

# RUSSIAN STRATEGIES IN EURASIA DURING THE 1990S AS A SOURCE OF PUTIN'S VISION OF THE REGION: LESSONS FROM THE PAST

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## Abstract

*The article analyses Russian foreign policy strategies toward the post-Soviet republics in early 90s. This paper argues that most of the initial political developments in Russia that took place immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union shaped Russian strategies in Eurasia for many years ahead and became the basis of Putin's policy in Eurasia today. This paper analyzes historical and documentary evidence in order to formulate a starting point for rethinking Russian understanding of the economic, political, and military influence vis-a-vis its immediate neighbourhood. The arguments presented in this paper could be used in analysis and understanding the logic, forms, and methods of the processes of Eurasian integration pushed forward by Russian government.*

**Keywords:** Russian foreign policy; Eurasian Union; post-Soviet States; Soviet Union collapse.

## Introduction

Over the last several years many scholars and pundits have associated Russian foreign policy toward the post-Soviet republics with more assertive and at times even brutal steps, pursuing Russia's goal of strengthening its key role in the geopolitics of the region (Mankoff, 2009; McFaul, 2016; Legvold, 2014; Galeotti, 2014, *et al.*). This policy is generally associated with the period of president Putin's ascent to power in 2000. To some extent, these conclusions about Russian behaviour are correct, bearing in mind that during last seventeen years we have witnessed a significantly turbulent period in the political and economic restructuring of the Eurasian region. This process was characterized by a series of dramatic political changes in Georgia and Ukraine, a number of sharp conflicts in the South Caucasus and Eastern Europe, as well as emerging regional integration impulses that resulted in the creation of the Customs Union and later the Eurasian Economic Union of Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan. Finally, the process of regional transformation has been influenced by the deep

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clash between Russia and the West over the Ukraine's political choice to side with European structures and associate itself with the process of European political and economic integration.

All of these dramatic events, in one way or another, can be explained by Russia's straight-forward regional strategy, implemented by the newly established Russian political elite that was brought in by Vladimir Putin. The charge that Putin's Russia represents an example of a purely autocratic political regime is quite widespread in recent international political discourse (Talbot, 2004; Hassner, 2008; Shevtsova, 2005). This idea exists in contrast to the an opposing view, which argues that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a more democratic state existed in Russia during the early 1990s, one that came about as a result of the liberal reforms of President Yeltsin and his team, which transformed Russia into a much more democratic country, one that was enjoying a real liberal economy and a number of vital political and social freedoms (MacFaul, Stoner-Weiss, 2008 p. 69). This paper argues, however, that the vision of a post-Soviet space promoted by Russian liberals in the late 1980s and 1990s differed only in little part from the views and beliefs of current Russian leaders, including Putin himself. Moreover, important attitudes about the post-Soviet space were simply adopted by the current political class from the liberal leaders of early 1990s. Hence, we may argue that it is highly unlikely to expect that possible liberalization of the Russian political system in future would necessary lead to revision of the current Russian approach to dealing with the former Soviet Republics in Eurasia.

The theoretical approach and methodology chosen by the author was based upon the principles of post-positivism elaborated by Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, *et al.*, as well as historical method of research (based on analysis and examining of primary historical sources and documents). Through an examination of the political development of post-Soviet Russia, author of this paper attempts to prove the hypothesis that Russian policies toward its neighbourhood are driven by Russia's perceived need to preserve its dominant position in Eurasia. These ideas and even some methods could hardly be an attribute of just Putin's current political regime. When one analyzes the last twenty-five years of Russian history, there is no denying that there is a great extent of continuity of such a policy from the very beginning of democratic reforms immediately after the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991 until today. This fact gives us a basis to assert that the current trend will continue for some time in future. The only differences we may expect is in the methods and instruments available under certain political and economic circumstances to reach that goal.

The paper consists of two major parts. The first part is primarily focused on the process of crystallization of a nationalist (nation-state) approach within the political spectrum of the late-Soviet regime in its search for a logical approach to interaction between the Newly Independent States (NIS) after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The second part examines and identifies the process of formulation



and implementation of Russian strategy of dealing with neighbouring states from 1991-1995, and its future impact on Russian understanding of its near abroad.

### **The state in transition and the genesis of Russia's post-Soviet strategy**

By the end of the 1980s, the USSR faced a deep crisis that resulted in ideological, economic, and political decline. All of Mikhail Gorbachev's attempts to reform the system using the instruments of "Perestroika" were not only insufficient, but also exposed some deep contradictions between centre and periphery within the Soviet Union. To overcome the crisis, it was necessary to rebuild all of the administrative principles that constitute Soviet state.

There were three major approaches to how to deal with Soviet political system, which was obviously falling apart. Different political groups supported all of these projects:

1. Moderate reformers, led by Mikhail Gorbachev
2. National political elites in the Soviet Republics
3. Conservative wing of the Communist Party, high-ranking security and army officials

The first approach called for a moderate revision of the Union; this approach—the transformation of the USSR into the Union of Sovereign Republics—was supported by Gorbachev and his team of reformers). This approach was based on the idea of a new form of agreement between the Kremlin and all the republics. The first version of the Treaty was ready by November 1990. On one hand, it called for equal status for new members of the Union, as well as the rights for them to determine independently their political processes and administrative functions, and their own social and economic policy. The Union's centre, on the other hand, would have secured control over the foreign policy, federal budget, army, police, and some other instruments of Union's administration. (Shubin, 2006, pp. 195-202). In other words, Gorbachev's project proposed to modernize the USSR by giving its members greater sovereignty and an independent status. Generally speaking, this approach basically met the needs of the greater part of the communist elite as well as the majority of Soviet citizens, 76,4% of whom voted for the idea of maintaining the USSR as a state during the March 1991 referendum (Lukashin, 2011).

Unfortunately, Gorbachev's model of modernization did not match the expectations of the newly emerging national political elites in the Soviet republics. This new political class gradually became the main drivers of political processes throughout the USSR. Representatives of national political elites supported the Nation-state approach of deep 'sovereignization' of Soviet republics, which, they argued, would lead to the establishment of *de facto* newly independent states under the umbrella of a less powerful centre. At the beginning of the elaboration of these nation-state ideas, supporters of the project were trying to reach an agreement with Gorbachev, asking for more independence within a new form of the USSR.



Regional elites exerted pressure on Kremlin, stressing the need for equal treatment of all the republics within the Union. Gorbachev recognized the more obvious demand for independence and was forced to follow a path that expanded freedoms (Shubin, 2006, pp. 211-214). Gorbachev experienced some difficulties to find a consensus between the federal government and the republican authorities, and to keep the formal status of the Union viable. The regional leaders, at the same time, were mostly concerned with expanding their power within their own republics. Sovereignization of the Soviet republics was seen at the time to be an integral component of the political reform process. A fragile compromise was struck in the new version of the Union Treaty that was ready for signing in August 1991 (Shubin, 2006, pp. 195-202). The ‘Treaty 9+1’\* unified the federal centre and nine former soviet republics on a *de facto* confederative basis that led to further degradation of the Kremlin’s influence. It needs to be stressed that the entire process of finding a new form of organization for the post-Soviet space was primarily driven by the political ambitions of newly emerging regional elites and their desire to concentrate more power in their hands. This was also particularly true for Russia itself (then Soviet Federative Socialist Republic of Russia, (RSFSR),\* led by Boris Yeltsin).

The Kremlin’s gradual loss of control over the political and economic process in the country provoked a serious concern within the conservative communist elite, particularly among high-ranking party officials, generals, and representatives of security structures, ministries, federal services whose careers and power would have been seriously undermined under the new circumstances when Soviet Union was about cease to exist as a unified state. At the very beginning of Gorbachev’s reforms, the conservative wing of Communist Party leaders, the so-called ‘*nomenklatura*’ were skeptical about the process of change of the Soviet Union’s statehood and status (Medvedev, 2010, pp. 306-314). Moreover, they were very disappointed of the fact that Gorbachev had made huge concessions to the national elites in the regions, under the new Union’s treaty. Nevertheless, even with these concessions in favour of republican independence only Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan was ready to sign the Treaty in August 1991. Belarus, Ukraine and other republics decided to make a decision in October-December 1991. It was not clear, however, whether they will be ready to sign the Treaty or refuse to do it just like it already did the Baltic States, Georgia, Armenia and Moldova. Such a perspective of Union’s disintegration was not acceptable for the conservative opposition within the Communist party of the USSR. They thought that national Republics should remain an integral part of the Union, which was stressed in the famous document ‘Address to the Soviet Citizens’ in August 18, 1991. Nationalist movement in Soviet republics was described as ‘extremist attempts to destroy the USSR and undermine the unity of soviet republics’

\* The Baltic States, Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova refused to sign the Treaty.

\* The Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.



(Shahrai, 2016, p. 828). All of this made the leaders of conservative wing within the Communist party to support political *revanche*, known as the August Coup.

The Coup supposed to prevent all attempts to revise the fundamentals of the USSR's administrative and political structure, as well as communist ideology. Using their influence in the army and security services, conservative elites tried to take over the political power in the country and restore the principles and constitution of the Soviet Union (Shahrai, 2016, pp. 829-831). The leaders of the *coup* expected to force Gorbachev to continue the process of discussion of the conditions of the new Union's Treaty with national political elites in republics to avoid the concessions in regard to the republic's more independent status (Medvedev, 2010 pp. 307-308).

However, the strong opposition of national leaders and widespread social protests, as well as the absence of a consensus among coup leaders, led to failure of their plans. Ironically, the attempts to save the USSR using military force resulted in the end of the old soviet communist system. The process of decentralization accelerated even more quickly than before the coup. There were several reasons for that:

- Gorbachev publicly proved to be unable to consolidate society and the elites to support his vision and logic of reforms. (Medvedev, 2010, pp. 151-153, 344-348).
- Nationalists felt that the moment gave them an opportunity to take the initiative and seek more independence and power within the republics.
- Communist ideology, which used to be a unifying element of the USSR, had become a symbol of the coup and an attempt to turn back the clock.

The failure of the August Coup also provided the regional elites a unique opportunity to consolidate society around the new values of independence and democracy, associated with gradual withdrawal from the Union's federal control. The idea of a Union of Sovereign States therefore became less and less attractive. Gorbachev was forced to make additional concessions to the regions. Finally, the Union Treaty gradually lost its attractiveness among the leaders of republics. In other words, they tried to establish a Union without the idea of real unification. On September 2, 1991, republican leaders and Gorbachev published a joint declaration in which, among other positions, was a recommendation to the Soviet Parliament to support the applications of the Soviet Republics to join the UN, with the status of independent members of the international community (Shahrai, 2016, p. 914). August of 1991 became a victorious moment for all of the political powers in the former USSR, which had supported the idea of independence, including Russia itself. During August-September of that year, parliaments in the Baltic States, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and other republics passed declarations of independence.

New circumstances forced then Russian leadership to rethink its strategy of interaction and to build the relations with newly independent states. One of Yeltsin's closest aides, Russian Federation Secretary of State Gennady Burbulis, prepared an important document "Russian Strategy for Transitional Period" also



known as “Burbulis’ Memorandum” where – among other things – was outlined the strategic vision of Russian foreign policy towards its neighbouring states. For the new Russian political leaders like Boris Yeltsin, Gennady Burbulis, Egor Gaidar, Yury Ryzhkov, Alexei Yablokov at al. independence and collapse of the Soviet Union was necessary in order to consolidate their grip on power and dismiss unpopular old soviet elite (Moroz, 2013 pp. 536-537). In accordance to the Memorandum, Soviet Union was seen as acting counter the interests of RSFSR (Russia), because of its functional role of redistributor of Russia’s assets in favour of the rest of member-republics. (Gorbachev, 2006, p.347). However, their interpretation of Russia’s role in the region kept many elements of old soviet times as Russia positioned itself as the only state that should keep all the privileges and obligations of the USSR i.e. foreign debts, property, nuclear status, position in the UN Security Council, etc. They expected that after the disintegration of the USSR, Russia inevitably would have the potential to occupy the central and dominant position among former Soviet republics. Burbulis, who at that moment have become a very influential political figure and one of the closest advisor to Yeltsin alongside with a group of Russian reformers who constitute the team of Boris Yeltsin were convinced that USSR was just a form of geopolitical organization of Soviet statehood that does not meet the needs of contemporary moment (Burbulis, 1995; Fillipov 2011, pp. 39-40). As this form of state is obsolete, Russia could take all the responsibilities and replace Soviet Union. For them, the return of Russia as a centre of gravity for the newly independent states was just a question of time (Moroz, 2013, p.535). The ideas formulated by Burbulis was very much welcomed by Yeltsin’s team and converted into the document “Russian strategy for transition period”, which had several versions, but very similar in substance. The strategy was mostly focused on the issues of Russian political and economic development, but also paid attention to the Russian policy in Eurasia. It was *de facto* the first formulated vision of how Russia expected to reorganize the post-Soviet geopolitical space securing the central place for itself.

### **From disintegration to strategic dominance: lessons from Russian liberal-democrats**

Boris Yeltsin and the leadership of Russian Federation were sure that the path of sovereignization for the Soviet republics was the best way to overcome the negative legacy of the past. This could not only give them a political power and influence within the new form of state, but also help them reorganize the ‘inefficient and collapsing model of Soviet governance’ (Fillipov 2011, pp. 39-40). In accordance to the above-mentioned strategy, principles of free market economy and democratic reforms, independent status of Russia would inevitably lead the entire region into the new form of cooperation. Gennady Burbulis and the other authors of the strategy did not plan to withdraw from the region; on the contrary, Russia aimed at remaining the only dominant power. The strategy received a status



of ‘classified document’ for personal use of small group of people to hide the real goals and intentions of new Russian leadership.

The Burbulis’s strategy was suggesting a “covert activity for initiation of joint economic community, where Russia inevitably occupy the role of informal leader, due to its geopolitical status, economic and natural recourse’s potential, without the influence of old Soviet political structures of the Centre [Central government of the USSR]. (Moroz, 2013, p. 535). To avoid suspicion from the other republics, and possible accusations in [Russian] hegemonic ambitions, at the initial stage (of functioning of the Community) must be executed the tactics of “shadow [moderate, informal] leadership”. Strengthening the ‘special status’ of Russia in the economic and geopolitical dimension. All this must be pursuing through the policy of ‘round table’ [formal equality]...” (Moroz, 2013, p.538).

In other words, Russian political elite led by Yeltsin wanted not only to concentrate all the political and economic power of Soviet leadership in its hands, but also to achieve the role of key regional player using some new instruments of market economy. In his interview on 2011 Burbulis stressed that when Yeltsin become the President of the Russian Federative Republic within the USSR only 7% of all the economic potential belonged to the republic, the rest 93% was under the control of the Union’s federal government and did not pay taxes to the republican’s budget of RSFSR. (Fillipov 2011, p. 33). In 1988 90% of all the soviet Republics except for Russia and Tarkmenistan had a negative trade balance and were subsidised in one way or another by the Union’s administration. Russia, however, was the greatest donor of that subsidies. (Gaidar. 2006, pp. 298-299). So it is possible to assume that Yeltsin’s team expected that after acquiring independence Russia will possess a significant economic and military power without the necessity of sharing of its potential with all the other Soviet republics. That is why Burbulis stressed in his Memorandum that after Russia’s independence it should communicate to the other Soviet republics from the ‘position of power’ and rely on its economic and military advantage (Moroz, 2013, p. 538). This could be seen as the very first articulation of Russia’s approach toward its neighbours. Later on it was converted to a systematic line of Russia’s foreign policy. Just as it acts under the Putin’s administration. In fact, Russia’s liberal elite of 1990s proposed not just a plan for the country’s political and economic development, but rather a new model of integration for the post-Soviet space after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The new principles of capitalism and free market economy were supposed to automatically redistribute power in the region, and eventually bring the role of new centre of gravity back to Russia. This idea received a second edition in the early 2000s by the new generation of Russian politicians. The only difference was that unlike Russia of 1991-1999, Putin’s administration had much more financial, economic, and political instruments to imply the strategy of domination in the region thanks to extremely high price of oil and specific form of political culture of his team.



However, the Burbulis's strategy was not aimed at replicating the USSR, but at crafting the path to the new form of geopolitical organization of the region, based on different ideological and economic principles. These principles could be converted into a formula with three major elements:

- Freedom from communist ideology,
- Political and economic independence of the countries in the region  
[disintegration of the USSR to avoid Soviet-style governance, redistribution of assets and resources among all the republics of USSR]
- Transition to the free-market economy and implementation of political reforms.

Implementing this formula in practice Yeltsin's Government led by Egor Gaidar expected to set up the new political and economic reality, which would allow him to build some new form and conditions of cooperation with former Soviet republics. The new conditions supposed to free Russia from its financial and economic obligations before the former members of the USSR and at the same time allow Russia to occupy the comfortable position of the most influential and powerful state in the region (due to its demographic, economic, and military preponderance). Afterwards it could be converted into improvement of international status of the Russian Federation on the global scene as a powerful player.

To achieve this goal, Burbulis' strategy recommended Russia to avoid attempts to get the immediate dominant status, at the same time undermining the role of Soviet Union institutions [supporting the process of disintegration]. "Russia should initiate the creation of new cooperative institutions for NIS, where Russia would *de facto* occupy a dominant position (in military and political sector, banking and finance, currency zone, energy sector, etc.)" (Moroz, 2013, P.538-539.). To achieve the proposed goals Burbulis and the newly assigned Prime Minister Egor Gaidar have pushed for an immediate series of economic and political reforms, which were meant to replace the Soviet system and bring back the functional form of Russia as independent and self-sufficient state. At the initial stage of the process of reforming of Russian economy and political institutions, Yeltsin and his team believed that Russia needed to ease the economic and political ties with the rest of the former Soviet republics. First, Russia should recover from political and economic crisis, and only after that restore of its sphere of influence on the post-Soviet space. "I am myself, and other colleagues of mine had come to the conclusion that we need to have a real Russian [independent] statehood... In case if we could not elaborate strong mechanisms of control over our own territory, our borders, finances, currency and taxes, we could not control the situation outside". (Gaidar, 2011). Following this logic we may conclude that control over the region after the normalization of the internal economic and political situation in Russia was one of the intentions in the minds of Russian policymakers of 1990s.

This may explain the rush to sign the Belovezha Accords in December 1991 with Ukraine and Belarus. The Accords in fact sealed the collapse of the Union and



opened the era of the Commonwealth of Independent States (a moderate and soft form of keeping ties between former members of the USSR, without taking any economic and political obligations) as a part of the plan outlined in the 'Burbulis Memorandum' discussed earlier. However, the hopes of Russian political elite for quick recovery of the economy and success of the reforms were ruined by the severe economic crisis and by the inability to implement a smooth transition from the socialist economy to the free market. However, the implication of Russia's strategy of acquiring the dominant positions among the NIS was not possible to follow because of the number of internal political and economic problems: disintegration of economic infrastructure, financial disorder, growing level of poverty, social turbulence, conflict in Chechen Republic, issues of separatism in Russian regions, etc.

At the same time political and economic situation in former republics of the USSR gradually became unfavourable for Russia. Despite all the attempts of Russian government to keep the influence and sustain economic and political ties via the new forms of cooperation under the umbrella of CIS, it was not possible. The Sovereign republics which also experienced a dramatic economic decline prefer to develop political and economic ties with partners outside the Commonwealth. We also have to admit a growing anti-Russian and nationalist movements in many former Soviet republics, which created some unfavourable conditions for any of Russian attempts to reorganize the regional geopolitical space. All this led to a gradual loss of Russian authority and influence in a region where it traditionally felt very strong and comfortable (Gaidar, 1998, p. 105-106. Vorobijov, 2013, p. 115). It proved that the initial Russian strategy toward the post-Soviet space outlined by Burbulis and Gaidar has failed due to the drastic economic and political circumstances and required serious revision. Economically and politically weak Russia at that moment was unable to formulate and implement any form of reintegration policy that would be attractive to the former Soviet republics. Moreover, the nationalist drift of the republican elites, which resulted in anti-Russian sentiments in the majority of former USSR republics, was seriously underestimated by the Russian policy-makers (Medvedev, 2010 pp. 380-381: Gaigar, 2006, p. 299-230).

Furthermore, some Newly Independent States began to face instability, ethnic and territorial conflicts, grown from the nationalist and revisionist policies of the governments, followed by the process of the nation-state building. Ethnic conflicts and border disputes - legacy of their Soviet past - became a major problem for republics of Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and Moldova. Even Russia has experienced a serious problems risking to fall into a violent conflicts in the North Caucasus and Tatarstan. All these crises required Russian immediate reaction, as it remained the only power with strong military presence in almost all the post-Soviet space. Russia had to deal with the issues of refugees, activity of criminal groups on its borders, Russian enclaves in former Soviet



republics, extremist and radical movements (Markedonov, 2010, pp. 31-34; Kavtaradze, 2005, pp.140-143).

The transformation of Russian doctrine was partly connected to the changes within Yeltsin's political elite and formation of strong of Military and so-called 'Statist' wings alongside with the economists and pragmatic technocrats led by E. Gaidar and G. Burbulis. The creation of these two wings of Russian elite coincided with the necessity for Russia to undertake peacekeeping operations in a series of bloody local conflicts in Tajikistan, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Moldova. At the beginning of its involvement, Russia did not try to use peacekeeping missions as an instrument of influence and manipulation on the post-Soviet republics. On the contrary, the early 90s was a short period of time, when Russia was eager to execute, so to say, an impartial and objective peacekeeping. The missions were almost exclusively focused on the tasks of prevention of clashes and of stabilization of the conflict zones (Danilov, 1999). However, these missions and Russian diplomatic activity have soon become an instrument of keeping strong informal ties with local governments and national political elites. Here we may find the very first signs of conversion of Russia's peacekeeping initiatives to become a useful tool of future Russian influence in the conflict regions. Exploitation of Russian military presence in the conflict zones on the post-Soviet space and the use of hard-power political instruments has become an evolutionary stage of the initial regional strategy executed by Boris Yeltsin and his advisers and policymakers. The process of elaboration of the new strategy, that included a stronger accent on hard-power and military presence in the Eurasian region took really long time and become articulated only years later, when Russian relations with the West passed through a serious period of turbulence tested by the conflicts on the Balkans [former Yugoslavia and Kosovo]. The analysis of the process and the influence of Russian peacekeeping activity in Eurasia, on its contemporary policy and Putin's reintegration strategies represent the separate subject of research that lays off the focus of given article. Nevertheless, we may assert that economic instruments of Russian strategy of domination in the region was gradually enriched with some elements of projection of power and military pressure on Russia's neighbours, so much criticized by contemporary Western politicians and experts.

## Conclusion

This brief analysis has aimed to show that the initial steps of Russian decision-makers in dealing with the legacy of the Soviet Union have become a strong basis for contemporary Russian strategies in Eurasia. The process of evolution of Russian policy and strategy in Eurasian region went through a series of revisions since the early 90s, but kept some fundamental principles and methods that were elaborated by the democratic reformers of Russia at the beginning of modern history of Russian Federation after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The level of analysis represented in this paper is just an attempt to rethink the role of



historical of factors in today's Russian policy. Based on such a background, the evolution of Russian strategies that constitute and shape the ongoing Eurasian project, supported and pushed forward by Vladimir Putin and other post-Soviet leaders could also be traced. Therefore, these strategies are not an exclusive product of contemporary Russian regime, but rather an attribute of the evolution of Russian political culture of late XX's Century. Having in mind the great degree of continuity of Russian policy in the region of Eurasia. It is possible to assert that change of the generation of political elite in Russia in future may not affect Russia's vision of the region. The fundamental change may come as soon as geopolitical and economic environment in the neighbouring regions (Eastern Europe, East and Central Asia, and the Middle East) will face some fundamental shifts due to internal or external factors. Only this may force Russia to rethink the logic of its policy in Eurasia alternative to the one that passed through its genesis during the 1990s.

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