Russian Culture and the Redefinition of Moscow’s Foreign Policy

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The collapse of the former Soviet Union has allowed Russian culture to play an unprecedented role in the definition of Moscow’s foreign policy. This new role reflects the changed relationship between Russian culture and the state itself, defines the way foreign policy debates are now conducted, and provides the basis for Western analysis of, and approach to, the new policies of the post-Soviet Russian state. In this essay, I want to explore each of these aspects.

Three Revolutions

Certainly the most world-transforming event since 1918, the collapse of the former Soviet Union had three major consequences for our topic here:

First, the collapse created a new Russian state with a new population and new borders, a development that by itself could not help but have foreign policy consequences by increasing the Russian element in both the state and its policies.

Second, the collapse discredited both the immediate political past and all alternative sources of value for the definition of policy, thus opening the way for the increased influence of bedrock cultural values.

Third, the collapse was accompanied by, and accelerated the rise of, mass participation in political life, a pattern that forced the new national elites to define political choices in terms accessible to the population at large. In the absence of any other set of values on which they could rely, these elites increasingly have chosen to articulate their ideas in cultural terms.

Each of these deserves separate comment; together they have allowed Russian culture to redefine how business is done in the formation of Russian foreign policy.

The most striking development is obviously the formation of a Russian state with a new population and a new set of borders. Even if nothing else
had changed, that would have been enough to change both the role of Russian culture and the direction of Russian foreign policy. Among the many aspects of this change, I should like to comment on three: First, the Russian Federation that has emerged is vastly more Russian than was the Soviet Union. While Russians formed barely half of the population of the latter and were never encouraged to view the USSR as uniquely theirs, they now form more than 80 per cent of the former and obviously believe that, however it is ultimately defined, the new state is precisely that. It is certainly more ‘Russian’ than any state based in that area for the past 300 years.

Second, Russia’s international environment has been changed by the sudden emergence of 14 new countries, many of them hostile, around its periphery. This has a triple significance. It means that the ethnic security map of Russian elites has changed: they simply must deal with new bilateral relationships that did not exist before, relationships that virtually all of the new states insist on having a national or even nationalist dimension. Then, because these states emerged out of the Soviet Union, their existence represents a challenge to the self-definition of Russians and especially of the national elites who had dominated that earlier entity, forcibly shattering what was understood as the barrier between foreign and domestic policy and forcing both elites and masses to articulate a form of retrenchment nationalism in order to cope. Many Russians find this shift in perspective difficult, if not impossible, to make and still view the USSR as their country in some sense. Lastly, because of the speed of this change and because of the possibility that this disintegrative process is not over - note President Yeltsin’s remark immediately after the referendum that ‘it is no secret that the country is gripped by a feeling of anxiety about the integrity of the Russian state. Will it share the same fate as the USSR?’ - the new set-up tends to undermine the traditional division of domestic and foreign policies. That in turn necessarily entails a broader impact for popular values and hence of national culture.

And third, the collapse by itself has shattered certain deep-rooted certainties among the population about its status as a world power and about its abilities and needs to prosecute any particular foreign policy. As one Russian scholar put it recently, ‘Russia ... remains a great power. This is recognised by practically the entire world but hardly by everyone in Russia itself.’ And, as we shall see below, this is widely discussed in all the debates now taking place concerning the future of Russia and the future of Russian foreign policy, two issues which now more than ever before are not separated by the participants and which are in fact two sides of the same coin.
The second major revolution, again one much commented upon, is the complete discrediting of alternative sources of value and the populist rejection of the ideas which defined foreign policy in the past. That the population has rejected communism at least in its earlier form seems clear, but what I have in mind here is something more radical. The Russian people and Russian elites have explicitly rejected the past political practice of the ancien régime, both its values and its steps, just as they did after the 1917 revolution, and that has left the Russian people in the position of a curious kind of Mankurt, to use Chingiz Aitmatov’s suggestive term. While breaking with the past at a conscious level, the Russians have had to find some guidance to direct their lives. Initially and during the period of post-collapse trauma, they sought these values primarily in the West. Now, having recognised that Western values are far from indigenous or even supportable in the Russian context, they are looking back further into their history and ultimately into their culture.

That attempt at a return to the past has three interesting aspects. First, any value that was attacked by the ancien régime has seen its attractiveness increase precisely because of those earlier attacks. Consequently, many ideas - ranging from the good, such as Russian Orthodoxy, to the frightening, such as the extremist Cossack movement - have taken on a new lease on life. Second, by their very nature, being both complex and imprecise on many issues, these values cannot provide precise guidance on how to act in the international sphere and that in turn has led to a kaleidoscopic series of shifts in the foreign policy positions of individuals, groups, and the state, as one or another cultural idea is explored and then incorporated in part or rejected. This rapidity in the ‘change of monuments’ means that culture will not necessarily provide a stabilising influence on the behaviour of the state; it may have just the opposite effect. Thirdly, this culturalisation of foreign policy, in the context of a culturalisation of all policies, means that the debates will take place in a language entirely different but just as valid as the language we are familiar with. What I mean is that we must accept these new debates on their own terms rather than reading them as but the latest ideological cover for older views.

The third revolution in this area involves the rise of mass participation in political life. More than ever before, the foreign policy of the Russian state must be articulated and defended in terms accessible to a mass audience and, as we have seen, that means in cultural terms. The discourses of scholars and diplomats in SShA or other journals of the past simply could not strike a chord with the population, but they did not have to. Now, given the enormous popular distrust of all elites - a distrust
almost worthy of the title of the old deviation ‘Makayevism’ - the political leadership is having to articulate its ideas in a more direct and accessible way. That explains a great deal of the way in which policy is now being formulated not only in the Russian parliament but in the Russian foreign ministry as well.

But there is another aspect to this problem which has generally escaped notice. That is the sociology of the situation with respect to national consciousness. In most modern national movements, attachment to cultural values *per se* has been moderated by the existence of a middle class that tempers these ideas with its own needs. Because Soviet policy did not allow the emergence of a middle class and thus allowed the intelligentsia to be the only and often unchallenged bearer of national values, the Russian state now confronts a vastly more radical intelligentsia in the original sense of cultural spokesmen than do most other states. In sum, the situation in Russia now with respect to the articulation of cultural values resembles that of earlier modern Europe as described by Engels and Cohen rather than the modern national movements we are more familiar with. For that reason, too, culture plays a much more direct role in politics than we might have suspected. And until a middle class does appear, the Russian political elites will have to seek legitimisation from these more fundamentalist cultural sources.

**Culture and Three Policy Challenges**

Russian culture, like all other cultures, is extremely rich and varied and cannot provide a direct, one-to-one guidance for policy formation. Consequently, we should be looking for tensions within the culture, rather than tenets, if we are to understand the impact of cultural values on foreign policy. I should like to suggest three such tensions - isolation versus involvement, East versus West, and a normal country versus a world power - that I believe are rooted in this cultural milieu and then suggest the complex ways these cultural tensions are played out in the formulation of policy approaches to the 14 former Soviet republics, Europe, and the United States. Again, my point here is not to find a magic key to all Russian foreign policy but rather to suggest the ways in which these underlying cultural values have an impact.

Like the United States, Russia has traditionally dealt with the world in one of two diametrically opposed ways: it has either existed in isolation from the world or intervened from a position of overwhelming power superiority. The tension between those who are interested in the cultivation
of a ‘little Russia’ and the protection of its unique culture and those who see Russia as having a special message to deliver to the world has already been present and is deeply rooted in Russian culture. What gives this tension special meaning now is that Russia does not appear to be able to either completely withdraw from the world - it needs too many things from the outside - or act from a position of overwhelming power outside. At the present time, those pushing for isolation argue either that it is necessary for recovery so that Russia can resume its broader role or that it is valuable because Russia should protect itself against contamination by the broader world. Those pushing for the latter also are split between those who see the reassertion of Russia’s role as curative at home and those who believe that Russia has a mission it cannot disregard. (It is not my purpose here, but certain obvious parallels between this Russian debate and the current American debate, parallels fuelled both by existential realities and cultural traditions, cry out for investigation.)

The second axis of debate with cultural roots is the problem of Russia’s ultimate direction and membership. Is it a European country with its face to the West, is it an Asian country with its face to the East, or can it find a unique ‘third’ way that both combines and supersedes the other two? The history of this debate over the past five hundred years is well known, as is its obvious resonance with the popular culture. Here I want to comment only briefly on its current form and on the spectrum of views it now embraces in the foreign policy realm. In each case, some of the advocates have made their choices on cultural grounds, others on prudential ones, and still others for narrow political advantage. At one end of this range are the Atlanticists, a group of people who believe that Russia must not only be a European country but one closely tied to the United States. (This group is in fact split between those who see Russia in European terms - the ‘Germanist’ faction of the Foreign Ministry - and those who see it more in the context of a bipolar world - the ‘Americanist’ faction in the same place.)

At the other end are the so-called geopoliticians. They divide between those who see Russia as an Asian or at least Asiatic power with natural allies in China, Turkey, and/or the Islamic east - the relatively smaller group - and those - more prominent - who believe that Russia has a special role to play by virtue of its geographical position as the dominant power on the Eurasian landmass, as a bridge and/or barrier between Europe and Asia. These groups too feed on deep cultural roots and not just existential realities. Traditionally, Russians have seen themselves as special and distinct from the West both by virtue of geography and as a result of religion. Orthodoxy looks east rather than west, and Russians have never
got over the sense of dispossession and being ignored by the West, which resulted in their being absorbed by the Mongols. This sense of abandonment has only increased in the recent past, as the West has promised but not really delivered on its assistance. And as a result, there is a growing sense that the West wants to see a weakened Russia or indeed a shattered one and that its ideology of capitalism and democracy is intended to produce exactly that.

But the most fundamental axis of debate, the one underlying all others and having the most obvious impact on Russian foreign policy thinking at the present time, is the question of whether Russia is a country like any other or whether it is a world power. If nothing else, the Soviet state gave the Russians a sense of ‘velikoderzhavnost’, a sense of being a great power and of having the right to a seat at the table on all questions of international affairs. That sense has been lost, with the consequent appearance of the sense of being injured and ignored. Even those who recognised that the Soviet Union had bankrupted the country by its overextended foreign policy approaches feel this sense of loss, of dispossession.

That sense is only heightened by the current effort of some national elites to talk about Russia becoming a normal country, a land of interests rather than goals. Such talk is profoundly offensive to a people used to being treated as special and to having its goals respected rather than its interests calculated. And it is especially offensive because any objective reading of the situation would suggest that while Russia is currently in a time of troubles, it has all the bases to recover and to become once again a great power, indeed perhaps a greater power than it was under the Soviets. As a result of this sense of injury, many Russians feel the urge to strike out, to ‘prove’ something to the world, and that too has cultural roots, albeit ones not unique to Russia.

How, then, do these three culturally rooted conflicts play out in the articulation of policy towards the fourteen non-Russian successor states, towards Europe and towards the United States? The situation with regard to the 14 non-Russian successor states is the most culturally dependent. Between one-quarter and one-third of all Russians in the Russian Federation do not accept the independence of these states as legitimate, seeing the former USSR as more naturally embracing the boundaries of Russia, and hence not accepting the boundary between the Russian Federation and these states as a dividing line between foreign and domestic policy. They have their reasons.

The tragedy here has deep roots. On the one hand, the Russian state became an empire long before the Russian people became a nation,
resulting in a situation where Russians never had to define precisely who they were and what the borders of their state should be and where the Russian state and its Soviet successor remained an empire of a pre-modern type with a centre and periphery rather than a metropolis and colonies. That has made the acceptance of the departure of the 14 far more difficult and in many cases impossible. And that explains both Yeltsin and Kozyrev’s push for a Russian-style Monroe Doctrine with respect to these so-called ‘near abroad’ states - who are not to be treated as wholly foreign - and the continuing discourse, most of it fraudulent, about the status of the 25.4 million Russians living in the successor states. (It is worth noting that more than 23 million of these people qualify already for citizenship of the new states, that only 50,000 of them have taken citizenship in the Russian Federation, and that only slightly under 2 million are in the indeterminate phase that has prompted so much criticism.)

On the other hand the Soviet system’s approach to the issue of Russians and non-Russians only reinforced this problem. While it treated all non-Russians in a purely territorial way - that is, non-Russians could exercise their linguistic and cultural rights only within their own national territories - the Soviet state allowed the Russians extraterritorial status - that is, their linguistic and cultural rights were supported regardless of where they were living. As a result few Russians learned the local languages and are having some difficulties integrating into societies they cannot or will not accept as foreign.

Indeed this policy area - where the lines between foreign and domestic policy are not just unclear for most participants but are in fact almost completely obliterated - is probably the one where cultural forces have the greatest and least limitable influence. And it should come as no surprise that these combinations often produce the strangest political bedfellows. Two examples will suffice to make my point: On the one hand the conservatives who could be expected to want to restore the empire often view the ‘near abroad’ as a source of contamination that Russia is better off without; while, on the other, many liberal imperialists insist on a forward, even offensive policy to prevent mass migrations and other kinds of conflicts that could threaten democracy at home. Thus, the strange situation where Daisichev supports the independence of the new states, and those around Stankevich want to restrict as much as possible.

The second ring of the ethnic security map of the Russian leadership and people concerns Europe. The way in which this map is drawn is affected by all three tensions described above. The sense of isolation and injury from the first, the sense of being different from or at least being viewed as different from Europe, and the sense that Europe now sees
Russia as a place to give a hand-out rather than as a partner or even a country feared and respected - all shape the Russian definition of its relationship to the Europeans. There are important cultural supports, therefore, for at least three positions: 1) cooperation with Europe against the US; 2) opposition to Europe in alliance with the US; and 3) withdrawal from contact with Europe in order to retreat into isolation or to build an alliance with Asia or the Middle East.

Culturally, Russians seem to accept that they are on the edge of Europe and will not be full partners in Europe any time soon. But they desperately want to be accepted as equals in at least an independent way or superiors who are respected and feared. Again neither is likely, but that, too, helps explain how and why Russian policy is being transformed.

But it is the relationship with the United States that has the greatest interest for us. Obviously Russians do not want to lose the sense that they are a coequal world power, that their ‘velikoderzhavnost’ is not only justified but recognised by the US. They realise that objectively they have the basis on which to continue to make this claim, even though, at the present time, they cannot exercise it. They remember, even if we do not, that Russia remains a continental power, like the US, and also, like the US, a non-European one. Indeed, as culture makes its comeback as an influence in Russian foreign policy-making, this may be its most important consequence.

**Our Response**

In coming to terms with these changes, we must make three fundamental changes in response. First, we must recognise this new role of culture in Russia and not attempt to view the cultural language as simply a cover for older policy concerns. Russia is more interested in Serbia and less in Latin America, not just because of the retrenchment of power but also because of cultural linkages.

Second, we must decide what we care about most. Our problem in dealing with Russia is that we currently have too many goals: democracy, free markets, stability, control of nuclear weapons, cooperation, isolation, and so on. We need to recognise both that our ability to achieve any one of these is limited and that for us to achieve all at once is impossible, regardless of what the Russians themselves do. My own view - but it is only my own preference - is that we must deal with Russia as a power and as a country and that we must be most concerned with its foreign policy rather than with its domestic development. It matters a great deal how
Russia deals with its neighbours because the assertion of power across international borders to protect co-ethnics could lead to war just as it did in the 1930s and the Russian denial of the reality of the independence of the new states - be it in the form of the CIS or some other idea - will preclude not only peace in the region but also the democratic development of Russia. Thus, the linkage of foreign and domestic policies is played out in another way.

And finally we need to treat Russia as a great power, as a country that matters, lest it strike out against us or others to 'prove' something. And, in doing so, we need to recognise that it is a great power of a new type, one where the elites are relatively less important than they were and where mass attitudes matter a great deal more. That puts a premium on non-state forms of communication, such as international exchanges and radio programmes, and means that we must work to change and refocus the culture of Russia so that its best elements will be the important and operative ones as Moscow comes to terms with its very new but very difficult task. It isn’t going to be easy for the Russians, for her neighbours, or for us.

Notes