is that the dynamics and the evolution of Russian polity is quite traceable, which gives reasons to predict that the Medvedev presidency will expand the scope of policy options for Russia both domestically and internationally.

**Domestic policies of the Medvedev regime**

**The hurdles of Medvedev’s political identity**

Since the times of Gorbachev, the policies of the top Kremlin leaders were associated with certain concepts that served as their political brands and reflected the spirit of the epoch. For Gorbachev, these key words included the proverbial ‘perestroika’ and ‘glasnost’, as well as ‘acceleration’ and ‘new thinking’; Yeltsin will be remembered for his orchestration of Russia’s independence from USSR and the “parade of sovereignties” staged by Russia’s regions; Putin is known for his own political vocabulary with the ‘vertical of power’ and ‘sovereign democracy’ at its core. By now Medvedev lacks recognizable language markers that could rightly distinguish him from other leaders. He tries to make accents on ‘modernization’ and ‘innovations’, as well as anti-corruption policies and the independence of judiciary, but these approaches are not new and remain rather broad and sometimes hollow. Perhaps, the “Medvedev thaw” could serve as a possible metaphor for today’s President, yet it reflects public expectations rather than real effects of his presidency.

Arguably, the lack of key words tells a lot about difficulties that Medvedev faces in underpinning his political credentials. Having a reputation of a mild liberal (in contrast to “tough conservative” Putin), a few months after his inauguration he had to start war against Georgia, and then faced a series of harsh security challenges in North Caucasus where terrorist acts became endemic. With a reputation of pragmatic technocrat, he nevertheless showed sensitiveness to ideological motives, as exemplified by the forming of the Commission for Countering the Falsifications of History aimed basically at disclaiming the revision of the heroic narrative of the Great Patriotic War. Having done this, he in the meantime tried to avoid pro-Stalinist rhetoric underlying in his internet blog that “the scope of terror of 1937-1938 is beyond imagination” and by no means can be justified.

Medvedev’s liberal credentials were confirmed by the creation in March 2008, immediately after his inauguration, of the Institute for Contemporary Development (ICD), a new think tank tasked with charting long-term strategies for Russia. In its widely debated report “Russia in the XXI Century: an Image of Desirable Tomorrow” released in January 2010 ICD called for reforms with ostensibly pro-liberal orientation. The most important among them are the introduction of legal norms stipulating the reduction of the presidential term to four years (from six), the formation of the government by the Duma majority, the popular election of the member of the
Russia builds its relations with the West upon two key concepts – multipolarity and new security architecture in Euro-Atlantics

In this section I will explore the changes between the federal center and the constitutive units of federation that fostered the diversification of Russian regional “landscape”. My basic argument is that the dominating discourse on an alleged success of Putin’s efforts to recentralize Russia needs a more critical look, since a number of symptoms point to the limitations of the re-unification project as initially conceived by Putin. Regions’ self-assertiveness is gradually becoming an important part of policy agenda for Medvedev’s presidency. It is manifest in three spheres and brings three different effects. The issues of cultural identity foster regional diversity, economic protectionism leads to fragmentation, and the security situation in Russia’s Caucasus boosts asymmetry between regions.

Firstly, issues of cultural identity keep gaining momentum all across Russia. Most of regional elites are keen to reinvent their historical identities through reactivating collective memories. The sharpening of identity agenda might lead to tensions between regions: the most telling case in 2008 was the contest between Nizhny Novgorod and Kazan for a semi-formal title of “Russia’s third capital”. In ethnic republics the issues of protecting local identities have re-entered the agenda. The leader here is Tatarstan which in 2009 campaigned for recognizing the Tatar language as the second official in Russia, as well as for the right of local graduates to pass the Single State Examination test in Tatar language. Both claims brought no immediate success but were indicative of the revival of demands for more cultural diversity.

Secondly, economic tensions between regions are becoming more pronounced. As the financial crisis erupted, it turned out that regions may differently react to the federal policies. For example, Moscow’s decision to raise import duties for foreign cars was challenged in the Far East where most of the cars are imported, but supported in car-producing regions. By the same token, certain signs of the revival of inter-regional economic conflicts, widely spread all across Russia in 1990s, have reappeared recently. In economic sphere, the financial crisis has reactualized regional protectionist strategies aimed not only at supporting local producers but also at closing regional markets for merchandise coming from other regions.

Thirdly, security situation is a factor that fosters asymmetry within the federation. The security dynamics in Russia’s North Caucasus regions entails their distinguishing from the rest of Russia. The sharpening of security concerns only adds new constraints to the policies of Moscow in these peripheral regions and exacerbates their claims for exceptional treatment.
Against this background, the policies of the Chechen leadership seem indicative. The termination by Moscow of the "regime of counter-terrorist operation" in Chechnya, a decision lobbied by Ramzan Kadyrov, is as an example of successful regional pressure upon Moscow. The federal center not only met the demands from Grozny, but found itself in a peculiar situation when its power be manifested not through the power to exceptionalize (and securitize), but – vice versa – through the power to normalize (and de-securitize) the formerly break-away region. Under Medvedev's presidency Chechnya tries to present itself as a "model region", an example of successful resolution of rampant security problems. It wishes to be considered as a region capable of helping other Caucasian territories: thus, immediately after the attempt on the Ingushetia President Evkurov in June 2009 Kadyrov proposed to jointly investigate the incident and severely punish the criminals either in Russia or abroad. In fact, the Chechen leader has publicly announced his security service ability to persecute criminals beyond Russia, and Medvedev has referred to the authorities in Chechnya while demanding to capture the terrorists operating in Ingushetia.

The Kremlin is certainly not inimical to the recognition of the variety of regional identities and interests in Russia. For instance, the three most recent Russia – EU summits were held outside Moscow – in Samara, Khanty-Mansiisk and Khabarovsk. In some cases, Moscow is favourably disposed to the geo-cultural ambitions of regions: thus, Ekaterinburg (a city promoting itself as Russia’s “Eurasian capital”) became a home to both BRIC and Shanghai organization summits in 2009. What remains to be seen is how the ongoing regional diversification can be harmonized with the unified way of governing the federation still practiced by the Kremlin.

**Russia’s foreign policy: the pressure of structural circumstances**

In this section I will show that the changed macro-structural circumstances in the world have altered some of the previous policies, and reconfigured “a corridor of opportunities” for Russia’s elites. In fact, the nature of domestic regime remained almost unchanged; yet the new external environment has made Medvedev to readjust his policy tools to tackle new threats and take advantage of new opportunities.

What are the macro-structural processes that directly affected Russian policies under the Medvedev presidency? Firstly, the administration of Barak Obama has initiated the proverbial “reset” in U.S. – Russia relations which led to a number of compromises to include America’s reconsideration of its previous policies (from direct support of the “colour revolutions” to the decision to deploy anti-missile systems in Poland and Czech Republic), and more cooperative Russian take on Afghanistan. Secondly, NATO has started developing its new Strategic Concept. Though the debate within NATO on its future strategy is far from being over, it may have long-term effects on Russia, since NATO offers an amalgamated vision of hard and soft security perspectives that strikingly differs from a much narrower Russian focusing on mostly military aspects of security. Thirdly, there is some important dynamic in Europe as well: on the one hand, EU is increasingly eager to play a role of “global security provider”; on the other hand, the world financial crisis has highlighted deep economic vulnerabilities of some of EU member states, which gives new arguments to those calling for stepping back from deepening integration. Fourthly, according to the Russian official interpretation, the five-day war against Georgia in August 2008 was a landmark event that is of paramount importance for the entire structure of international relations, a Russian equivalent to September 11, i.e. an event to be symbolized as a “moment of truth” and touching upon the deepest strings of international politics. Fifthly, as direct effects of Russia’s policies towards Georgia and Ukraine, countries of Eastern and Central Europe more loudly than earlier started expressing their serious concerns about what they dub the resurgence of Russia’s great power ambitions, and thus revived the geopolitical / hard security / territorial defence type of thinking.

Medvedev’s foreign policy agenda differs from his predecessor in at least two major respects. Firstly, as a direct effect of the Georgia war of August 2008, Russia builds its relations with the West upon two key concepts – multi-polarity and new security architecture in Euro-Atlantics. Secondly, in its near abroad, the idea of soft power became more accentuated as one of prospective foreign policy tools of Russia.

**The multipolarity discourse and its variations**

Under the presidency of Medvedev, Russian foreign policy is conceptually focused at practically implementing what since mid-1990s is known as the idea of multipolarity. Foreign minister Sergey Lavrov has stated that the unipolar world ceased to exist right after August 2008, as a result of Russia’s military victory over Georgia. Russia thus stems from the “reality of multipolar world” (Lavrov, 2008a). Therefore, the key problem is not the demolition of the “American hegemony”, as it used to be under Putin’s presidency, but its replacement with a different type of international order.

A closer look at the concept of multipolarity opens at least three policy strategies. A first one sees multipolarity as a variant of the balance of power approach. Its reverse side is unilateralism and the logic of sovereign decisions which Russia favours itself and expects from others. Hereof, Medvedev’s suggestions that the Western countries need to be pragmatic and guided by their own “genuine interests”, as opposed to the “imagined ideological clichés” (Medvedev, 2008).

The victorious operation against Georgia strengthened the balance-of-power approach. Russia not only demonstrated serious determination to apply military force in
its “near abroad”, but also openly announced its zones of “special interest”. The “red line” concept, though, could be understood in both offensive (as a declaration of Russian aggressiveness) and defensive (as a proposal to divide spheres of influence) terms.

A second perspective, on the contrary, imbues some normative flavor to the conception of multipolarity by linking it with democracy. Russian standpoint suggests that it is multipolarity that fosters the development of democratic institutions in the world not vice versa. In other words, the key argument is that all type of multipolarity is equivalent to international democracy.

A third perspective views multipolarity through institutionalist lenses, as a type of multilateralist international society. Eventually, it entails a new version of a “concert of great powers” (Rossiskiy..., 2009: 37), or “great power management” (GPM). The Georgia war, despite the seemingly deep cleavages between Russia and major Western governments it provoked, fostered some elements of GPM. The Russia – NATO relations which reached their peak of securitization in August 2008, have gradually evolved into a more business-as-usual type of bargaining with concessions from both sides.

NATO refused to extend the Membership Action Plans to Georgia and Ukraine; the US cancelled the deployment of anti-missile systems in Poland and Czech Republic, while Russia increased its involvement in the operation in Afghanistan and pledged to cooperate against Somalia pirates.

"Russia’s predominant focus on hard security issues, which differs from the EU concentration on soft security"

New security architecture proposals

The second conceptual approach articulated in the aftermath of the Georgia war is known as Medvedev’s proposal on a new security architecture in the Euro-Atlantic region. Lavrov called the events of August 2008 a systemic breakdown which only necessitates reparation of the deficient architecture of security (Lavrov, 2008b). This claim is substantiated by different arguments.

Firstly, the current security architecture proved to be unable to prevent a number of violent crimes, from Balkans to the Caucasus. Secondly, European security landscape rests upon obsolete “bloc approaches” that are of no help in situations of trans-national threats. Thirdly, the prevailing approaches to security are excessively ideologized. Thus, Russia insists that security decisions (including NATO enlargement) should not be based upon the assessments of the state of democracy in candidate countries. Fourthly, in today’s Europe certain countries and their groups enjoy special rights in security making – a clear allusion to NATO. Fifthly, Lavrov compared today’s security arrangements to a patchwork (Lavrov, 2008c), a metaphor pointing to fragmentation and lack due uniformity. Therefore, a “new security architecture”, as opposed to an “old” one, has to, logically speaking: a) be able to prevent violent conflicts; b) be of “non-bloc” nature; c) avoid ideological collisions; d) exclude the possibilities of exceptional security arrangements; e) contain “suturing” mechanisms allowing for more coherence, and f) give Russia an equal footing with other participants.

The last point seems to be crucial, since Medvedev’s security proposal is meant to raise Russia’s international profile as a country apt for normative type of behaviour. The crux of the proposal lies in an attempt to join the security community of Euro-Atlantic partnership that NATO and EU consider, by and large, as already established and functioning. Inclusion in such a community requires that the applicants become increasingly “more like us” and, consequently, is premised on a sense of weakness and togetherness. In such a community difference and pluralism are externalized, and Russia is one of those outsiders that is perceived as external to the Western security (Joenniemi, 2010). Some of the language games nicely reflect this perceptual gap: while Russia prefers to speak about “Euro-Atlantic security” (presupposing Russia’s participation), most of Europeans think in categories of “trans-Atlantic security” (which does not envision Russia’s acthorpshion).

There are some grounds to believe that the Kremlin does understand the possible negative effects of this distancing. In particular, Lavrov’s portrayal of Russia and America as two branches of the European civilization seems to be an attempt to reformulate the Western discourse on Russia through three inter-connected moves.

Firstly, Lavrov repudiates the US-centric worldview in favour of a Europe-centric one, much closer to Russia’s world outlook. His claim that America has to think about “returning to Europe” – in a sense of sharing the European worldview (Lavrov, 2008a) – underpins this point. Secondly, within this logic, Russia portrays its role identity as an extension of Europe. Thirdly, this discursive strategy equates Russia with the US, presenting both countries as sharing a common European legacy.

Yet there are two problems with practically implementing Russia’s policy of integration into Euro-Atlantic security space: one is related to intrinsic inconsistency of Russia’s vision, while the second deals with miscommunication between Russia and EU.

As far as Russia’s vision of a “new security architecture” is concerned, it seems to be rather blurred. In particular, the Kremlin explains the presumed “indivisibility” of security from a rather narrow and formalistic standpoint, as rejection of safeguarding one’s own security at the expense of others. Yet seen from other angles, security can be both divisible (the hard – soft security distinction) and dividing (for example, the Litvinenko murder case has overtly illustrated how different are security mindsets in Moscow and London). These divisions are inherent in the structure of security relations between Russia and Europe.
Some of glaring discrepancies in communication between Russia and EU stem from Russia’s predominant focus on hard security issues, which differs from the EU concentration on soft security. This is perceived as quite troublesome by the Kremlin, since most of the “soft” threats, being external for Europe, are domestic for Russia. Russia is ill-equipped to effectively deal with the issues that get a high profile in the EU policy agenda, including corruption, trafficking, migration, environmental protection, and can’t ‘export’ successful security practices to other countries. The EU concept of security sector reform, with its accents on accountable and transparent security relations (Ioannides, 2009: 37), does not resonate in Russia. By the same token, the security-development nexus, being pivotal for the European discourse, indirectly marginalizes Russia that evidently can’t boast of grounding its security management in inclusive social policies.

Conceptual divisions are complemented by geographical ones, only to raise questions about the presumed “equality” in security relations. Lavrov is explicitly skeptical about the existence within a wider Europe of spheres with different mechanisms of influence, humanitarian commitments, market regulations, etc. Yet the dominating European discourse views Europe exactly in a manner refuted by Lavrov - as a conglomerate of regions-in-the-making, each of them potentially having its own security agenda. One may argue that security concerns of the Nordic Europe are definitely very much different from – and thus unequal to – security troubles faced by the Black Sea countries.

Normative arguments and soft power

it is Russia’s near abroad where the concept of soft power, increasingly important in Russian foreign policy toolkit, can be tested. Normative judgments were one of Russia’s major arguments against the Saakashvili regime, Ukraine’s NATO membership, the disenfranchisement of Russian-speaking population in Baltic countries, etc.

Against this background, the normative turn in the Kremlin foreign policy is one of its political instruments aimed at reinstalling Russia as an organic part of the international society – a status which, as Moscow feels, is either disputed or challenged by the West. In the meantime, the sensitiveness of Russian authorities to normative invectives from the part of foreign governments and NGOs is a good prove of the understanding that the only way to gain political subjectivity in the world is through the observance of democratic procedures.

The CIS countries seem to be the most natural terrain for Russia’s exercise of soft power-based integrationist policy. Yet the vectors of these countries’ development are markedly different. For my analysis, I will refer to two countries that most clearly demonstrate the plurality of post-Soviet area: Ukraine that after the 2010 presidential election has rejected the explicitly pro-Western, orange revolution-based type of transformation, and Moldova

that, vice versa, in 2009 made important step towards association with the West.

Russia – Ukraine: new political context of 2010

under Putin’s presidency, the Kremlin dubbed the so-called colour revolutions “a Western ploy to install pro-American regimes on Russia’s periphery and then to engineer a regime change in Russia itself” (Trenin, 2005: 1). Thus, it was a strong feeling that starting from 2004 Russia is gradually loosing political leverages over Ukraine. Yet under the Medvedev presidency the situation has changed. Both of the previous Russian goals - to prevent the advent to power in Kyiv of anti-Russian regime and to block projections of “colour revolutions” into Russia – do not appear as vibrant as in previous years. The process of Ukraine’s integration into NATO was also brought to a halt.

The Ukrainian presidential election of February 2010 won by the most cardinal challenger of the “orange coalition” Viktor Yanukovich set a new political context for Russian – Ukrainian relations. At least three of its facets are worthwhile noting. Firstly, in 2010 Russia was not so deeply and openly engaged in the electoral process as it was the case of 2004 election. It was widely acknowledged that the 2010 election outcomes were predetermined by domestic developments.

Secondly, with Viktor Yuschenko and Yulia Timoshenko out of their offices, the idea of “orange revolution” has clearly lost its political momentum, which is widely acknowledged by both Western and Ukrainian experts. The international implications of this turn seem to be favourable for Russia: the Obama administration has repudiated the regional “balance-of-power” approach towards Russia and rejected calls to contain Russia through strengthening neighboring countries (Dubovyk, 2010: 3). For Russia’s domestic policies this signals the drastically decreased value of the “orange threat” argument that was widely employed by the Putin administration as the stronger justification for more authoritarian rule.

Thirdly, the advent of Yanukovich to the presidency signifies the setting of a new agenda in Russian – Ukrainian relations. Russian political elite, celebrating the success of Yanukovich, should not, however, exaggerate his pro-Russian intentions. There are three perceptional gaps that deserve attention in this context. First, it has to be noted that Yanukovich, who is overwhelmingly portrayed as a “pro-Russian” leader, made his first official visit to Brussels, followed by a visit to Moscow. This itinerary seems to be quite symbolic and sheds light on new President’s international priorities. It is likely that Yanukovich will positively react to the attempts of both EU and US to engage him in dialogue. Secondly, Russia expects from the new administration in Kyiv more efficiency in security sector plagued by multiple gas price conflicts. In the meantime, it seems potentially disappointing for Russia that in his first address to Moscow the new Ukrainian prime minister requested the decrease of
the gas prices. In a very pragmatic way, the post-orange elite is likely to have more chances to pressurize Moscow and demand economic concessions in exchange for political rapprochement. Thirdly, it is likely that Moscow will expect Yanukovich to take a more explicit pro-Russian stand in allowing the Russian Black Sea fleet to maintain its base in Sebastopol, yet it might turn out that the new President, even if he wishes so, won’t be legally capable of prolonging the deployment of Russia’s naval base after 2017.

Russia – Moldova: testing the soft power approach

the defeat of the Communist Part of Moldova in the parliamentary election of 2009 has deeply challenged Russia’s positions in this country. As an effect of the 2009 events in Moldova, Russia was stuck between geopolitical approaches and prescriptions of political realism, on the one hand, and the application of more sophisticated “soft power” tools, on the other.

The first set of approaches is grounded in the concept of Russia’s national interests that, however, raises more questions than answers. One of its possible articulations is the maintenance of Moldova as a sovereign state.

In practical terms this argument spells preventing Moldova’ from the possible EU membership. For Moldova this membership, the logic goes on, means manipulation, submission, and loss of identity. In the opinion of Russian officials, this misfortune is ruled out in the so-called post-Soviet model of integration. Yet the distinction between the EU integrative model as presuming the dispersal of sovereignty, on the one hand, and the post-Soviet one as intending to safeguard sovereignties of all parties involved, on the other, is perceived in Moldova as an indication of Russia’s imitation of integration and its reduction to a series of state-to-state agreements.

Russia claims that its another interest is fostering Moldova’s neutrality which, more concretely, means blocking the prospects of NATO membership for Moldova. Yet it remains unclear what kind of security arrangements Russia may offer to Moldova.

Russia also declares that it is in its interest to keep the current format of the negotiations on Transdniestria. Yet it remains unclear what this break-away region means for Russia – a tool for exerting political pressure on Chisinau, a Russia-controlled piece of land at close vicinity with NATO and EU, or a break-away territory with perspectives of accession to the Russian Federation?

These uncertainties forced the Kremlin to refresh its policy instruments in Moldova, adding to the rather traditional – though not always workable – geopolitical and ‘realist’ approaches more subtle forms of “soft power”.

What might be seen as a step in the right direction is Russia’s gradual investment of political resources in bridging the communication gaps with the new pro-Western elites in Chisinau and a variety of non-governmental groups. Yet the functioning of Russian foundations in countries like Moldova and Ukraine sometimes produces polarizing effects within these societies and only complicates the bilateral political relationship. What lies at the surface is that, despite these foundations’ self-presentation as “independent civil society institutions”, they are overwhelmingly viewed as off-springs of the Kremlin. Yet the even deeper problem is the lack in Russian arsenal of a ‘normative appeal’, which is one of strongest instruments of the EU neighborhood policy. This deficit of value-based policies is detrimental for the attempts to make use of soft power as a foreign policy tool. The way soft power is understood in the Kremlin does not meet the expectations of the new Moldovan elite, and only strengthens the perception of Russia as a Realpolitik type of power which makes largely ineffective efforts to use soft power resources.

In conclusion, domestically Russia is gradually moving to accepting more diversity, in terms of both interests and identities. The “vertical of power” imposed by Putin seems to be under severe strain.

From the international viewpoint, there are two main contradictions in Russian foreign policy. On the one hand, the two dominating Russian approaches – multipolarity and “new security architecture” – are not so congruous as it may seem. The lack of harmony between them is explained by their grounding in two divergent foreign policy philosophies. The new security architecture idea fits into the normative and solidarist logics of rule-based international society, while the multipolarity approach is presumed on the tenets of Realpolitik and more pluralist worldview where each powerful actor is free to choose its own policy. On the other hand, the post-Soviet countries that are deemed Russian priority seem to be unaffected by both multipolarity and security discourses, which makes to conclude that Russia has two foreign policies voices – for the West and for CIS countries.

Bibliographical references


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