product of the US's obsessive fear of that country, a feeling not shared by Europeans. The original plan was for radars to be installed in the Czech Republic and the anti-missile batteries in Poland. While those two countries were willing to help out the Americans, the rest of Europe was skeptical. (A hesitant Polish government finally signed on to the plan in the wake of the Georgian war.) Moscow objected on the grounds that the system could be used against Russian missiles at some point in the future, depriving Russia of its second-strike deterrent capacity. This invocation of Cold War thinking starkly illustrates just how divorced is the Russian security debate from 21st century realities. Medvedev was unable to persuade Obama to abandon the missile defense plan, or to exchange it for a system jointly-operated with Russia. The Polish deployment plan was eventually shelved in September 2009 – not as a sop to the Russians, but ostensibly because of a Pentagon reassessment of the Iranian missile threat. Subsequently, in February 2010, as a part of the compromise with Republicans over the

new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with Russia, Obama revived the project of an anti-missile system in Europe, this time in Romania. In contrast to the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT), which expired in 2009, New START would allow for onsite inspection in both countries, though critics noted that the treaty did not cover tactical nuclear weapons and did not mandate the destruction of removed warheads.⁷ The New START treaty was signed in April 2010 and eventually ratified by Congress in December 2010. The treaty was one of the main foreign policy achievements of the first term of President Obama. Its value was not in preventing an arms race with Russia, something that Russia neither desired nor could afford. Rather, it set an example of the leading powers cooperating in arms control, and thereby contributed to the more urgent task of preventing nuclear proliferation to other countries.

4.2. The economic dimension

Russia's economic interests are closely tied to Europe. The European Union accounts for 50 percent of Russia's trade, and the post-Soviet states, with Belarus and Ukraine also located in Europe, account for another 20 percent. Economic ties with Asia are limited, though set to rise with the development of energy projects such as the Sakhalin offshore oil and gas fields and the East Siberia–Pacific Ocean (VSTO) oil pipeline. These projects should boost the share of Russia's oil sold to Asia from the current 8 percent to 30 percent by 2020. In 2009 China's total trade with Russia was equal to that of Germany, each with \$40 billion ([Rosstat, 2011](#)). In 2000, the respective figures were \$4.2 billion for China and \$12.7 billion for Germany.

The most important geo-economic debates have been those surrounding Russia's transit pipelines to Europe, and the access of Western oil companies to Russian oil and gas deposits. The prevailing approach is to analyze these confrontations in terms of Russia's strategic agenda ([Stulberg, 2008](#)). Hence the periodic shut-offs of gas supplies to Europe across Ukraine (that occurred in 2006 and 2009) are seen as part of Russia's desire to gain influence over Ukraine's domestic politics and establish a Soviet-type zone of influence in what the Russians used to call “the near abroad.” These debates certainly have a strategic dimension, couched in terms of “energy security,” but it must also be remembered that they are business transactions involving profit and loss calculations on both sides ([Aalto, 2012](#)). The principal actors involve not only corporations such as Gazprom, but also shadowy networks of international businessmen with links to organized crime, who are suspected of steering some of the profits of the gas trade into the pockets of corrupt politicians in Moscow and Kyiv through intermediaries such as the Rosukrenergo corporation. ([Global Witness, 2006](#); [Balmaceda, 2008](#)). In such an environment it is unconvincing to insist on forcing Russian behavior into the frame of great power expansionism, when the evidence suggests that such a unified “rational actor” model does not correspond to the facts on the ground.

Russia has been negotiating for entry to the World Trade Organization since 1993. The European Union gave its approval to Russian entry in 2004, in return for Russia's acceptance of the Kyoto accords ([Rutland, 2007](#)). The US foot-dragging on Russia's WTO entry was partly based on the lobbying of some specific sectoral interests, such as pork exporters angered by Russian sanitary rules; and Hollywood and Silicon Valley worries about intellectual property rights. But more generally the stalemate seems reflective of a broader cooling of relations between Moscow and Washington. In 2009 Putin began raising obstacles to WTO entry – something that he had previously supported. In June 2009 Putin announced that Russia would be withdrawing its individual bid to join the WTO, and would instead be pursuing a joint bid as part of a customs union with Kazakhstan and Belarus. WTO officials were taken aback, explaining that there is no provision for collective membership applications. Russia returned to the negotiating table, however, and succeeded in striking a deal on WTO entry in December 2011, with import tariffs set to fall from an average of 9.5 percent to 6 percent ([Rutland, 2012](#)). The State Duma ratified the treaty in July

2012. Repeal of the 1974 Jackson-Vanik amendment requiring certification of freedom of migration from Russia is still a problem for the American side.

4.3. The identity dimension

Identity politics is at least as important as military power or economic interests in assessing Russia's position in the international system. But it is hard to say just what is the dominant geographical vector in Russia's identity politics. Historically, at least since the break-up of the Mongol empire in the 15th century, Russia's identity discourse has been oriented toward Europe ([Hauner, 1992](#); [Poe, 2003](#); [Neumann, 1996](#)). The key question was “Is Russia a part of Europe?”, and even if the most common answer was ‘no,’ Europe was the frame of reference ([Kazantsev, 2010](#)). In contrast, during the Cold War, Russia's self-image was very much vested in its role as a global superpower, and hence was connected to its competition with the United States. That mutual rivalry ended with the end of the Cold War. Russia cannot hope to regain its former status as a global power equal to the US, still less as a successor to the US as the global superpower, given the rise of China.

The US remains an important reference point for Russian identity, but the love–hate relationship of Soviet times has now turned into a more diffuse anti-Americanism, one that is centered on the idea that America is to blame for the political turmoil and economic privations that Russia experienced during the 1990s.⁸ Whatever the historical truth (or lack thereof) behind this view, it is clear that such sentiments are an unsteady foundation on which to build a national identity for Russia heading into the 21st century. The hollowing out of America's industrial base and the 2011 fiscal crisis indicate that Washington's ability to maintain its hegemonic role is in doubt. Russians might experience some Schadenfreude in watching America's decline – but this is no substitute for an affirmative, forward-looking construction of Russian identity.

With its retreat from the global stage, Russia's cultural ties (educational exchanges, tourism flows, sports interests, and others) are increasingly embedded in Europe. Some 3 million Russians have left to live abroad since 1991, and the majority of them reside in Europe. They include a large slice of Russia's New Rich, who dominate the elite housing market in London, Prague and Berlin, and the luxury yacht berths in Cannes ([Hollingsworth and Lansley, 2009](#)). The most recent and striking manifestation of this European orientation is the creation of a new Continental Hockey League in 2008, lavishly funded by Gazprom, as a rival to the American National Hockey League ([Jokisipila, 2011](#)). However, the fact remains that the gap between Russia and Europe is still considerable, in terms of living standards, level of democracy, degree of corruption and criminality. As a result only a minority of Russians regard themselves as European. According to a 2004 poll, 46 percent ‘never’ think of themselves as European, 17 percent ‘rarely,’ 18 percent ‘sometimes,’ and only 19 percent ‘often’ ([New Russia Barometer, 2004](#)). Moreover, the ‘never’ respondents had tripled from 15 percent in 2000, while the ‘sometimes’ halved from 35 percent.

Russia's identification ties with Asia are weak, having reached a modest peak in the 1950s, prior to the Sino-Soviet split, when the Soviet Union was still actively engaged in developing Chinese science and industry. Since then Moscow has had very difficult relations with Beijing. Ties have slowly improved in the last 20 years as the benefits of economic cooperation became clear to both sides, but they are not rooted in any sense of common identity or civilizational worldview. The Russian Far East has developed intimate cross-border ties with its giant southern neighbor, but there is no doubt that its Russian residents regard themselves – and are regarded as – a European population in a foreign continent. Russia's relations with Japan are even more estranged, because of the 60 year stand-off over the southern Kurile Islands (Northern Territories) seized by the Russians in 1945.

5. The three faces, in space and time

To some degree, the military, economic and identity dimensions of Russia's international relations not only map onto different global regions, they also map onto different historical time periods. It could be said that Russia still lives in the military world of the 20th century, while engaging with the economic world of the 21st century global economy. Yet the identity debates seem to have regressed to 19th century categories: the Russian Idea, Eurasianism, the benefits of autocracy, the uniqueness of Orthodoxy, the challenge of modernization, and so on.

Military calculations are rooted in the Soviet past, with almost the entire stock of the weapons hardware and institutional software dating back to the pre-1991 regime. Even the institutional structures of the Soviet military live on, to a much greater extent than in other spheres of social and political life. They range from the maintenance of a strategic nuclear deterrent to the effective abandonment of the effort to replace the draft with a professional army, launched with the introduction of “contract soldiers” in 2004 and effectively abandoned by 2010 ([Boudreaux, 2011](#)).

Economic interests have some roots in the Soviet past to be sure (the export pipelines built during the Brezhnev era being the most salient example), but they are primarily oriented toward the present – and future. The oligarchs and the business corporations they head may have their origins in Soviet industrial enterprises – but with their listings on foreign stock exchanges and global acquisitions, they have transformed themselves in 20 short years.

Of course Russia is not unique in facing the challenge of heterogeneity in its relations with the outside world. To some extent this asymmetry of power domains is normal for any country. As [Emerson \(2010\)](#) notes, “the US has three faces, after all: westward-Pacific, yes, but eastward-Atlantic and southward-Hispanic as well.” The US conducts a high proportion of its trade with Canada and Mexico, but those countries do not loom large in the US defense posture review.⁹ In Asia, the US faces a contradiction between its dependence on trade with China and its commitment to the defense of Taiwan, and desire to limit the transfer of military technology to Beijing. But in the case of the US, these contradictions are anchored in a strong and enduring sense of national identity, and they have been around for decades (in the case of Taiwan) if not centuries (in the case of Canada).

The problem in Russia's case is that the balance between the three power domains, and the three geographical vectors, shifted radically with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the domestic political gyrations of the 1990s. Domestic political institutions, interest groups and conceptual frameworks change much more slowly than the technological and economic revolutions that have transformed the global economy, so all countries are playing catch-up. But in Russia's case these institutions had to be created more or less from scratch – or worse still from socio-political remnants of the Soviet regime.

6. The interplay between domestic and international systems

“Everything is being globalized except politics.”

David Singh [Grewal \(2009, 34\)](#)

What kind of domestic social structures and cultural norms are compatible with a state's role in the contemporary international system? Does international integration presuppose that the participating states share common norms and congruent domestic socio-political structures? The Westphalian system required only a minimal set of conditions (sovereignty over territory and mutual recognition) and thus allowed for considerable heterogeneity across states within Europe (from religious belief to structures of

government). The post-1945 United Nations system tried but largely failed to establish a broader set of norms, including the renunciation of wars of aggression and respect for human rights that would produce more homogeneous behavior amongst its member states. The 1990s saw renewed optimism about the scope for enforcement of international humanitarian law, with the creation of an International Criminal Court in 2002.

In US academic debates, the complex interplay between the three layers (military, economic and identity) has stimulated academic debate ([Gallarotti, 2009](#); [Cerny, 2010](#)). But moving from the academic to the policy arena, one finds that debates remain heavily compartmentalized: the military talk about military threats; economists talk about how to prevent crises in the financial system and boost trade flows; NGO activists talk about human rights; oil people talk about oil. Discussions of identity are usually left to anthropologists and historians. There are a few areas of overlap – for example, the concept of “energy security” draws interest from both the security and economic communities (though more from the former than the latter).

In the security realm, the 1990s saw a shift from a bipolar to unipolar world view, with the US generally recognized as the global hegemon – albeit one whose power was exaggerated, both by its friends and its enemies ([Walt, 2006](#); [Wohlforth, 2009](#)). This shift to US hegemony hit Russia harder than any other state. According to one estimate Russia had ranked #1 in military power in 1750, 1790, and 1870, #2 in 1950 through 1985, and then slipped to #5 in 2005 ([Ikenberry et al., 2009](#), 11). Efforts to develop a multipolar system in which Russia played a leading role, when Yevgenii Primakov was foreign minister (1995–1998), did not produce anything of great substance ([Ambrosio, 2005](#)). The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is sometimes invoked as an example of a multipolar balancing institution. But China's main goal in creating the SCO in 2001 (jointly with Russia) was to promote political stability and economic development in Central Asia, more than deter US influence in the region. And the divergence of strategic interests between China and Russia has hamstrung the SCO's development ([Cooley, 2009](#)). The problem with the multipolarity concept is that it rests on a 19th century European military balance of power model that simply does not match the polymorphous contemporary world order. And the US itself quickly discovered that unipolarity also fails to accurately capture the realities of power projection in the modern world. It turns out that interventions by the “global hegemons” require multilateral participation by allied powers – and preferably official approval from the United Nations – in order to stand a chance of success.

Political economy approaches identify **globalization** (meaning an increase in trans-border flows), and regionalization as the two most significant trends of the post-Cold War era. Globalization meant the increasing porousness of international borders, and the growing pluralization of the relevant actors in international affairs. Power was shifting away from the traditional unitary state – upwards toward international agencies such as the WTO, and downwards to non-government organizations and transnational diasporas. Such trends were particularly disturbing for Russia's leaders ([Blum, 2008](#)), since they inherited a state tradition that was heavily vested in hierarchy and control, and because they took over a state apparatus which was in the process of collapsing. This led to a traumatic gap between aspirations and capacity.

It was widely assumed that globalization would produce greater homogeneity – of political institutions, of economic practices, and of cultural norms. *The World Is Flat*, as Thomas [Friedman \(2006\)](#) put it. But markets do not necessarily produce homogeneity across the board. On the contrary, they make possible greater heterogeneity, at least in some dimensions of human activity. Ever since Adam Smith's discovery of the division of labor in the pin factory, it has been recognized that markets produce specialization and differentiation, and a dynamic inter-dependence between market participants. Such has also been the case with the spread and deepening of markets in the era of globalization. Countries can specialize not only in

certain types of products but also in distinctive institutional arrangements. An obvious example, so obvious that it often goes unremarked: for half a century the United States has relied on dynastic–theocratic regimes in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to guarantee the flow of oil to world markets. A democratic United States was more than happy to import oil from, and provide security guarantees for, Middle Eastern countries with very different cultural values and political institutions.

Since 1980 we have seen a new twist to this international division of labor, with the US acting as the consumer of last resort, fueling China's long economic boom – and at the same time as the trusted banker, depository of the bulk of China's colossal savings. The fact that the two countries have radically different political and economic institutional structures has not prevented their fruitful collaboration in economic development, for 30 years and counting ([Ferguson, 2009](#)). In some ways the co-dependency of the authoritarian regimes in Russia and China on the US as the backbone of the international financial system parallels the way that Japan and Europe outsourced their security to the US after 1945.

Meanwhile in the developing world, after 40 years of largely failed efforts to stimulate growth, there is a new recognition that “no generic formula exists” for bringing about development ([Spence, 2008](#)). The “Washington Consensus” was just that – the consensus amongst policy experts in Washington about the package of economic policies most likely to succeed ([Williamson, 1990](#)). But there was no guarantee, nor even an assumption, that the policy package would succeed in any country which tried to implement it, irrespective of local conditions. Even within the post-socialist region, there was no single successful transition model after the collapse of communism. On the contrary, we find a number of routes to capitalism emerging in the 1990s, with considerable variety even among the “success stories” of Eastern Europe, in terms of the pace and scope of privatization (fast in Czech Republic, measured in Poland), the degree of openness to foreign investment (high in Hungary), and the preservation of corporatist institutions (as in Slovenia) ([Greskovits and Bohle, 2007](#)).

One part of the homogenization that was foreseen was that globalization would threaten the capacity of individual states to craft policies independent of the ‘logic’ of global markets. Earlier work in the 1980s showed that this was not true for the specialized welfare states of Western Europe, or for the developmental autocracies of East Asia. And it also turns out that in the latest wave of globalization the state still plays a pivotal role in dealing with the consequences of uncertainty brought by increased exposure to international trade and technical change ([Levy, 2006](#); [Beck, 2009](#)).

Optimism about **regionalism** peaked in mid 1990s visions of a “world of regions”, but the integration process now seems to have stalled. Security regions do not coincide with economic regions, which means that regional integration efforts have not managed to overcome the incongruence between economics and military power discussed above ([Breslin, 2007](#)). The European Union has impressively expanded in scale since 1991, from 12 to 27 nations. But that territorial enlargement seems to have reached a limit for the time being, in terms of managing the central decision making processes of such a large body, and coping with the economic and cultural diversity that accompanied enlargement. The EU has proved unable to move forward to deeper political or security integration. The EU is a very much an exception in the global system, the only example of a regional bloc that has substantially eroded national sovereignty in economic policy making. The European Union does not expect to see equivalent regional blocs to emerge any time soon, and seems to regard independent nation-states such as the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China) as potential allies in a new more laterally-organized global system ([Grevi and Vasconcelos, 2008](#)).

The rise of the EU as an oddity in the international landscape has posed a challenge for Russia as a close and intimately connected neighbor, struggling to figure out how to interact with this new and complex entity. Russia is not seen as a serious contender for future EU entry, and it declined to participate in the

European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) launched in 2003 ([Wilson and Popescu, 2009](#)). Russia would prefer to maintain its special bilateral relationship with the EU, including biannual meetings. It did not want to be lumped in together with the other post-Soviet states, not to mention the ten distant and disparate countries of the Southern Mediterranean, including Syria and the Occupied Palestinian Territories that are also part of the ENP. So, the further European integration proceeded eastwards, the more isolated Russia felt itself.

Russia is still a member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and joined the Council of Europe in 1996, so it has some institutional ties to the continent. But rather than generating a sense of comity and belonging, these are more often than not a source of dispute and frustration. The OSCE has proved inadequate to the task of dealing with “frozen” conflicts in Moldova, Georgia and Karabakh. Russia has been embarrassed in the Council of Europe and Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE when challenged over its policies in Chechnya.¹⁰

The closest analogous organization to the EU elsewhere in the world would probably be the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), which began as a free-trade association and has not yet progressed beyond that stage. It is spawning broader entities such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), but the inclusion of the giant China, and the question of whether to include or exclude India and the United States, are challenges to deeper integration ([Emerson, 2010](#)). Russia itself does have a physical presence in Asia, but only a tenuous political presence. President Putin attended the inaugural EAS in 2005 in Kuala Lumpur, but only as a guest invited by the Malaysian host, and Russia has been trying to become a member ever since.

The 1990s saw the rise of the “**democratic peace**” paradigm, according to which the surge of democratization that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall would also bring about a sharp reduction in inter-state warfare – as indeed has occurred. After a period of Atlanticism in the early 1990s under Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, from 1995 on Russia came to see the democratic peace paradigm as a formula for the expansion of US hegemony. Far from embracing the “democratic peace,” Russian leaders saw it as a direct threat to Russian national interests – and to their own ability to stay in power. This fear was heightened by the wave of “color revolutions” that toppled authoritarian leaders from Belgrade to Bishkek between 2000 and 2005. It was one of the key factors leading to the authoritarian retrenchment that was evident in Putin's second term as president (2004–2008). It stands as a vivid example of the interplay between international forces and domestic political regimes – in this case, with a negative feedback effect, in that efforts to spread democracy in the former Soviet states accelerated its diminution in Russian Federation.

However, the colored tide receded just as quickly as it had arrived. Already by the early 2000s American enthusiasm for democracy promotion was starting to wane ([Carothers, 2002](#)). There was disillusion with the performance of the new democratic leaders of Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. By 2007, of the 15 post-Soviet states only the Baltic countries and Ukraine were rated as ‘free’ by Freedom House, while Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova were rated as ‘partly free.’ The remaining eight were ‘unfree.’ There was grudging recognition in Washington that some hard cases (China, Belarus and Uzbekistan being prominent examples) may resist democratization entirely. Already in the 1990s it was apparent that partial democratization may be destabilizing, in that countries in transition to democracy seem prone to engage in conflict either with internal secessionists or with neighboring states.¹¹ Examples range from the outbreak of secessionist wars in Azerbaijan and Georgia in the early 1990s to the election of Hamas in Palestine in 2005.

The evidence from beyond the former Soviet Union also does not support the “Washington Hypothesis” that globalization promotes democratization ([Rudra, 2005](#)). Increased trade and capital flows do not correlate with democracy, unless one includes social spending in the model.

Nevertheless the mainstream of the Obama foreign policy establishment continues to insist that democracy promotion should remain a cornerstone of US foreign policy, though prior to 2011 this was more of a long-term conviction about the vector of history than a call for specific country interventions ([Fukuyama and McFaul, 2007](#)). The Arab Spring caught the Obama administration by surprise: the president was slow to call for the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and he left it to France and Britain to take the lead in the military intervention in Libya. Still, the drop-off of interest in democracy promotion came as a relief to the Kremlin and perhaps gives them a little more room for maneuver in coming up with an identity politics more in harmony with European partners, and based on the pursuit of common interests with the US without triggering a hostile reaction from Russian nationalists complaining of US encirclement.

A popular new framework for discussing how the different dimensions fit together is the concept of “**soft power**” developed by [Nye \(2004\)](#) – in contrast to the “hard power” of military capacity which was the traditional concern of Realist international relations theory, and the “hard power” of economic leverage.¹² (It is a common misperception to assume that economic levers are “soft power”: they are not.) Through “soft power” one country may convince another to act in the way it desires through persuasion rather than coercion. Changing the other country's view of how the world works, and how to conceive their own interests, may be less costly and more effective than using the carrots and sticks of traditional diplomacy.

One drawback to the “soft power” approach is that it was developed specifically with reference to the US, at a time (the 1990s) when the US was the unchallenged hegemon. The concept presupposes a hierarchy of power: soft power is a way for the US to achieve its objectives by persuading other countries to act in a certain way without having to rely on hard power. But US ability to exercise soft power was in practice predicated on the knowledge that the US had a wealth of hard power at its disposal. It is not at all clear that the “soft power” concept is of any utility to a power that is not at the top of the power hierarchy, or that occupies an ambiguous place in the hierarchy. It does seem to have some relevance for China, a rising power that credibly aspires to some sort of parity with the US over the next century. China's attitude toward US “soft power” is vividly summarized in this editorial from the [People's Daily \(2009\)](#):

Of course, influence in international affairs through moral force does not mean completely throwing away big sticks and picking up sweet carrots. Wrapping a big stick in a layer of soft sponge or putting a carrot at the front and a big stick at the back, the US has never given up its powerful military force.

For Russia, deployment of “soft power” is only likely to draw attention back to the period in the past when it occupied a higher place in the international hierarchy – based on “hard power.” Russian talk of “soft power” is most often associated with spreading Russian language and culture among the ethnic Russian “compatriots” living in the “Russian world” (*Russkii mir*) ([Gorham, 2011](#)) – an issue which sets off alarm bells from Tallinn to Kyiv and Astana. At best, the newly-independent states see Russian language use as an obstacle to the promotion of their own national language and identity. At worst, they fear Russian political interference or outright irredentism. Kremlin efforts to promote Russian soft power beyond the former Soviet Union have mostly been seen as crude propaganda. All the money poured into Russia Today television, with a 2008 budget of \$147 million, may merely draw attention to its tendentious and clumsy programming ([Twickel, 2010](#)). Likewise the creation in 2008 of a Russian state-funded Institute for Democracy and Cooperation in New York and Paris,¹³ mimicking Western bodies such as the Open Society Institute, just highlights the absence of an independent civil society in Russia.

This review indicates that each of the major new trends in international security thinking in recent decades – the spread of globalization, the rise of regionalism, the notion of the “democratic peace”, and the importance of “soft power” – posed particular challenges for Russia and exacerbated the deep-rooted structural dilemmas outlined in the first half of this article.

7. Russian identity: the burden of history

The trajectory of Russia's military and economic interests is fairly clear. It faces a steady contraction of its military assets, though it will retain the ability to threaten small neighboring states. Its economy will continue to ride the wave of rising prices for natural resources – with the concomitant distortions to Russia's political and economic development that are associated with the “resource curse.” It is Russian identity that remains the great unknown in Russia's global integration, and the variable most vulnerable to unpredictable shifts in Russia's domestic political landscape.

To what extent is the political regime of any state path dependent? Specifically, is there a distinctive Russian Tradition which dooms Russia to a certain political structure ([Hedlund, 2009](#))? If the answer is yes, then what are the implications for Russia's role in the international order? If no, if Russia is capable of evolving into a different type of political regime, then what kinds of change will have to happen to bring Russia into line with its international partners? And how may outside players help – or hinder – this process?

A similar process of self-discovery is under way in China, although their challenge is handling a rise rather than decline in international influence. China did not experience the state collapse of the USSR, though the Cultural Revolution was deeply traumatic. But it is clear that in China – as in Russia – perceptions of identity and relative cultural status are just as important as hard power measures of success in assessing China's role in the international system ([Deng, 2008](#); [Callahan, 2010](#)).

The Soviet Union's international identity was rooted in its prominent role on the global stage. That centered on its position as a military and ideological competitor with the United States ([Parshev, 2000](#); [Chugrov, 1993](#)). That was a fairly stable and legible state of affairs, although this stability in political self-identity came at the price of stagnation – in living standards, in personal freedom, and in the assertion of national identity among the component peoples of the USSR.

Since the Soviet Union's demise, the central paradigm in Western historiography has been to portray Russia as a country doomed by its geography and history to be on the periphery of Europe, and the periphery of Asia. Neither fish nor fowl, a perpetual outsider. Over the centuries the Russian state has struggled to deal with this situation by developing a distinctive political regime, by expanding Russian territory, and by importing Western ideas and technology. Thanks to these herculean efforts, Russia still exists as a going concern, but it remains a peripheral and seemingly vulnerable entity. As a result of these struggles, successes and setbacks, the Russian state evolved into a particular type of political regime: an autocratic, centralized state with a “service class” elite, and a weak and dependent civil society ([Hellie, 2005](#); [Blank, 2009](#)). This regime was forged under Tsarism; was reborn in the guise of Soviet socialism; and seems to be in the process of rebirth for the third time in the post-Soviet period.

Many Russians are understandably uncomfortable with these harsh dichotomies – Europe or Asia; embrace or reject the Soviet past. Some Russian thinkers have turned to the concept of Eurasianism ([Laruelle, 2008, 2009](#)). The term arose in the late 19th century, flourished among émigré intellectuals in the 1920s, and then disappeared until its revival in the 1990s among a radical intellectual fringe. The concept (it would be an exaggeration to call it a ‘movement’) has drawn an extraordinary amount of attention among Western scholars – attention arguably out of proportion to the concept's importance.¹⁴

For Russia, Eurasianism is arguably a fantasy, a form of political escapism with no solid grounding in political, economic or social structures.

One way of making sense of Eurasianism is to ask what is its opposite. Clearly, the antipode to Eurasianism is 'Atlanticism' – that is, a role for the United States in Europe. So Eurasian is essentially an intellectual repackaging of anti-Americanism, reflecting a desire to exclude the US from the Eurasian land-mass. This approach is deeply rooted in the world view of Harold Mackinder, whose influential writings on geopolitics at the turn of the 20th century focused on the idea of a strategic 'heartland' in the landmass of Eurasia. Mackinder's approach still has its defenders in Russia – who point to the problems NATO faced in projecting power into mountainous landlocked regions such as Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan. But Mackinder's vision overlooks the fact that the prosperity of modern economies and their strategic security rests on easy access to oceanic transport. The economic dynamism and cultural identity of Europe and Asia have become yet more embedded in these oceanic networks in the course of the post-1980s wave of globalization. Russia has the choice – to embrace that world, or to hunker down in a mythic memory of its past.

8. Conclusion: understanding the Russian dilemma

Russia is facing a double challenge: learning to live in a post-Soviet *and* post-modern world. The interplay between shifting forces in security and economics poses a challenge even for well-established states with strong national identities and capable bureaucracies. How much more difficult it is for Russia to navigate its way through the new world order. Simplistic notions of Russia as a recidivist empire, or a nascent market democracy, do not match this complex reality.

Compartmentalization of these disparate spheres (de-linkage) seems like a logical way to go, and this indeed represents the EU's approach to its own challenge of integration in previous decades. However, the dynamics of domestic politics inside Russia seem to be pulling in the opposite direction, blending together military, economic, cultural and sporting life in an effort to weave a more plausible and robust narrative of national identity.

If one accepts a relatively deterministic approach to Russian history, and does not expect any radical transformation of its domestic political regime anytime soon, then what are the implications for Western policy? Essentially, it leaves the West as an interested but relatively powerless bystander ([Council on Foreign Relations Task Force, 2006](#); [Aslund and Kuchins, 2009](#); [Saunders, 2011](#)). The conventional thinking these days seems to be, in the words of one Obama administration official, that 90 percent of the variance in Russian behavior is driven by factors internal to Russia. And, one might add, for the remaining 10 percent it is hard to predict whether any given Western action will help or hinder the transition to democracy.

Russia's challenge is to recognize the reality of its reduced military ties to the US, and to scale down the security anxiety of its European neighbors. At the same time it has to sort out its identity, its sense of place in the world – which arguably centers on its geographical, economic, political and cultural attachment to Europe.

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Endnotes

¹ Based on a paper for the Conference “Institutions, networks and trust in European–Russian relations”, European University Institute, Florence, 26–27 March, 2010.

2 [New Russia Barometer, 2003](#). The choice is rather forced: American respondents are typically not posed such a dilemma by pollsters, the assumption being that for the US the two can go together.

3 The Condorcet paradox refers to the possibility that the outcome of voting in a democratic body may depend on the order in which votes are taken. It was first identified by the Marquis de Condorcet in 1785. If A is preferred to B, B to C, and C to A, then the voting will cycle indefinitely, unless an arbitrary voting sequence order is imposed.

4 For a different approach, see [Laidi \(2007\)](#), and [Kopstein and Steinmo \(2008\)](#).

5 The corpus of presidential speeches can be easily searched on the website: <http://kremlin.ru/>.

6 Technically, in August 2003 NATO took over the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan from the US.

7 For a defense of the treaty, see [Dvorkin and Arbatov \(2010\)](#). On the critics, see [US News and World Report \(2010\)](#).

8 Anti-Americanism remains a minority viewpoint. According to a January 2011 poll, 60 percent of respondents had a positive attitude toward the US, and 28 percent negative ([Levada Center, 2011b](#)).

9 The US was however upset by Canada's 2005 decision not to take part in the US missile defense program – although it continues to cooperate in the NORAD early warning system.

10 On Russia's experiences at the Strasbourg European Court of Human Rights, see [Sperling \(2009\)](#), ch. 5.

11 As of 2006, according to [Goldsmith \(2008\)](#) there were 77 democracies, 21 autocracies, and 58 semi-democratic systems.

12 Nye had originally coined the term in 1990, but it only took off after the publication of his book in 2004.

13 Their web site: <http://www.idc-europe.org/index.asp>.

14 For Kazakhstan, perhaps, the approach has more direct relevance. In Kazakhstan it has been embraced by the ruling president, and not just by a small group of intellectuals.