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Growing Distrust between Russia and the West

The high level of trust that had been constructed between western and Soviet leaders in the late 1980s and early 1990s was not sustained when western leaders had to face an independent Russia. At first sight this appears paradoxical. The new Russia began with every intention of transforming itself into a full participating member of the international institutions set up after 1945 to keep the peace. In June 1992 Yeltsin told the US Congress that Russia wished to 'join the world community', and he had earlier declared to the UN Security Council that 'Russia sees the West, and the countries of the East, not merely as partners but as allies. This is a highly important pre-requisite for – and I would say a revolution in – peaceful cooperation among the states of the civilised world.... Our principles are simple and understandable: the supremacy of democracy, human rights and liberties, legality and morality.' Russia finally abandoned Marxism, class struggle, and any claim to dominate eastern and central Europe, accepted a unified Germany within NATO and removed its troops not only from the former Warsaw Pact countries but also from the former Soviet Baltic republics, previously considered strategically vital. It carried out a far-reaching democratisation of the political system, including elections for the President himself. Under Yeltsin it went further than even Gorbachev had done and committed itself to a thoroughgoing privatisation and marketisation of its economy; Yeltsin called for western trade and economic assistance and promised to provide all the information needed to make it effective.[1]

The Russian Foreign Office seemed ready to play its part. The first draft of its basic doctrine emphasised the role of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe and

[1] Robert H. Donaldson & Joseph L. Nogee, *The Foreign Policy of Russia: changing systems, enduring interests*, 2nd edition, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002, 219.

stated that Russia's interests should be promoted "in the first place through participation in various international organisations", stressing in particular the contribution they could make to settling disputes between former Soviet republics.[2] In the immediate aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR, then, trust between Russia and the west seemed high. Russia was incorporated in a number of international institutions, notably the G-8 and the Council of Europe, in some of which its membership was controversial.

On the other hand these very changes created new problems, which proved ultimately to be obstacles on the road to a trusting relationship with the west. The first problem was that Russia suddenly found itself surrounded by independent ex-Soviet republics, not all of whom were friendly. It thus had a new and potentially threatening security problem on its borders, exacerbated by the fact that more than twenty million ethnic Russians lived in those republics and many of them faced hostile discrimination from their new authorities. [Refugees] This alone meant that the generous internationalising approach of the last Soviet leader would be difficult to continue. The first Russian foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, did however make the effort, though he faced continual resistance from the military. During 1992 and 1993 Russian military units, probably with the tacit approval of the Ministry of Defence, supported Abkhaz separatist rebels in breaking away from Georgia, provoking the Georgian leader, Shevardnadze, at one point to exclaim in exasperation and despair that the 'evil empire' was at work again. In July 1993, however, Kozyrev joined with Shevardnadze and the UN General Secretary Boutros-Ghali in calling for UN and CSCE monitors to supervise a peace agreement there. They were very slow to respond. Two months later, when the agreement

[2] Jeffrey Checkel, *Ideas and International Political Change*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997, 112-114.

broke down, the UN had sent only five of the 88 observers it had promised. As someone quipped at the time, there were more CNN cameramen there than UN observers there.[3]

Kozyrev commented in retrospect 'Evidently our country was fated to play a special role in maintaining peace and stability in the former USSR, especially since no state of the "near or distant abroad" and no international organisation had either the will or the capacity to replace Russia as a peacekeeping force in that region.'[4] That did not stop foreign commentators accusing Russian troops of imperialist ambitions. There was a residual problem of distrust here, left over from the Cold War, since western statesmen and international organisations feared appearing to approve or even assist Russia's 'imperial wars'. The strain of maintaining a pro-Western stance was so great that in December 1992 at a meeting of foreign ministers in Stockholm Kozyrev made an extraordinary spoof speech announcing that Russia would no longer pursue the goal of freedom and democracy but would give priority to defending its own great power interests, and he called on the former Soviet republics to band together under Russian leadership. Ministers and journalists were in consternation, until Kozyrev let it be known that his speech was intended as a warning of what would follow if the West allowed the reformers to fail.[5]

In any case, even if western observers had been willing to do play a full part, the Russian military and many Russian politicians would have resisted the idea of allowing them to do so. The foreign ministry's trusting vision of international institutions was not universally shared. The international affairs committee of the Supreme Soviet, for example,

[3] Kozyrev, *Preobrazhenie*, ?**; on the UN role in Abkhazia, see *A Question of Sovereignty: the Georgia-Abkhazia peace process*, London: Conciliation Resources, 1999.
[4] Andrei Kozyrev, *Preobrazhenie*, Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otnoshenaiia, 1995, 110-118; quotation on p 112.
[5] Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: a memoir of presidential diplomacy*, New York: Random House, 2002, 41.

thought otherwise; its chairman, Evgenii Ambartsumov, formerly a prominent supporter of Gorbachev's 'new thinking', recommended that Russia should declare its own Monroe Doctrine to make clear that "the entire geopolitical space of the former Soviet Union is a sphere of vital Russian interests".[6]

This disagreement reflected a radical divide in thinking inside Russia. Under the old Soviet system, such a disagreement would have been thrashed out around polished tables in sound-proofed rooms, well away from the mass media and the public. Now, however, Russia was at least in that sense a democracy. Every current of opinion had the right to be expressed and disseminated through the media. The collapse of the Warsaw Pact, the imminent then the actual disintegration of the USSR, seen as a hopeful sign in the west, was naturally greeted with consternation and resentment by many people in the Soviet Union, especially by Russians, who had dominated the old system and who lived in appreciable numbers in all the Soviet republics. [Say something here about Russian nationalist groups: Communists, LDP, Soiuz. Russians in non-Russian republics, based on Neil Melvin]

Russians' alarm at the prospect of any further crumbling of their sovereign territory was evident in President Yeltsin's heavy-handed and disproportionate response to the challenge of the Chechen declaration of independence. Forty thousand Russian troops invaded in December 1994, bombarding the capital, Groznyi, indiscriminately, with tremendous loss of life. In spite of their superiority in numbers and weapons, they never succeeded in wresting control of Chechen territory from the rebels, and after eighteen months

[6] Jeffrey Checkel, *Ideas and International Political Change*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997, 112-14.

had to conclude a humiliating peace which left Chechnia in effect an independent state – one moreover which proceeded to begin turning itself into an Islamic republic.[7]

For Russians, then, the post-Soviet world was full of new hazards caused by the dissolution of the USSR. In dealing with them, they found that international institutions could help them little, and so tended to revert to familiar great power devices, which then further alienated the western powers.

Another major set of problems was generated by Russia's economic condition and its unstable internal politics. After the Soviet collapse, President Bush (senior) was reluctant to provide serious economic aid – perhaps in the form of a stabilisation fund – until he could be sure the Russians would use it sensibly. Clinton however took a different approach: on becoming US President in January 1993 he regarded helping Russia to achieve democracy and prosperity as a major priority. He put a lot of work into achieving a good relationship with Yeltsin, on the principle that such relationships can be extremely helpful in creating trust where otherwise mutual suspicion might prevail. He was accused at the time and later of having allowed it to over-influence his judgement at times when Yeltsin behaved undemocratically, especially in launching the Chechen war. He persisted, though, believing that Yeltsin 'was the only figure on the scene who combined real power with a "gut conviction that democracy and freedom are the way to go"'. He even compared Yeltsin with Abraham Lincoln declaring war on the secessionist south in order to preserve the integrity of the United States – an analogy which privately appalled Clinton's advisers.[8] When he was in the middle of the crisis precipitated by his dissolution of the Supreme Soviet in 1993 Clinton

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[7] Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: tombstone of Russian power*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.
[8] Goldgeier, *Power and Purpose*, 138-144; Talbott, *Russia Hand* ?**.

overcame his own doubts and those of his advisers: "We're in this thing for keeps. Yeltsin's hanging in there, and we've got to stick with him.... When he's got hard calls to make, he's more likely to make the right ones with the knowledge that I'm there for him."[9] What is noteworthy about this attitude is the strong personalisation of the issues and Clinton's complete confidence that he knew what was right for Russia. This attitude annoyed even many pro-Western Russian politicians.

Clinton's advisers and aides also created strong trust relationships with certain Russian actors. US economic consultants worked through a narrow team of reformers around the privatisation supremo, Anatolii Chubais, whom they knew well and trusted. Most of their information about the state of the Russian economy came to them through that team, and they never consulted politicians from a wider public, let alone from the opposition. Consultants worked in many ministries and, because they were in a hurry, having annual budgets to justify, they tended to couch their recommendations almost in the form of commands, an insult to a country accustomed to thinking of itself as a great power.[10] They thus fell into the danger – always the downside of trust – of cliquish exclusiveness, and actually strengthened rather than weakened, as they had intended, the authoritarian, clannish and personalised nature of Russian politics. Little was done to reinforce Russian citizens' trust in institutions. Yet institutions were vital if politics was to become less hung up on personal and tribal feuds.

Another problem was that Clinton and his advisers considered it self-evident that economic institutions which worked well in the west would also work well in Russia, with a bit of advice and help. Larry Summers [US Treasury emissary?] told Prime Minister

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[9] Talbott, *Russia Hand,* 103, 285.

[10] Janine Wedel, *Collision and Collusion: the strange case of western aid to Eastern Europe*: Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998, chapter 4 and 188-190.

Chernomyrdin that the conditions on which the IMF disbursed funds to Russia reflected the laws of economics, which were like those of physics. Chernomyrdin retorted that his government 'had to conduct economic policy within the bounds of what was tolerable to the parliament and the electorate'. Besides, he added, Russia's foreign partners must respect the pride and sovereignty of a great power.[11]

The institutions through which economic aid passed – AID, IMF – were accustomed to dealing with countries that had very different economic problems, under-development not distorted development. They had an agenda that was rushed (any funds not spent in one year Congress took away the following year) and which concentrated on certain limited aims conceived for different circumstances: privatisation, deregulation, cutting state expenditure. They did not see the importance of conserving what social capital Russia had accumulated inside the USSR, and they disbursed assistance only on fulfilment of conditions, which limited the scope of Russian decision-makers and insulted Russia's feeling of being a great power. They gave insufficient attention to the social consequences of radical economic reform, did little to put an economic safety net in place or to conserve functioning health and education services. As a result, during the 1990s Russia's population became less healthy and less well-educated – certainly not a recipe for economic success, not to mention the human distress thus caused. Russia's population fell more sharply than had been experienced previously in any industrialised country.[12]

The western economic advice imposed at such cost also failed, in a sensational and unequivocal manner. Through privatisation the Russian state deprived itself of a hefty

[11] Talbott, *Russia Hand*, 85.

[12] James M. Goldgeier & Michael McFaul, *Power and Purpose: US policy toward Russia after the Cold War*, Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003, chapter 5; Stieglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents*, ?**.

proportion of its revenue, and its revamped taxation systems were incapable of making up the deficit. The Finance Ministry and the Central Bank tried various devices for covering the shortfall: at first they printed money, generating runaway inflation. Then they simply stopped paying those dependent on the state for their incomes: pensioners, schoolteachers and doctors would be paid either not all or very late in inflated rubles, intensifying the social crisis and the discontent of most of the population. They began borrowing money from the IMF and the World Bank, and then from international money markets, though short-term bonds at high interest rates. None of this was sustainable in the long term without a radical upswing in the economy, which never came. The USA encouraged the IMF to go on making loans that were far more risky than their normal practice, largely on the grounds that Clinton "couldn't let Boris down".[13]

In August 1998 the charade came to an inglorious end: the government declared that Russia was defaulting on its debts. Overnight most of Moscow's banks became technically insolvent, and for the second time savers lost most of their deposits. Real wages fell by 40%, the ruble lost two-thirds of its value, and the proportion of the population living below the official poverty line rose from 20% to 35%.[14] Even pro-Western reformers now turned against Western advice. Deputy Finance Minister Kas'ianov told Talbott "We're not here to take exams or listen to lectures. If our Western partners had had all the solutions to our problems, we wouldn't be in this mess now, given how hard earlier Russian governments worked to do what you people told us to do."[15]

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[13] Goldgeier, *Power and Purpose*, 224.
[14] Thane Gustafson, *Capitalism Russian-style*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, 104-7, 175.
[15] Talbott, *Russia Hand*, 290.

Strangely, August 1998 proved to be a turning point in the opposite sense from what everyone expected in its immediate aftermath. With a devalued ruble, and relieved of the burden of expensive foreign loans, the Russian economy began to recover. It turned out that it operated better when not in the hands of western consultants. There were fortuitous reasons for this success, such as the rising international price of oil and gas, but all the same the experience suggested to Russian economists that they would be better off devising their own economic policies rather than trying to imitate someone else's.

The enlargement of NATO grew out of other Cold War ghosts. The western powers took a conscious decision to rate the security of the central European countries, up to and including the Baltic states, higher than reassuring Russia. Those countries were close to Russian geographically, and could not shake off the still recent memory of Soviet Russian domination; they distrusted Russia, feared its possible revival, and appealed to the west to guarantee their security. The western powers gave their feelings priority and agreed to integrate them into NATO. Russians recalled that Genscher had given undertakings in 1990 that NATO, having absorbed the GDR, would not move any nearer the Soviet/Russian frontier. But those undertakings were not incorporated into any written agreement, and the west chose to ignore them. The Russians felt not only threatened but betrayed, since on that understanding they had withdrawn their own troops from the very countries now joining NATO. Yeltsin and subsequently Putin felt obliged to accept NATO enlargement, since they could not prevent it. But it cast an extra shadow of distrust over Russia-NATO relationships. [NATO-Russia Council? Partnership for Peace? Institutions that became meaningless and impotent because the basic trust to make them work was absent?]

Trust relationships between Russia and the west, and specifically between Yeltsin and Clinton were subjected to their greatest test in the Kosovo crisis of 1999. It was sparked by persistent Serb campaigns of ethnic cleansing, climaxing in the Racak massacre of Janaury 1999. Attempts to dissuade Milosevic having failed, NATO forces began bombing Serbian targets. The west regarded the bombing offensive as an enlightened campaign to prevent gross violation of human rights. Most Russians, on the contrary, regarded it as a crude assertion of western, especially US, military might against a country which was a traditional client of Russia; some of them even regarded it as a trial run for a possible war against Russia. Their view drew conviction from the fact that the campaign had not been approved by the UN Security Council – where it was never tested, since Russia and probably China would have vetoed it. Besides, there was no discussion of the Kosovo crisis in the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council, which had been created specifically for just that kind of consultation.[16]

Yeltsin was caught between these two views. He hated to see Russia ignored and humiliated, and his first reaction was to berate Clinton for letting him down. Yet he wanted to continue cultivating good relationships with the west and personally with his good friend Bill. His attempts to persuade Milosevic to back down failed [evidence?**]. In the end he seems to have decided that Russia should help negotiate an end to the war, and if possible gain what it could from the settlement. That at least is a reasonable reading of his actions and statements. As an envoy he chose Chernomyrdin, who enjoyed close personal relationships with US Vice-President Al Gore and had considerable political weight as a former Russian prime minister. In the end Chernomyrdin was able to persuade Milosevic that Russia could and would not help him, and that he must therefore accept the western demands, including the

[16] Goldgeier, *Power and Purpose*, 253.

withdrawal of all Serbian troops from Kosovo and the stationing of an international military mission there under NATO command and without a specific Russian sector.[17]

The alternative Russia viewpoint soon made itself felt, however. Even during the vital negotiations the General Ivashov, from the Russian Defence Ministry, refused to sign the agreement.[18] On 11 June, as the Serbian withdrawal from Kosovo was under way, but before NATO had entered it, some 200 Russian paratroopers from Bosnia moved through Serbia, with the apparent compliance of the Serbian authorities, and took up position at Pristina airport. What they seemingly intended to do was to prepare the way for several thousand more troops to be airlifted from Russia and perhaps establish a Russian occupation sector in Kosovo. Whether the Russian military had agreed this secretly with Milosevic we cannot now know. [General Wesley Clark, commander of the NATO forces, ordered General Mike Jackson to block the airport runway. Jackson retorted "I am not going to start World War III" – or so he subsequently claimed – and asserted his right to refer the order upwards for a political decision.]

In the event the Russian troops proved to be helpless in their isolated position at the airport: intermediate states, under pressure from Washington, refused overflight rights for Russian planes to supply and reinforce them, so that in order simply not to starve they eventually had to accept food from British troops stationed nearby. In the end they agreed to leave the airport. The Russian and US defence ministries then reached agreement that 4,000 Russian troops could stay in Kosovo, without their own sector, dispersed in the US, German

[17] Ivo. H. Daalder & Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly: NATO's war to save Kosovo*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000, 168-174, 265-7.
[18] Talbott, *Russia Hand*, 325-6.

and French sectors, under overall NATO command, as had already happened in Bosnia.[19] Yeltsin later told Clinton that their relationship had come near to collapse at that point, "but even at the toughest moment we asked ourselves 'Should we keep working together?' and we always answered 'Yes'".[20]

9/11 brought a new period of cooperation and even watchful trust between Russia and the USA – whose campaign in Afghanistan and bases in Central Asia were tolerated, even welcomed, by Russian officials as part of the mutual 'war on terror'. At the same time, this new-found cooperation deepened Russians' bewilderment as to why the west did not approve of its own renewed war on terror in Chechnia, which Russians regarded as a purely internal affair, while the USA interpreted it as a human rights concern with international implications.[21]

The misfit between Russian and western world views also played itself out inside Russian society. Yeltsin had taken a certain pride in the relative freedom of the Russian media and the multiform diversity of social and political associations. President Putin took a different and less trusting view. He regarded information and ideas, also any organisation with the slightest political implication, as being directly relevant to the security of Russia as a great power. He especially attacked Western aid to Russian civil society organisations.

The Orange Revolution in Ukraine in autumn 2004 brought out unambiguously the clash between the two views of civil society and political opposition. The Russian-backed candidate, Viktor Yanukovych, won presidential elections which were almost certainly

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[19] Talbott, *Russia Hand*, chapter 12; Daalder & O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly*, 175-6; Goldgeier, *Power and Policy*, 263-5; Donaldson & Nogee, *Foreign Policy*, 262-5.
[20] Goldgeier, *Power and Policy*, 264.
[21] Richard Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's choice*, 2nd edition, London: Routledge, 2008, 280-9.

rigged. The pro-western opposition, led by Viktor Yushchenko, protested, and mass demonstrations in Kiev and other cities forced a judicial review and a re-run of the elections. Some of the protesters had been trained by international institutions in the skills of civic activism and financed through human rights programmes. Most western statesmen regarded the result as a triumph for democratic politics. The Russian government, however, and many Russian citizens regarded it as another crude assertion of western great power politics – and a deadly serious one. For most Russians Ukraine is really part of their own country, a large and important part; that it could be integrated into an alliance of alien and potentially hostile powers was unthinkable. One has to imagine how English people would have reacted in the 1970s if there had seemed to be a danger that Scotland would join the Warsaw Pact.[22] Putin's most vehement anti-western rhetoric came after the Orange Revolution.

The attractiveness of the European Union to the Central European and Baltic states was viewed with suspicion and resentment in Russia. The Union's insistence on the rule of law, the consolidation of human rights and the settling of ethnic conflict as a pre-requisite for membership came over as hypocritical to Russians living in EU member states Latvia and Estonia, who continued not to enjoy full citizenship rights if they had not mastered the Latvian or Estonian languages. In spite of this, there was not much evidence of effective Russian political mobilisation in those republics to demand their civil rights. This relative passivity reflected partly the lack of a Russian tradition of public political organisation, and partly the fact that, in spite of everything, most Russians considered themselves better off in

[22] Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine's Orange Revolution*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

the relatively prosperous and democratic Baltic states than in their ostensible homeland, the Russian Federation.[23]

Altogether by 2005 a basic misfit had become apparent between Russia and the western powers in their outlook on international affairs. Russians – not just their government – had come to view international institutions with profound distrust as having deceived them in both the economic and diplomatic spheres. They returned to a familiar Imperial Russian and Soviet diplomatic and military posture, in which one achieves security through the creation and assertion of raw power. In this view, one side's gain is the other side's loss. Win-win situations are not envisaged. This is close to an 18th century 'mercantilist' vision of international affairs, according to which the state has the right to mobilise all the resources of society. The economy, information, the media, science and technology are all viewed as belonging to the state to be deployed in great power rivalry. This is what Putin means when he talks of 'sovereign democracy'. The west does not have to accept the terms of the argument, but should at least try to understand what they are if trust is to be, slowly and painfully, restored.

[23] Eiki Berg and Alan Sikk, 'Ethnic claims and local politics in northeastern Estonia', in Risto Alapuro, Ilkka Liikanen and Markku Lonkila (eds), *Beyond Post-Soviet Transition*, Helsinki: Kikimora Publications, 2004, 165-187.