
Russia does not want another Cold War.

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MOSCOW. (RIA Novosti political commentator Dmitry Shusharin) - Authors who are critical of Russia's current political structure often write that the Kremlin has no proper foreign policy, or rather that its policy is so vague, anonymous, and insufficiently centralized that it can only be described as PR actions.

That view is shared by people across the ideological spectrum.

A few words about ideology. The system of government in Russia is based on clans - or tribes, if you like. We are witnessing a rapid development of an informal center of power based on quid pro quo and nepotism. Those who are creating that center pretend that Russia has a strong president because they need such an illusion to attain their private or corporate goals.

In fact, this system of government is making the president increasingly dependent on his subordinates, both as a group and individually. Moreover, this is a sure path towards a hidden decentralization of power, which will eventually become quite open.

Therefore, it would be logical to expect publicly expressed differences of opinion on foreign policy issues. This is all the more probable because different members of the government have different corporate and personal (economic) interests.

These differences of opinion seemingly became obvious after Russian President Vladimir Putin's speech at the Munich security conference and subsequent speeches made by top Russian officials. The news conference of First Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov (who was the defense minister at that time) differed from Putin's Munich speech in tone and essence. Soon after that, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said things that created the impression that Russia has stopped its advance towards another cold war.

A clan system of government cannot be stable. However, I do not see any internal contradictions in Russia's foreign policy. There is a simple explanation for the choice of less harsh words by the country's top officials.

Putin delivered a general foreign and domestic policy statement in Munich, while his defense and foreign ministers later specified Russia's foreign policy plans. However, the basic principles of Russia's foreign policy are quite solid.

Moreover, I would say that Lavrov's speech spotlighted the integrity of Russia's foreign and domestic policy. Commentators have noticed that he mostly appealed to Western politicians to ignore the opinions of the public and media about Russia.

There is no such thing as "public opinion" in Russia's current domestic policy.

The Russian authorities do not consider society as "a subject of law," which is demonstrated by changes in the electoral legislation (the elimination of the "none of the above" box on ballots). The West

has been invited to play by the rules of the current Russian state controlled by clans, and to talk exclusively with political elites.

This is a satisfactory response to the notion that Russia does not have a foreign policy. As a rule, that argument is used by those who are pining for a Soviet-type foreign policy, especially the Stalinist one. However, Stalin's style of foreign policy implied actively working with Western public opinion, and it was he himself who invented that method.

Stalin's strongest foreign policy decision was to avoid a direct military confrontation with the West after the Second World War because the Soviet Union was not prepared for it. Had Fidel Castro's revolution happened ten years earlier, the Soviet Union would not have had enough weapons to deploy in Cuba.

Stalin's response to the Iron Curtain was truly asymmetric: he established a movement for peace using his image and popularity.

Nikita Khrushchev, who served as Soviet leader from 1953 to 1964, was much more of an imperialist than Stalin, because he had a much larger military capability to back him. But his imperialism was much diversified.

Under Leonid Brezhnev, who ruled from 1964 to 1982, Soviet foreign policy was considered a collusion of elite groups, which made working with Western public opinion a mere formality.

Only Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union, serving from 1985 until its collapse in 1991, changed the situation with his "new thinking."

But Russia's current foreign policy is completely different. In the past few years, the Kremlin has not made a single global foreign policy initiative. Its actions on the international stage are reactive, not proactive, and so they do not need any ideological niceties, or even PR campaigns aimed at tilting public opinion in its favor.

Putin told Indian journalists before his visit to India that Russia was not seeking the status of a superpower. He was not lying.

Neither is it true that Russia is pursuing an aggressive policy in the former Soviet republics. These lies are being spread by the American intelligence community, which Russian commentators interpret as its response to the fact that Russia is getting back on its feet. I interpret this as part of lobbying for more funds.

It is true that there is a deliberate confrontation in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), an organization of 11 former Soviet countries, and with some former satellite countries, but this only camouflages Russia's refusal to influence the political development of the former Soviet republics.

In the past few years, Russia has not tried to establish effective pro-Russian political groups in any of the CIS countries. (The Party of Regions, led by Ukrainian Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich, is effective, but not very pro-Russian.)

What we see is a different kind of activity - in relations with Iran and its nuclear program, with Venezuela, which is buying Russian weapons, and in the Middle East. I explain this by the specific world outlook of the Russian political elite. They believe that while the

influence of the West, primarily the United States, is strengthening, Russia is retreating. At the same time, Russia is trying to maximally use the waning of American influence in some areas, or the growth of hostility towards the U.S., to step up its activity, both positively and negatively, as in the case of Belarus. Unlike in the Soviet period, that activity does not mean that Russia is anti-American or that it views the U.S. as an equal rival. This is nothing more than bargaining.

The only thing the Russian political class is bargaining for is the acceptance of Russia's political structure by the international political community, with the ensuing acceptance of the ruling clan.

So, there will not be a second cold war or struggle for the status of a superpower. Russia does not need this status, given the consequences of Washington's policy in Afghanistan and Iraq, Europe's energy dependence on Russia, and high oil and gas prices; another cold war would not be in its interest.

In principle, these are highly rational tools of foreign policy, a reasonable way to acquire a new quality as a subject of international law and a new identity. But they clash with the country's main goal, because a shrinking domestic legitimacy (especially now that the amended electoral legislation has minimized people's involvement in public politics) will increase the dependence of the authorities on foreign recognition.

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