

Putin's Eurasian Union Initiative: Are the premises of Russia's post-Soviet policy changing?

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In early October 2011, Russia's prime minister – and putative president in waiting – Vladimir Putin unveiled his plans to create a 'Eurasian Union' of the former Soviet countries. According to his vision, laid out in an article in Russian newspaper *Izvestia*, the envisaged Eurasian Union would become a powerful supranational body with political, economic and value basis.

At first sight, the initiative to create a value-based union appears to be a break with Russia's current policies towards its post-Soviet neighbourhood. The Russian neighbourhood policy is based on Russian political and economic interests – not on any ideology or values. Indeed, Russia's post-Soviet policies have been described as Machiavellian: flexibly shifting on an instrumental basis between supporting autocratic leaders and scheming against democratic leaders and supporting democratic opposition, or alternatively, non-democratic extremists. Although the Eurasian Union initiative seems new and unique against this backdrop, a closer examination suggests Russia's post-Soviet neighbourhood policy is unlikely to yield much change.

'Active measures' revisited

Russia's existing neighbourhood policy developed into its current form as a response to the 'Colour Revolutions' in former Soviet countries. The Orange revolution in Ukraine was interpreted widely in Russia as a humiliating evidence of Russia's weakening influence in the post-Soviet space. The conclusion drawn was that Russia should increase its efforts to create its own NGO networks and to provide financial assistance, know-how and education in 'political technologies'; all in order to regain its dominant position in the region.

The Russian policies towards the post Soviet states after the Orange revolution emphasised public diplomacy that aims to influence the attitudes of foreign audiences. In Russia, this policy is often called a 'humanitarian trend' (*gumanitarnoe napravlenie*) in foreign policy.

The key tools deployed by Russian public diplomacy actors to influence foreign public in the 'near abroad' are:

1) *Pro-active political involvement*

- e.g. creating links to a variety of political actors, assisting reorganisation and coordination of pro-Russian parties, export of political technologies and consultation around elections

- 2) *'NGO diplomacy'*
 - e.g. creating and assisting pro-Russian youth groups, minority and separatist civil organisations and think tanks
- 3) *Creation and management of favourable media environment*
 - e.g. the establishment of Russian media ventures, launching media campaigns in the Russian media, or influencing the local national media

These tools are primarily aimed at the Russian-speaking minorities as 'hooks' for gaining influence in the post-Soviet neighbourhood. The tools are combined typically with structural bonds of energy grid and deliverables as well as Russian economic investments in neighbourhood.

Russian public diplomacy in the post-Soviet neighbourhood does not attempt to evoke the soft power of attraction but draws from the Soviet tradition of manipulation. Indeed, Russia's post-Soviet policy owes much to the Soviet practice of 'active measures' (*aktivnye meropriyatiya*) of propaganda and 'political influence techniques' – such as planting of disinformation in the press, employment of agents of influence and the creation of front organisations to act on behalf of Russia in other countries.

Measures then were aimed at influencing the policies of another government, undermining confidence in its leaders and institutions, disrupting relations between other nations, strengthening the allies of the Soviet Union and discrediting and weakening governmental and non-governmental opponents of the Soviet state. They were meant to create a favourable environment for the achievement of Soviet foreign policy objectives. The goals and methods of Russian post-Soviet policy today seem rather consistent with previous ones.

Mastermind Kolerov

The 'innovation centre' of the Russian Soviet-inspired post-Orange policy towards former Soviet states was the *Presidential Directorate for Interregional Relations and Cultural Contacts with Foreign Countries* (*Upravlenie Prezidenta Rossii po mezhhregionalnym i kulturnym svyazyam s zarubezhnymi stranami*) which president Putin established in February 2005. Putin chose a well-known political strategist Modest Kolerov to head the new body.

In particular, Kolerov is the mastermind behind the current pro-active 'NGO diplomacy' in the post-Soviet neighbourhood. Russia has supported and funded the activities of pro-Russian youth groups and diaspora organisations, separatist actors, research centres and think tanks providing information that supports Russian goals in the post-Soviet countries.

For instance, Russia has supported the establishment of various pro-Russian youth groups in Ukraine and in elsewhere in the post-Soviet states. The most notable of these is *Proryv* movement operational in Crimea, Transnistria and South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Examples of pro-Russian research centres and organisations that engage mainly in information production and distribution include the *Legal Information Centre of Human Rights* in Estonia, the *International Council for Democratic Institutions and State Sovereignty* in Transnistria, the *Caucasus Institute for Democracy and the Free Europe Foundation* in South Ossetia. More generally, organisations representing the Russian diaspora in the post-Soviet states receive generous funding from various Russian bodies. Kolerov's directorate also helped in the reorganisation and closer coordination of these organisations across the region.

Kolerov's office and other Russian actors have financially and politically supported separatist actors in Moldova and Georgia and encouraged active cooperation between them. Kolerov was a frequent visitor in the separatist regions and he sponsored meetings between the separatist authorities. Kolerov's department helped to form the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly in 2006 bringing together these separatist regimes.

Furthermore, Kolerov worked actively for the reorganisation of pro-Russian and minority parties in the former Soviet republics. With Kolerov's help the poorly organised, local pro-Russian parties in Latvia were able to rise to nationwide significance: in the 2011 parliamentary elections pro-Russian *Harmony Centre* received the highest share of votes of all parties. In addition to clearly pro-Russian parties, the goal was to establish close links with a whole spectrum of political actors in the region as to secure Russian influence in all conditions and to create rifts amongst local political actors.

The Russian agenda is further promoted by active media policies in the post-Soviet and Baltic states. These include the support of Russian language broadcasting and press, as well as media campaigns in the local and Russian media (widely followed in the region). For example, when Moldova and Ukraine introduced a new border regime that required exporting Transnistrian companies to register in Chisinau in 2006, Russia launched a harsh media campaign against Moldovan leaders. Russian media claimed that Moldovan policies were creating a 'humanitarian catastrophe' in Transnistria. Furthermore, Russia embargoed all Moldovan wines, officially due to health issues, which hit the vulnerable Moldovan economy hard.

Kolerov was actively meddling with the riots around the replacement of the Bronze Soldier statute in Tallinn during the spring 2007 and this is likely to have led to his eventual dismissal in October 2007. He was succeeded in July 2008 by a less colourful figure, Sergei Vinokurov. However, the grand strategy and the main building blocks of Kolerov's post-Soviet policy endured.

Words vs. deeds

While the Russian policy towards the former Soviet republics seem to be taken almost directly from a Soviet manual of ‘political influence techniques’, the way in which the policies are marketed publicly tell a different story.

In the Russian media, Kolerov argued that Russia is in fact offering its post-Soviet neighbours ‘true sovereignty’ without the EU’s normative conditionality and interference in internal affairs and an ‘alternative to increasing ethnic nationalism, parochialism, militarization and special services’ involvement in politics‘ that otherwise dominate the post-Soviet space. However, in practice Russia’s policies in the post-Soviet and Baltic states certainly do not demonstrate respect for post-Soviet states’ sovereignty and its aggressive compatriot policy does not support the claim of Russia’s opposition to ethnic nationalism. The mismatch between words and deeds is obvious.

If one only reads Putin’s comment in *Izvestia*, one could be misled to believe that the envisaged Eurasian Union was a serious attempt to revise thinking behind Russian post-Soviet policies and change the actual policies towards more mutually beneficial and accommodative approach. Indeed, if Russia was offering the post-Soviet states what Putin claimed – i.e. mutually beneficial cooperation and integration based on the values of freedom, democracy and well-functioning market laws without excluding any aspirations to forge closer ties with the EU – it would be an appealing option for many states in the region. After all, many post-Soviet states feel more ambiguous about their ‘Europeanness’ than the Central European and Baltic States, and value their sovereignty and freedom of manoeuvre highly.

However, a novel, more accommodating approach towards the post-Soviet space is hardly to be expected during Putin’s third presidential term. Despite Putin’s reference to common values, there is nothing concrete that would suggest a major shift in Russian thinking about the post-Soviet space. A closer scrutiny of Putin’s article suggests the old geopolitical mindset at work, with hopes that the Eurasian Union could become a of global pole of influence.

In fact, it seems that the Eurasian Union initiative is more of an opportunistic attempt to seize the moment and increase Russia’s influence in the post-Soviet region. In the mainstream Russian public discussion the EU is seen as losing legitimacy and just a few steps away from serious political decay. Hence, for hard-line Russian insiders, the situation could be seen as a window of opportunity for the Russia-dominated Eurasian Union to become the power that is – in the words of Putin in *Izvestia* – ‘*defining the rules of the game and determine the contours of the future*’ in the post-Soviet region.

Link to the article: Vladimir Putin, ‘Novyi integratsionnyi proekt dlya Evrazii – budushchee kotoroe rozhdaetsya segodnya’, *Izvestia*, 3 October 2011, <http://www.izvestia.ru/news/502761>.

About the author

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UI brief

NO 9, 1 Nov 2011

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