

PARADOXES IN THE PERCEPTION OF CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

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The perception of Russia in international relations is an interesting cognitive problem. It also has certain practical consequences. Russia is among those participants in international relations who had a strong influence on the 20th century. However, its self-assessment in this matter differs fundamentally from those of other participants in international life.

The way Russia's image is presented in the world is an offshoot of the determination of its political elites. They express their state's great power identity in international relations through the prism of neo-imperial ambitions. This undermines Russia's credibility in the eyes of international opinion.

The article shows how contemporary Russia is perceived through the prism of certain antinomies and paradoxes. These concern the self-definition of Russia in the world, its civilizational-geopolitical identification, its relative weakness despite being a nuclear raw materials power, its attempts to create a new state ideology ("sovereign democracy") colored with imperial and nationalist sentiments, and the need for Russia to give up on defining its vital interests in terms of "omnipresence" in the world as this clashes with internal imperatives, whose essence lies in economic growth and modernization. The complexity of emerging processes in Russia makes it a challenge to get to know the country better and build objective images of it.

1. The essence of international perception

International perception is a complex process. The definitions of perception formulated under the influence of psychologists do not adequately describe

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it. A number of American authors pointed this out already in the mid-20th century. Influenced by the effects and threats of the Cold War, they dealt with the question of the complexity of the conditions of international perception (especially Kenneth Boulding). In the 1970s, Robert Jervis stressed the need to link international perception with the intentions and behaviors of actors on the international scene as well as decision-makers in interstate relations. Of particular interest was his proposal postulating a link in international analyses between “the psychological environment” and the “operational environment”. He criticized supporters of a psychological approach to international relations for a number of reasons: attaching more importance to emotional factors than to cognitive ones; drawing conclusions more on the basis of laboratory experiments than on processes taking place in the real world; focusing too narrowly on decision-makers, and at the same time having an incorrect view of conflicts of interest within the whole structure of the system of international relations.

In the Polish literature on this subject, Jervis’ approach was adopted by Jerzy Wiatr who clearly rejected psychological reductionism and examined the question of correct and incorrect perception of international relations from a sociological viewpoint. But it was Józef Kukułka who provided the most comprehensive interpretation of international perception in Polish political science literature¹.

The prevailing view in the field today is that perception determines not only the process of sensory reflection of objects and phenomena in the real world, but also the finding and understanding of the sense of their existence in various dimensions. The essence of the process of perception leads to the forming of dynamic images of objects and phenomena in the international environment. This process shows at the same time that there is an active cognitive relationship between the observer and the observed reality. In an increasingly complicated international reality, perception is decreasingly involuntary or spontaneous and increasingly conscious and intentional.

The content of the images of states in the international arena depends to a large extent on subjective conditions. An essential yet unsettling role in the

¹ Kukułka J. “Postrzeganie międzynarodowe” [„International Perception”]. *Stosunki Międzynarodowe*, 1992, vol. 16, p. 91-103; idem, *Teoria stosunków międzynarodowych* [*The Theory of International Relations*], Wydawnictwo Naukowe SCHOLAR, Warszawa 2000, p. 123-132.

process of international perception is played by myths and stereotypes, but also by mistakes in perception and attribution, inherent in human nature. In addition, in international relations information flows on a par with disinformation, so there occurs the widespread phenomenon of falsification of reality and manipulation of various data that have an influence on the effects of perception. For this reason, experts and the media play such an important role – through them information reaches ordinary people. The high level of knowledge and professionalism among people who gather and analyze information has a positive influence on the quality of images created by them.

It should be noted that defective images (i.e. those that are incomplete, inadequate, idealized or catastrophic) are formed most often when the gathering and utilization of information is selective and carried out exclusively on the basis of preexisting preferences. Experts have greater chances of taking into account unexpected information and of creating objective images, while practitioners more often pay attention to information that they desire and have requested beforehand and also have a tendency to create images that are biased or shaped by conditions prevailing at the moment.

Keeping these observations in mind, it is worth examining the international perception of Russia as it is an interesting cognitive problem. This is a state about which thousands of papers have been written in the last 15 years or so, although the majority of them have taken a rather negative view. Russia is among the handful of actors in international relations which have had a strong influence on the 20th century. Its self-assessment in this matter differs fundamentally from the assessment of other participants in international relations.

Russians are aware of the truth that in this day and age the way a country is presented on the international stage is more important than the reality. For this reason, there is no shortage of critics of the way Russia presents itself abroad, even among loyal stalwarts of the system, such as Sergei Karaganov, one of the best known Russian political scientists. In his opinion, Kremlin foreign policy lacks a solid clarification of the motives for Russians actions in international relations, which leads to a negative perception of its moves, when in reality things are quite different².

² Karaganov S. "Russia and the International Order" in: ed. Dov Lynch *What Russia Sees*, Chaillot Paper, January 2005, no. 74, p. 23-43.

Russia and especially its elite find themselves in a phase of development where, in the face of ever tougher international games, they are keen on demonstrating their independence and new subjectivity in international relations. Therefore, they show a strong determination to defend the rightness of their actions, but in the process make plenty of mistakes. For example, Russia declares itself an ally of the West in the fight against international terrorism and at the same time supports terrorist groups such as Hamas. It stakes a lot on energy cooperation with the West and at the same time does not shy away from resorting to energy blackmail.

In Russia's structure of perception of the international environment, two target groups are of prime importance: post-Soviet in the "near abroad" and Western. The neighboring group, linked to the post-Soviet space, is the most important point of reference, both for the political elites and society at large. Historical experience plays an essential role in the perception of the "near abroad". The images of post-Soviet states neighboring Russia and the perception of Russia in the "near abroad" are formed under the direct influence of geopolitical factors, tensions and conflicts, culture and language.

In turn, Western perception of Russia determines its wider positioning in the world. Experiences and collisions with a culture that is higher and more developed than its own, mutual attraction and repulsion – these are phenomena accompanying the entire modern history of Russia in its conflict and cooperation with the West, especially its European core. For Western states, Russia is characterized by national, cultural and religious distinctiveness. It is not only a matter of geographic exoticism, resulting from Asiatic origins. Russianness often means civilizational dissimilarity, as pointed out by Arnold Toynbee, and more recently, Samuel Huntington. For these reasons, Russians fear that the West will close in on itself, leaving them outside. But the West also remains something "different" and "foreign" in the perception of Russians. According to Yuri Levada, the father of contemporary Russian sociology who died in November 2006, "sociological studies show that subconsciously Russians fear European influences, the European way of life, mentality, democracy – all this is for them something foreign and not entirely understandable"³. This results from the fact

³ "Levada: Rosjanie panicznie boją się zmian" ["Levada: Russians Have a Morbid Fear of Change"]. *Dziennik* 18-19.1.2006.

that while Russia is a European state, it is at the same time different from the West, being a unique bridge between the West and Asia.

It is also worth remembering that there are big differences between the West and the states of Central and Eastern Europe in their perceptions of Russia. These are first of all due to dissimilar historical experiences and the geopolitics associated with them. Western European states did not experience Soviet occupation and view Russia as a generally responsible, if occasionally awkward, partner⁴. For these reasons, from time to time they accuse Central and Eastern Europeans of stirring up anti-Russian feelings.

However, Russia is trying to preserve as much as possible of its old great power status, maintaining strong ties with the biggest Western powers, which creates irritation in the capitals of middle-sized powers, such as Warsaw. Poles are annoyed by the cold distance with which Russia relates to their country. But none of the political forces in Poland have come up with a recipe or displayed any initiative to change this state of affairs⁵. There are strong indications that Poles will keep wallowing in their powerlessness and anger, while at the same time others will be doing quite a good business with Russia⁶.

2. Problems with the self-definition of Russia in the world

One can present contemporary Russia through the prism of certain antinomies and paradoxes. A paradox involves reasoning in which correct assumptions and conclusions lead to contradictions, even to falsehoods. Paradoxes thus understood concern the self-definition of Russia in the world. Therefore it is worth pointing out:

- the civilizational and geopolitical paradox,
- the paradox of power,

⁴ Western states are satisfied with the pragmatic achievements in the stabilization of Russian statehood and the predictability of Kremlin policies, while Polish expectations of Russia often have a maximalist character.

⁵ Szacki W. "Co zrobić, żeby Rosja nas polubiła" [„What to Do to Make Russia Like Us”]. *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 11.3.2005.

⁶ In the 1990s in Warsaw some Russian diplomats used to say that “when a lion is sick, even a monkey can beat it”. It was a warning against the consequences of what would happen when “the lion recovers”. Who knows if we are not facing that very situation at present.

- the paradox of democratization, and
- the paradoxes in international activity.

In economic terms Russia is at once a developed country, which is formally confirmed by its membership in the group of the world's richest states (G8), a developing country, and weakly developed one (as shown by indicators of economic growth and the social situation of the population), and even a failing state, as some described it in the 1990s.

There is no shortage of other paradoxes. It is therefore typical of contemporary Russia that:

1. social conservatism and resistance exist alongside openness towards innovative undertakings;
2. hostility and distrust towards all kinds of differences are mixed with acceptance of outside influences and growing international activity;
3. the uniqueness of Russia is stressed together with a readiness to compare with and imitate others;
4. various undertakings are accompanied by maximalism, i.e. engagement in something on a gigantic scale regardless of costs, while at the same time there is greater concern about the profit and loss balance;
5. one still comes across a reluctance to compromise in domestic and international affairs, which suggests a tendency towards dichotomous thinking on the "all or nothing" principle (*zero-sum game model*). At the same time, in recent years one can observe increasing pragmatism in Russian politics and a growing willingness to make concessions.

There is a widespread belief that Russia played a decisive role in the fall of the USSR, particularly after Yeltsin's election victory in June 1991. He set out to undermine the already tottering position of Gorbachev and eradicate support for the old elites. Events connected with the unsuccessful coup of August 1991 accelerated the pace of events, especially the Russian Federation's assumption of central government powers. However, roles were soon reversed. From a state aiming to break up the USSR, Russia began to change into a defender of the Soviet heritage, conscious of its position and resources.

Many contradictions accompanied this process. In spite of declarations and constitutional transformations in a democratic direction, Russia is seen in the world as:

- an unstable state, with a political leadership with authoritarian tendencies and a mafia-like oligarchic infrastructure;
- a nuclear power which is incapable of handling centrifugal tendencies other than by means of a bloody war, as the tragedy of Chechnya shows;
- a state which dismantled a totalitarian structure but presides over a society which has not yet shaken off the Soviet mentality and has not established a democratic political culture⁷.

Problems with self-definition concern Russia's historical, political, national and cultural spheres. In the historical sphere, it has to do with the degree of identification with the past, with distinguishing between what was bad and worth discarding, and what is worth keeping or continuing. A particular obstacle seems to be the strong attachment to the imperial character of Russia's past. For hundreds of years, Russia was an imperial state, which with the dramatic changes of the early 1990s suddenly lost its *raison d'être*. In this situation we are dealing with not only a revolution in the politico-economic order, but also a revolution in the consciousness of society, which must redefine its identity as well as reevaluate its national interests.

Many Russians feel closer to imagined and inherited history than to real history that is being currently created. Self-definition and the identity resulting from that process often revolve around the desire for reclaiming or restoring what has been lost, rather than for self-renewal and creation of something new. The former involves the efforts of various social groups to get back what they lost, or at least limit the damages resulting from the loss of empire. The latter is based on a complete break with the past, the previous political order and its universal claims. This is the type of self-definition that West Germans accepted after the Second World War under the pressure of the victorious Allies. In Russia too it seemed that the state emerging from the USSR was radically and effectively breaking with the past. However, the changes initiated from above soon provoked a conservative backlash. Within a few years of the collapse of the USSR, the question of the revival of Russia's great power status was put on the political agenda, given that Russia was not only the legal successor to the USSR, but also the heir to a noble tradition of imperial greatness.

⁷ See: Bieleń S. "Tożsamość międzynarodowa Federacji Rosyjskiej" [„International Identity of Russian Federation”]. Oficyna Wydawnicza ASPRA-JR, Warszawa, 2006.

In the political sphere there is a dissonance between the drive to build a modern state and the implementation of democratic practices and old habits and customs from the epoch of totalitarianism. A striking characteristic of this is the clashing of two tendencies – on the one hand, we see modernization, i.e. an opening up to Western ideas and values, but on the other, an escape into autarchy and isolation with the aim of preserving Russian distinctiveness. The latter is sometimes associated with the search for a mythical “third way” of development, which is expressed through emphasis on the “self-contained civilization of Russia”. Arguments between occidentalists and eurasianists are to a large extent a reflection of this. Defenders of the distinctive character of Russia are worried that the spread of the Western way of life is leading Russia to negate its own cultural identity. Being a consequence of modernization, cultural unification is undermining the meaning of the values making up the uniqueness of Russia, setting that state apart in the world.

Arnold Toynbee already a long time ago observed that Russia chose various adaptive strategies. The first of these he dubbed the “zealot” opposition of Old Believers, the essence of which was not to turn against the West as such, but to refuse the acceptance of foreign models. Its opposite was uncompromising “herodianism” which Peter the Great became an exponent of. The essence of this approach was the transformation of Russia from an Orthodox universal state to one of the “parochial” or peripheral powers of the Western world. The third strategy was communism, aspiring to universal leadership of the Soviet empire.

At present Russia is confronted with the necessity of choosing an adaptive strategy which will protect it from repeating historical disasters. This means, instead of mechanically transferring from above Western experiences and models to Russian soil, drawing on them in order to work out its own reform programs that enable it to enter into the current of civilizational transformation. Russians call this strategy “organic adaptation”.

2.1. The civilizational-geopolitical paradox

In the geopolitical sense Russia is both Europe and Asia, connecting East and West, North and South, which in itself makes it a unique phenomenon.

So, the special significance of geopolitics in the case of Russia is determined by its particular geographic situation. Its Eurasian characteristics define its borders, natural barriers which have protected it against invasions, and enclose within themselves culture and history that maintain mythical continuity. The geography of Russia is loaded with affective and symbolic meanings. They are so ideologically charged that they strongly reinforce the genuine feeling of belonging to a Great Russia, and define the *genus loci* in which one can find the original national spirit. Nature and geography exert an overpowering influence on the attitude of Russians in their contacts with other nations. The low-lying and limitless Russian expanses have served to make the people averse to moderation and compromise, and have given rise to extreme attitudes of an “all or nothing” nature. Various descriptions of the national character of Russians emerge from such premises⁸.

The geography of Russia has iconic significance, symbolizing a distinct landscape, harsh climate, and wealth of customs which contribute to a continuous awareness of its place in the world. The collective influence of the various ways in which people understand and perceive a known space is contained in the concept of *topophilia* which was introduced in 1974 by Yi-Fu Tuan, an American of Chinese origin, in a book with this title. A counterpart of *topophilia* is *geopietism*, meaning experiencing one’s native land as an object to which special value is attached. The emotional bond with one’s native land is connected with the belief that it is part of the “living national tissue”.

The vastness of Russia led to the formation of the unique national psychology of Russians which stresses “destiny” and place in the world. Space appeared as a synonym for power and position. The enormous spaces resulted in the development of a certain style in social life which manifests itself in the way politics is conducted, but also in the way the results of all types of activities, including architecture or art, is presented. As Andrzej Chodubski wrote, “glorification of the idea of largeness and monumentalism in relation to space meant that since the dawn of its statehood, Russia was organized for expansion and territorial conquest”⁹.

⁸ Лосский Н. О. *Характер русского народа*. [Character of Russian People] Москва: Издательство «ДАРЪ», 2005.

⁹ Chodubski A. “Elementy identyfikacji kulturowej Rosji” [“Elements of Russian Cultural Identity”]. *Sprawy Polityczne*, 2001, no. 3, p. 90.

The geopolitical position of Russia gives it therefore the capacity to influence the most important processes on the Eurasian landmass and forces all participants in international relations to reckon with it. The Eurasian activity of Russia makes it an important global actor on the international stage. All kinds of activities and roles in this field are of key significance to the international order.

In Poland this factor is in fact forgotten and emphasis is put on the economic weakness and marginalization of Russia. Meanwhile, the US cannot imagine resolving the most pressing problems of the contemporary world, e.g. the Korean or Afghan questions, without the help and advice of Russia. For its part, Russia can effectively limit American influence by supporting states that clearly oppose Washington's policies (the most spectacular example being support for anti-American Iran). Russian protection of authoritarian regimes in the "near abroad" is at the same time a substantial limitation of Western influence, especially American, in countries such as Belarus, Kazakhstan or Turkmenistan. Geopolitics means that, regardless of weaknesses in other areas, Russia is an important player on the international scene. Without its participation it is not possible to imagine any configuration of forces that would have significance in the processes of establishing global equilibrium.

The geopolitical situation of Russia as a bridge between two continents, and also its physical environment and type of neighborhood, shaped the political development of the state as well as its image. The "troublesome geopolitical situation" arose because Russia, lying in the middle of the Eurasian continent, put powers located in its immediate vicinity in the position of natural rivals. From this viewpoint, Alexei Kara-Murza's thesis that the geopolitical position of Russia had and has a confrontational character is correct¹⁰. The authoritarian severity of the state is the inevitable result. This partly explains why militarism was closely connected with autocracy in Russian history. Frontline areas played a crucial role in defining the ability to repel invasions and maintain the state's internal stability. There was also another side to this phenomenon. Often, the authoritarian government itself looked for a place where it could "bare its

¹⁰ Kara-Murza A. A. "Zmiana formuły tożsamości: Rosja między okcydentalizmem a samoistością" ["The Change of Identity Formula: Russia between the Occidentalism and Self-existence"]. in: Agnieszka Magdziak-Miszewska et al. (eds), *Polacy i Rosjanie. 100 kluczowych pojęć* [Poles and Russians. 100 Key Concepts], Biblioteka „WIEŻI”, Warszawa 2002, p. 218.

claws”. Creating an image of a distinctive civilization, surrounded on all sides by adversaries, it created the ideological foundations for further conquests and imperial expansion. Russia was always surrounded by rebellious provinces or unfriendly states. From the chauvinist point of view, a friendly neighbor could only be a subordinated neighbor¹¹.

The complicated historical experience explains in a certain way the current assumptions behind the defense doctrine of Russia, which attaches so much weight to the so-called “near abroad”. On top of that, the loss of Central Europe as an important buffer zone against the West placed Russia in a new situation. Looking from this perspective, it is easier to understand the sources of Russian resistance to NATO’s eastward expansion in the 1990s.

The physical setting of Russia has kept it away from the sources of the West’s dynamic civilization and delayed socio-economic development, putting it in an unfavorable position both in relation to Western Europe and later the US and Japan. In terms of economic and technological indicators, Russia has lagged behind the major powers in every epoch. However, through its contacts with stronger European powers, Russia has continuously adopted experiences, culture and worldviews from its adversaries.

The aspiration for the rebirth of geopolitical power seems to be the only way to restore the personal dignity and pride of the Russian political elites. They are not divided by their attitude towards a state bent on pursuing greatness and power, but by their attitude towards reform. Because of dramatic historical experiences, and especially the living memory of the Great Fatherland War, the Russian government and society are unusually sensitive to every potential threat to territorial integrity and inviolability of borders. This territorial imperative dictates Russian resistance to solving the problem of the Kurile Islands on the basis of rational compromise. It also fuels the contempt of Russians for the right of Chechens to self-determination. However, the stabilization of territorial ownership through demarcation of borders with China perhaps gives some basis to think that slow but significant changes are taking place in this regard in the mentality of Russian elites.

¹¹ Paradowski R., “Rosyjski konflikt kulturowy i perspektywy imperialne” [Russian Cultural Conflict and Imperial Prospects] in: Piotr Kraszewski (ed.), *Cywilizacja Rosji imperialnej* [The Imperial Russia Civilization], Instytut Wschodni UAM, Poznań 2002, p. 49-62.

Contemporary powers have already abandoned the atavistic view that growth is to a larger extent the result of territorial conquests than of internal economic development and peaceful trade. Similar processes will certainly emerge among the Russians as well. For that reason, one should be cautious when making judgments. One should give up traditional stereotypes and patterns of thought regarding Russia. An astute observer of the Russian scene, George Kennan (1904-2005) warned against the ignorance evident in treating Russia as a country “unceasingly and wrongly expansionistic”. Treating it like this “oversimplifies matters greatly and gives an erroneous picture of a large part of the history of Russian diplomacy in the Tsarist period”¹². Generalizing about the contemporary governments of Russia or about the conduct of that country in the future on the basis of the historical record is a dangerous mistake.

2.2. The paradox of power

Russia is first and foremost a large world exporter of energy resources, having one of the largest nuclear potentials in the world. It is therefore a nuclear raw materials power. The nuclear potential of Russia guarantees its passive strategic defense. In the opinion of military commentators, for Russia, deeply frustrated by the loss of its superpower position, and at the same time, claiming the right to have a say in the fate of the world, the nuclear bogeyman has become its “last best hope”. In defense doctrine, the relatively cheap nuclear capacity of the Russian armed forces is considered their most cost-effective element.

As a consequence of its nuclear status, Russia is only state which negotiates and concludes disarmament treaties with the biggest power of our times – the United States. Russia has a similarly important voice in reaching agreements in the field of conventional disarmament in Europe. None of the efforts of the international community in the area of non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction would have succeeded without cooperation with Russia. The problem of access to nuclear weapons by North Korea or Iran cannot be resolved in any forum which does not take into account Russia’s views.

Active diplomacy is a matter of linking energy weapons as offensive instruments and nuclear weapons as defensive ones. In this field Russia has no com-

¹² Kennan G. F., *On American Principles*, “Foreign Affairs”, 1995, no. 2.

petitors, with the exception of the US, which has the largest number of great power attributes. The nuclear factor has a generally destructive effect – it constantly fuels or even deepens the world's suspicion of Russia. The oil factor has the opposite effect – it contributes to increasing the constructive interest of various states in Russia.

Moreover, a distinctive aspect of Russia is its self-creation through exaggeration of its strong points. The ability to create false ideas and inflated images of its power remains a specialty of Russian elites¹³. Russians themselves often put themselves in the forefront of world powers. Russia is undoubtedly a powerful nuclear power, has the largest territory, with the greatest reserves of natural resources in the world. This is all true. However, these advantages do not make it a major economic power. The Russian paradox in the economic sphere lies in the fact that according to World Bank indicators, Russia lags behind other middle-income states. At the same time, it continues to be a key state in the international configuration of forces.

Russia belongs to the G8 group of the richest states in the world, which create some two-thirds of the world's GNP. Although it contributes far less compared to the other members, this did not prevent it from assuming the presidency of the body in 2006 and preparing a discussion on ways to improve mechanisms of global management. The G8 serves as the contemporary equivalent of the 19th century European "concert" of great powers. Membership in this informal club confers prestige and distinction on Russia, although in rank it does not compare with Western powers.

Many objective indicators point to the favorable development of Russia. In the last six years, there has been continuous and noticeable economic growth, the external debt of Russia has decreased, the state has accumulated huge budget surpluses, and pensions and salaries are paid on time. Inflation has gone down to around 10%, while unemployment is not as high as in other post-communist states, hovering in the vicinity of 7-8%. So if all these indicators show growth, what then is the reason for the pessimism expressed in most analyses and assessments? It is paradoxical that the elements which Russians identify as their strong points are also the source of their state's weakness. On the one

¹³ Галумов Э. А., *Международный имидж России: стратегия формирования* [Russia's International Image: The Creating Strategy], Москва: Издательство «Известия», 2003.

hand, they enable Russia to rebuild its great power status, ensure a balanced budget, build up reserves, and increase defense spending, as well as exert pressure on smaller and weaker states with the aim of gaining political advantages. But, on the other hand, they push the state in the direction of extensive growth, which closes the road to modernization and linkage with the most developed Western powers¹⁴.

2.3. The paradox of democratization

In the course of 16 years Russia went from having a repressive dictatorship of the Communist Party and secret services to a system in which the fate of individual political officials depends on more or less democratic elections, organized systematically and in accordance with standards recognized around the world. No one in Russia idealizes the results achieved by the transformation; on the contrary, there are more critics than enthusiasts, but this does not mean that Russia is steadily sliding downhill.

The paradox lies in the fact that Russia proclaims its return to liberal democracy, while the world views it as being anti-liberal. This is further proof of how difficult it is to understand the “Russian syndrome”. At present it is hard to say unequivocally whether the authoritarian tendencies, manifested in the campaign to rid Russia of robber-baron capitalism and create conditions for stable economic growth, will turn out to be strong and long-lasting. Decisions such as limiting the authority of governors, conducting a campaign against media freedom, forcing disloyal oligarchs to emigrate, as well as inflexibility on the Chechen question are widely perceived as signs of tightening of the screws. Russian history clearly shows that periods like this last much longer than flashes of liberal reform. If this tendency gets stronger, it could turn out that Vladimir Putin’s team is ending the Russian thaw which began in the mid-1980s with Mikhail Gorbachev’s *perestroika*.

President Putin takes every opportunity to argue against claims that Russia is heading in an authoritarian direction. He stresses that Russia has chosen the path of democracy and that this is a choice it will stick with. Announcements

¹⁴ See: Neumann I. B., “Russia as a Great Power”, in: Jakob Hedenskog et al. (eds), *Russia as a Great Power. Dimensions of Security under Putin*, New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 13-28.

of reforms strengthening the executive branch are not a reaction to the terrorist attack in North Ossetia in September 2004. There is considerable evidence that Putin is simply continuing activities launched in 2000 aimed at restoring the functioning of the state. Putin's first term saw the slow and careful resuscitation of state structures, which were in an advanced state of decay when Boris Yeltsin inherited them after the fall of the USSR. As Russians themselves assert, the president had to start from elementary things, without which no steps forward would have been possible. The first task carried out was to restore the ability to control the security structures. The next priority was to revive Russian interests in its immediate neighborhood, i.e. above all, in the post-Soviet space. The most important goal, however, was to restore Russia's great power status in the world, based on real sovereignty. The maintenance of full independence from others is for Russia not only a question of political and international legal identity, but also a condition for survival. Without this element, it is difficult to understand its attitude towards other powers.

Under Putin's rule, the Russian state has undergone consolidation, with the executive branch expanding its control over all spheres of public life. The president of Russia has a chance of going down in history as someone who restored order, stability, and economic growth following the years of disarray under Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Belief in supremacy of the state as well as in the usefulness and necessity of strengthening his effectiveness as a wise plenipotentiary of the entire national community – this is the core of current presidential doctrine. There are strong indications that the priority of contemporary Russian elites is economic growth and civilizational development, not democracy and institutions of civil society. For this reason, there are so many references in the political rhetoric to the distinctive nature of the Russian system. The Kremlin today proclaims that in line with the distinctiveness of Russia, it is building a distinctive Russian democracy. There is no lack of ironic suggestions that this system can be called "petroleum democracy".

In discussions about democratization in Russia, the so-called first law of petropolitics, formulated by "New York Times" commentator Thomas Friedman, has gained popularity. Let us recall that petropolitics is the politics of states exporting petroleum. The law states the following: "In countries rich in petroleum, the price of this raw material and the pace of expansion of civic

freedoms are always inversely proportional". The biggest enemy of Russian democracy is therefore not the Kremlin or the oligarchs, but the high price of oil. As Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev argues, Russia is governed today by a regime whose entire legitimacy is based on extraction of enormous profits from the sale of oil and gas. The West, dependent on Russian supplies of these energy resources, gives *de facto* support to this regime and prevents any kind of change. In Krastev's opinion, "freedom in Russia will blossom only when the price of oil falls in Western states". The one and only indicator of the success of the European policy of promoting democracy would be the ending of Western dependence on Russian oil and gas, not only through diversification of energy suppliers, but also through the search for renewable energy sources¹⁵.

A further paradox is the linking of sovereignty and democracy in a single political concept¹⁶. Its basic premises are set forth in the book entitled "Sovereignty", published under the editorship of Nikita Garadiya, and also in the book "Putin: His Ideology" by Alexei Chaadayev, officially accepted by the political technocrats of the presidential administration. The first of these books includes excerpts of presidential speeches about the condition of the state, an interview with one of Putin's possible successors Dmitry Medvedev, remarks by Vladislav Surkov, head ideologist of the Kremlin, made to activists of the "One Russia" party, and around a dozen interviews and essays, reflecting the tradition of enlightened loyalism. Authors such as Chaadayev and Garadiya, journalists like Vitaly Tret'yakov and Maxim Sokolov, and military strategists such as Andrei Kokoshin are reputed to be the most important ideological officials in Putin's special services.

The concept of sovereign democracy means that Russia rejects the liberal democracy of the West¹⁷. Kremlin strategists argue that the entire world cannot be expected to follow one model. Just as the priority for American democracy is freedom, and for European democracy it is equality, for Russian democracy at the present stage security is of the highest importance. In fact, it is a question of

¹⁵ Krastev I., "Putinowskie "społeczeństwo obywatelskie" [„Putin's Civil Society"]], *Europa-Tygodnik Idei*, 2005, no. 43, 26 Oct. 2005.

¹⁶ Idem, *Sovereign Democracy. Russian-Style*, Opendemocracy.net, 16.11.2006, http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-istitutions_government/sovereign_democracy_4104.jsp (29.03.2007).

¹⁷ Janeliūnas T., "Sovereign Democracy" – Yet Another Attempt to Define Russian Regime", *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*, 2006, no. 2 (6), p. 119-133.

deflecting societal pressure from below and international pressure from above, both of which led to the “color revolutions” in Ukraine and Georgia. According to Kremlin specialists, “attempts at so-called democratization” are nothing but an effort by the West to “limit the sovereignty” of post-Soviet states. Russia is also becoming a target of this. Calls for democratization, support from the outside for independent liberal parties, appeals for observation of human rights are for Chaadayevev, one of the Kremlin’s political technocrats, “a new crusade against Russia”, conducted by the West. According to him, this crusade is supported in Russia by agents of foreign influence, namely domestic liberals, and defenders of human rights and national minorities.

As defined by Kremlin ideologues, sovereignty is not a right to which the state or nation is entitled but rather the potential of the state, its economic independence, military power, and cultural identity. Another basic element of a sovereign state is an elite with nationally oriented views. The national character of the elite is the most important factor determining the strength of a sovereign state.

The slogan “sovereign democracy” is used in an opportunistic fashion to serve the current needs of the government. Sovereign democracy is presented as a struggle with chaos and disorder. It is a type of state ideology, seasoned with imperialist and nationalist sentiments.

In building the intellectual justification for the sovereign democracy project, Kremlin ideologues turned to the intellectual heritage of continental Europe – to the French political rationalism of Francois Guizot, a 19th-century philosopher and prime minister of France, and to the “decisionism” of Carl Schmitt, the “court jurist” of the Third Reich and a leading figure in the contemporary anti-liberal tradition. Guizot and Schmitt are surprising pillars of the Kremlin idea of sovereign democracy. What the Russian ideologues like is the anti-revolutionary stance and deep distrust of two fundamental concepts of contemporary democracy: the idea of representation as an expression of the pluralistic character of modern-day society and the idea of popular sovereignty. Anti-populism and anti-pluralism are characteristics distinguishing the current regime in Moscow. Its ideologues, following Schmitt’s footsteps, prefer to define sovereign democracy as the “identity of rulers and the ruled”. Following Guizot’s footsteps, they consider as sovereign not the people (electorate), but reason

finding its expression in consensus achieved by responsible political elites. In the Kremlin's mixture of Guizot's anti-populism and Schmitt's anti-liberalism, elections do not serve to express differing, often opposing interests, but are a tool for demonstrating the identity of rulers and the ruled. Elections do not serve to represent people but to represent the authorities before the people. The definition of Schmitt, according to which the sovereign is "he who decides on the state of emergency", is perfectly suited to the almost metaphysical role of the figure of president in the present-day Russian political system. The Schmittian definition of democracy in categories of identity rather than representation does not enable one to distinguish democracy from dictatorship in any substantial way, which in the eyes of Kremlin theoreticians of democracy is certainly a strong point of this concept.

Russian and foreign critics of Putin are usually dismissive of the intellectual contents of the idea of sovereign democracy. They are interested in the true nature of the regime, and not how the regime tries to present and legitimize itself. In their opinion, "sovereign democracy" only has propaganda value. The only role of this concept is to protect the regime against Western criticism.

However, there are also those who believe that the concept of sovereign democracy embodies the nostalgia of Putin's Russia for the ideological force of attraction exerted by the USSR. It is a question of creating an alternative model for Western states discouraged by the growth of populism and the pressure of globalization.

2.4. Paradoxes in Russia's international activities

At the beginning of the 21st century, Russian foreign policy is still determined not so much by positive as by negative goals: to not let itself be marginalized in international affairs, to avoid isolation of the state in the international arena and further reduction of its importance, and to avoid involvement in contentious international problems that could threaten the progress of internal reforms. Russia often defines itself not in an inclusive sense, within the system of participants in international relations, but rather in an exclusive sense "against" other states. This means stressing differences and contrasts, and a desire to separate oneself from others. One can be certain that in the foreseeable

future Russia will not agree to join any kind of international structure at the price of giving up even part of its independence. This is something that cannot be imagined either by Russian elites or by broad sections of the politically conscious population.

There exists an enormous discrepancy between Russian aspirations and the possibilities for achieving them. Neither economic growth nor strong political leadership can erase in a short time the huge deficiencies and distances separating Russia from the biggest powers of the contemporary world. It will remain a great power more through the consent of the other powers, or in other words, a “licensed” power. It is a partner which is respected, but which cannot always be depended on. So the basic question is lack of trust. Respect for Russia results above all from the conviction that the weakness of the Russian state is not only a problem for it, but also for many other states. No serious Western observer denies for this reason the European character of Russia and its membership in the European security system.

In international relations, Russia operates in a manner that is different from other states. This is a phenomenon encountered many times in history. The duality of Russian behavior lies in the fact that it generally accepts the values and rules of the game recognized by other states. But at the same time it reserves the right to “its own” interpretation of certain standards, which undermines its credibility in the eyes of international opinion.

Russia has broken with the expansionist policies which contributed to the squandering of resources, has limited the development of offensive weapons, and has stopped supporting various revolutionary regimes and sending thousands of advisors to a host of countries. It is undergoing demilitarization of its political thinking (resulting in reduction of the army and of arms sales) and implementing disarmament agreements. However, it is not clear whether it has given up on its imperial ambitions. The governing class of Russia keeps clinging to the delusion of great power status, which is delaying the introduction of democratic standards.

Russians are in the process of reevaluating their involvement in international affairs. Their misfortune is that they lack a clear idea regarding the proper place of contemporary Russia in the global power system. The biggest problem boils down to overcoming the strongly rooted complex of playing the role of one of

the most important decision-makers. This calls for Russia to give up on defining its vital interests in terms of “omnipresence” in the world. Russia needs self-limitation. It is a paradox that contemporary Russia has chosen to assume the role of regional power and wants to be active on a continental scale while continually taking on tasks that place it in the ranks of powers with global ambitions.

Still conducting multivector diplomacy, Russia in the foreseeable future will only be able to afford “limited globalism”, i.e. co-shaping the international order, based on partnerlike relations with other powers and collective undertaking of activities to alleviate and resolve regional and international conflicts.

In Russian thinking about foreign policy, domestic imperatives predominate. International interests have to serve domestic modernization, which has still not had the desired social effects. The economization of politics is supposed to lead to the effects of economic growth being translated into changes that are perceivable by the people. The dynamics of foreign involvement will depend on this and it is in this context that the world will accept the return of Russian power to the great game. Russia is particularly keen on being attractive to investors, a precondition of which is not only internal policy, but also good political relations with the richest states of the West. Today’s Russia subordinates to this goal all other areas of activity, stressing especially the role of so-called economic diplomacy.

In the West experts often reiterate a basic fact that Russia must now accept in its conduct of international relations. It must – in spite of internal resistance – adapt to the new world order and its own changed position within it. Its long-term interests lie in the development of normal, constructive cooperation with the West. In the opinion of Zbigniew Brzezinski, in the long run the only advantageous choice for Russians is closer ties with the Euroatlantic community. Otherwise it risks geopolitical isolation and exposure to the Islamic threat from the south as well as Chinese power from the east. Brzezinski is right to point out that nations do not change their images of themselves or their historical fates of their own free will, but only when they have to. So it is a question not only of will but of realizing a certain necessity. An understanding of objective conditions can perhaps come to Russia more quickly if it bears in mind that in the past century many nations and states have had to fundamentally change

their views of their own aspirations and position in the world. This was the case, above all, with Germany and Japan, but also with Great Britain, France, Holland and Turkey.

Russia is no longer the leader of states dissatisfied with the international order that emerged after the Cold War. It is not a state striving at any price to revise the existing status quo. Russia played such a role under the Soviet flag, but it paid a high price for this, with mostly negative results. For this reason, Russia views the European Union as a serious economic and political partner. However, in international security matters, the Western European states do not yet speak with one voice, and on the Iraq question are simply divided. In this sense, although Russia tries to maintain the best possible relations with them, the entire EU is not as attractive a partner as the US. Moreover, there has been a serious rift in transatlantic relations, which in Soviet times would have been viewed by Moscow as a success, but given the new realities Russia is now keen on good relations with each side of the Atlantic divide. In fact, all divisions in the Atlantic community are to the detriment of Russia. It has to therefore calculate to what extent good relations with the US will not adversely affect its attractive economic relations with Western European states. Russia has to maintain a balance in its relations between the two parts of the Western world to the benefit of its own national interests. While maintaining partnerlike relations with the US, Russia gladly accepts invitations to everything that is European. Maintaining a balance in its relations with the US and the EU, and also with individual European states, is the most important task of Russian foreign policy. It is a unique paradox that Russia is today just as keen on Western unity as is the West itself.

According to specialists, this is just the beginning of the challenges facing Russia. Transatlantic rivalry will keep on intensifying in the foreseeable future, which will pose continual dilemmas for Russia. Each of the parties realizes perfectly well that playing the other two parties off against each other would be an absurd mistake¹⁸.

The states of Western Europe and North America have not stopped criticizing Russia for its various departures from the rules and standards of the Western world, but at the same time they are striving to improve the climate and develop

¹⁸Lynch D., *Russia Faces Europe*. Chaillot Papers, May 2003, no. 60.

relations, not freeze or worsen them. There is a certain dualism in the way Russia is treated. Western states declare that they are striving to build “something truly common” with Russia, but treat it like a “partner from outside”, whose interests and values often diverge from those of Europe. Such “partnership”, in the opinion of Russian experts, is simply doomed to cyclical reproduction of crises.

Conclusions

Processes emerging in Russia are complicated and difficult to evaluate or interpret in an unambiguous way. Observers of Russia do not express categorical opinions either regarding the effects of internal transformation or their influence on international processes. It is interesting that there was a greater variety of scenarios and predictions in the early years of Russia’s transformation (mostly pessimistic) than now at the beginning of the 21st century. Various observers view Russia with pessimism or with optimism. Pessimists view it as a nuclear power in a very precarious position because of its political and social instability. Optimists see a semi-authoritarian leadership, striving for stability, but at the price of sacrificing certain democratic freedoms. It is obvious that both the pessimistic and optimistic views lead to oversimplification in the face of an unclear reality – just as a catastrophic or euphoric view does not at all reflect reality. Many observers are stuck in a normativistic if not idealistic current of thought on the question of Russia, demanding conditions that it must fulfil in order to be recognized as a normal state. Normativists are convinced that the world can be rapidly rebuilt on the Western model. They are infected with the “end of history” vision, i.e. the victory of liberalism on a global scale, when in the meantime the world is undergoing further diversification, not turning back to communism. Examples of China’s transformation, and also the dynamics of growth of the so-called Asian tigers should be instructive. Therefore it is worth looking sometimes at the future of Russia as well from a non-Western perspective.