



HAL
open science

Back to the Besieged Fortress?

Marie Mendras

► **To cite this version:**

Marie Mendras. Back to the Besieged Fortress?. Wojciech Konończuk. Putin's Empire, Stefan Batory Foundation, pp.137 - 151, 2007. hal-03394027

HAL Id: hal-03394027

<https://hal-sciencespo.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-03394027>

Submitted on 22 Oct 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Marie Mendras

Back to the Besieged Fortress?

Russia under Putin is a country that does not dream. Society has no great ambitions and keeps its expectations low. Elites cling to short-term, mercantilist and self-seeking ruling methods. Political and economic leaders have their eyes fixed on the March 2008 presidential succession and the consolidation of their vested interests beyond that crucial date.

In such a context, Russia's relations to the outside world cannot be open, trustful or productive. With no vision for the development of the country, how could there be a vision for Russia in the world? The slogans of "sovereign democracy" and "Russia for the Russians" do not bode well for the cultural influence and power projection of Russia abroad. This chapter aims at demonstrating the limits of Russia's new assertiveness in foreign affairs, with a special focus on relations with its Western "periphery" and Europe, but also underlines the potential dangers of Moscow's corrosive methods for our own capacity, in Europe, to deal with the complex post-Soviet legacy. The Russian leadership is not accountable to anyone or any institution. It is more prone to dictate the rules of the game, thereby undermining our institutional mechanisms and usages of consensus-seeking and multilateralism.

From better to worse: Russia and the West since 1999

Russia has long been in a Hegelian relationship with Europe and with the West. Modernisation in tsarist Russia was devised with a constant eye on European models and a desire to open windows to the more developed countries of Europe. The Soviet doctrine was one of hate and denial of the Enemy, non-dissociable from fascination and attraction to Western accomplishments and power. Gorbachev's reforms stemmed from a strong will to come closer to European standards and build a "common European Home". The West, or rather Western Europe, is the preferred Other; however, as opinion polls showed already in the 1990s, although Europe is perceived with more sympathy than animosity, Russians do not see themselves as belonging to it.

The paradigm that helps best understand Moscow's attitude today is the proclaimed "specificity" and defence against foreign influence. The two are closely linked. Surkov's "sovereign democracy" has been selling since 2005 as the recipe for reasserting Russia that would be free of any form of conditionality or dependence on Western partners¹. His concept was defined *a posteriori*, after Vladimir Putin had tilted toward a harsher foreign policy, which had undoubtedly been made possible by the rising oil prices and the recovery of Russia's financial situation in 2002–2003. At the Valdai conference² in September 2005, asked why he chose this combination of words and whether this was a concept for domestic politics or for foreign policy, Putin gave a complicated response that boiled down to the following: the concept applies to both spheres, meaning democracy

¹ Vladislav Surkov is Vladimir Putin's Deputy Chief of Staff at the presidential administration and his "ideology" man. See for instance his "secret speech" of May 2006, presented by Mikhail Sokolov on Radio Liberty on 11 July, 2006, and his 2007 booklet *Osnovnye tendentsii i perspektivy razvitiya sovremennoi Rossii (Main Trends and prospects for development in contemporary Russia)*, www.polit.ru/2007/01/23/surkov_print.html.

² The Valdai Discussion group meets once a year in Russia. The first conference gathered in September 2004 in Novgorod and Moscow. The group is composed of about 35 Western specialists of Russia, and, on the Russian side, members of the government, advisers to the President, deputies, experts, and journalists. An encounter with the President of Russia is the closing event.

at home, but *à la russe*, and equalling to asserted sovereignty in relations with foreign countries. One cannot go without the other. Russian specific “democracy” cannot consolidate if it is polluted from the outside, Russian power cannot rise if it lets influence inside, without any protection. At the next Valdai conference in September 2006, Vladimir Putin was asked the same question. Taking into consideration the fact that his guests were Western specialists of Russia, he answered with caution. He insisted that each term be taken separately, democracy pertaining to internal choices, and sovereignty concerning Russia’s national interest and independent position in world affairs³.

Specificity means “no interference”. The more one speaks of the Russian “path” and sovereign democracy, the more one wishes to confront Eastern and Western partners and distance oneself from their “values”. Hostility, distrust and, at times, aggressive positioning against neighbors and against the USA are closely correlated to a protectionist trend: protection against influence, against migrants, against values and against foreign investment in strategic sectors like energy. This combination of brutal assertiveness and self-protection is not paradoxical, but a clear sign of what Putin’s foreign policy is not. It is not an ambitious policy of re-conquest, nor a strategy of economic “imperialism” by energy domination. As Arkadi Moshes also emphasises in his contribution, the Kremlin is not “neo-imperialist”, since it does not want to continue to subsidise the former Soviet republics with cheap oil and gas. If it were seeking to re-conquer those countries, it would increase their economic dependence.

The rejection of influence is the red thread that runs along the chronology of Russian relations with Western countries since 1990s⁴. In the second half of 1980s and early 1990s, the momentum was strong, led by change at home and intensified cooperation with the West, on the basis of condition-

³ Notes of the author, meeting with Vladimir Putin, Novo Ogarevo, 9 September 2006.

⁴ Marie Mendras, “Russia and the West: to Belong or not to Belong?”, in Jan Zielonka and Alex Pravda, eds., *Democratic Consolidation in Eastern Europe*, Vol. 2, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, pp. 485–510.

ality: democratization and rapprochement, with Western support. Russia joined many European and international organisations, except NATO and the European Union, with which it signed partnership agreements, and with the exception of the World Trade Organisation, which it will join before the end of this decade. Many Russian politicians, experts and intellectuals criticised the “unilateral concessions” that their weakened country had to make to the more powerful Western partners. But their complaints were not taken very seriously, either by the Yeltsin leadership or by the foreign “protectors”⁵.

Three major turning points in Russia's policies occurred in 1999–2000, 2003–2004 and 2006–2007 (at the time of writing). In the aftermath of the dramatic financial crash of August 1998 and in the midst of Yeltsin's gloomy *fin de règne*, succession was the key issue amongst ruling elites. And succession did not mean only the replacement of ailing Boris Yeltsin, but also the protection of newly conquered assets and fortunes, and the consolidation of powerful networks. The pattern was set for future electoral cycles. Four years later, and eight years later, the stakes behind the presidential choice became formidable.

1999 was not only the year of Yeltsin's succession: it also was the year of NATO strikes against Serbia in the Kosovo war, and of the decision to wage a second war in Chechnya. The three events were closely interconnected. The NATO strikes in the spring were used by the military and the intelligence services as a good argument to go ahead with a second massive and devastating campaign in Chechnya in the autumn. Anti-Americanism reached a peak in official rhetoric and in public opinion. It receded slowly afterwards, but remained relatively high even after the September 2001 World Trade Center tragedy and the Russian support for “war against terrorism”⁶. Russia

⁵ See the different views and analyses in Vladimir Baranovsky, ed., *Russia and Europe. The Emerging Security Agenda*, SIPRI, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, p. 582.

⁶ Youri Levada, Marie Mendras, “L'alliance opportuniste de Vladimir Poutine et George W. Bush”, *Esprit*, August–September 2002, pp. 32–48.

and the Western partners closed ranks again in 2001 with the war against the Taliban, but relations could never regain their earlier quality⁷.

In 2003, on the eve of the legislative and presidential elections, Russia became engaged in the last struggle of pluralism and opposition against the one-dimensional reality of Putin's rule. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Yukos owner and manager, was arrested in October 2003, jailed and later sentenced to eight years of imprisonment; he will be sentenced to several more years after a second unfair trial to be held in 2007. At the same time, Russia faced the enlargement of the European Union by ten new Member States, of which three were former Soviet republics – the Baltic states – and four were former satellites of the USSR. Terrorist attacks made Russians feel more and more insecure. After the Beslan hostage-taking in a North-Ossetian school in September 2004, Putin's position hardened on the domestic and the foreign fronts.

The present time, 2006–2007, is another crucial period. We are observing a new decisive step towards what Lilia Shevtsova names "Imitation Russia"⁸, Michael Specter qualifies as "Kremlin, Inc."⁹, Arkadi Moshes gently defines as „post-imperialism"¹⁰, U.S. Defence Secretary Robert Gates as "a new cold war", and what I refer to as Russia's self-inflicted isolation.

Once again, the rise of tensions in Russia's foreign policy occurs during a pre-electoral year in the context of growing tensions and uncertainty about who will be the next President, i.e. the new power-broker in a system of consolidated political, financial and industrial networks headed by powerful government officials, FSB officers and cronies, and oligarchs.

By the end of his eight-year presidency, Vladimir Putin will have succeeded in spoiling Russia's relations with every single one of its long-time

⁷ Vladimir Frolov, "A Complex Relationship, *Russia Profile*, vol. 4, N. 1, January 2007, p. 47.

⁸ Lilia Shevtsova, "Imitation Russia", Carnegie Centre, Moscow, 2006.

⁹ Michael Specter, "Kremlin, Inc.", *The New Yorker*, 29 January 2007, available on www.newyorker.com/printables/fact/070129.

¹⁰ See his contribution to this volume, and his article "Prospects for EU-Russia Foreign and Security Policy Cooperation", *The EU-Russia Review*, N. 2, EU-Russia Centre, Brussels, November 2006, pp. 22–26.

partners: the United States, the European Union countries, both the “old” and the “new” (the former satellites of Central and Eastern Europe), and most former Soviet republics. As will be argued below, even relations with its “younger brother”, Belarus, have seriously deteriorated in recent years, with a peak at Christmas 2006 over natural gas.

Europe remains the preferred other, but relations and mutual perceptions have deteriorated

The Russian Federation and the European Union are two asymmetrical partners. Russia is a vast country, ruled by an undemocratic leadership, with a population that only 16 years ago was a Soviet population, i.e. had been raised in a particular relationship to Europe and the West. The national economy is growing, but not harmoniously¹¹. Relations with the former republics are complex, and not productive.

The European Union is a multilateral community of 27 states, with a complex institutional framework, an integrated economy, and a common European law. Each state nevertheless maintains its own attitudes and policies on many issues, one of them being Russia. Nine of EU Member States had lived under Soviet domination for more than four decades and have their legitimate concerns about Russia's uncertain future. Hence, the relationship between Russia and the UE may not likely resemble a traditional state-to-state relation. On the one hand, Moscow feels stronger because Europe is heavily dependent on Russian hydrocarbons, and because Kremlin does not have to care about consensus at home whereas the EU is constantly struggling to reach compromises in Brussels. On the other hand, Europe is Russia's major economic partner and the most stable and reliable neighbor. Europe remains the only main door to the West, i.e., to the industrialised nations. It would seem very unreasonable for Moscow to bring this relationship to a deadlock. But emotions and big phrases have been taking their toll.

¹¹ See “Russian Federation. 2006”, *OECD Economic Surveys*, OECD Publishing, Volume 2006/17, November 2006, p. 216.

Clearly, official declarations and media coverage about a less friendly Europe have had their impact on Russian perceptions. In a survey done in December 2006 by the Levada Centre for the EU-Russia Centre in Brussels, Russians were asked whether the European Union constitutes a potential threat to their country. 45% of respondents agreed, 37% disagreed, and 17% gave no answer. As sociologists comment on the results of their survey, “Russian attitudes towards Europe have changed markedly since the end of 1990s. In reviewing past research in 2000 by the Levada Centre, 35% of Russians believed that Western democracy and culture were destructive for Russia. This had shifted to 42% by the end of 2006”. Table 1 shows more details the Russian public’s attitudes.

Table 1. How is Russia seen by European countries? How are European countries perceived in Russia? (Respondents could select more than one response)

Russia is most likely to be seen by European countries as...	(%)	European countries are most likely to be seen by Russians as...	(%)
A source of raw materials	40	Neighbors and partners with whom to strengthen and develop relations	32
A source of technical expertise for Western companies and scientific institutions	25	Having a high standard of living	29
A place for profitable investments	24	Main trading partners	24
A country where there is no law for those who have money	20	Attractive countries for Russians to work in or emigrate to	23
An undeveloped, unpredictable and aggressive country	17	Centers of cultural and historical values	10

A neighbor and partner with whom to strengthen and develop relations	15	Potential aggressors united by the NATO military bloc	8
The home country of people who “throw money about”	14	Implementers of US policy on the Eurasian continent	7
A potential military adversary	12	No answer	16
A country from which unwanted migrants come to Europe	9		
A great power, with a rich cultural heritage	8		
A country controlled by the KGB	4		
No answer	12		

Russians see European perceptions of themselves quite negatively. Their perception of Europe is more positive, but the overall picture indicates the existence of a wide gap between the two worlds. The growing animosity towards Georgians, Ukrainians and other former Soviet nationalities must be understood in consideration of this dim view of relations with Europe.

The tactics of “weak sovereignty”

The image of the Enemy is unveiled in the next tables, which demonstrate the great distrust against former compatriots. This phenomenon is the natural continuation of the relentless demonising of the Chechens since 1999, with fierce one-sided television coverage. Terrorism was the first fuel used to brew xenophobic attitudes; “colored revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine were the second.

Table 2. Name five countries which in your opinion are close friends and allies of Russia

	2005 May	2006 May
Belarus	46	47
Germany	23	22
Kazakhstan	20	33
Ukraine	17	10
India	16	15

Table 3. Name five countries which on your opinion have unfriendly and hostile attitude towards Russia

	2005 May	2006 May
Latvia	49	46
Lithuania	42	42
Georgia	38	44
Estonia	32	28
USA	23	37

Putin has managed to make most of the former Soviet republics “enemies” in the Russian mind. The Levada Centre opinion polls give a strikingly distrustful perception of neighboring countries. The three Baltic states and Georgia are amongst the first five countries that are unfriendly or hostile to Russia, together with the USA. Amongst the five friendliest to Russia, Belarus comes first with 47%, followed by Kazakhstan (33%), Germany (22%), and India (15%). Ukraine comes 5th with only 10% of respondents who believe that Ukraine is a close friend and ally of Russia. With the exception of Belarus, Russians do not see any of the former republics as a close friend. And Belarus is an exception in yet another manner. Asked in a later poll whether Belarus is foreign or not (*Schitaete li vy Belarus zagranitsej?*), 61% of respondents reply that Belarus is not a foreign country¹².

¹² Levada Centre opinion poll, 30 January 2007, <http://levada.ru/press/2007013004>.

Interestingly, a majority of Russians believe that relations with Belarus have deteriorated in recent years and only a minority sees the relationship as “friendly” (8%), or “good-neighborly” (16%), or “warm enough” (10%).

The Russian-named “near abroad” is where domestic affairs and foreign policy become blurred. If the non-loyal Ukraine or Georgia behaves badly, then it should be punished. Russia will raise the price of gas, embargo imports and interfere in Ukrainian and Georgian affairs. And it will do its utmost to impede any resolution of the “frozen conflicts” in Georgia and Moldova (South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transnistria). The goal is to keep each of these countries' sovereignty weak, so that none of them can act independently in regional and international politics and economics.

The Russian public is being talked into putting all the blame on the neighbors and evading responsibility. What regular opinion polls have been showing since 2004 is that hostility towards Ukraine and Georgia has changed into animosity against the people themselves. Worked up by their media, Russians developed after the Orange Revolution an anti-Ukrainian, and not only an anti-Yushchenko, attitude. To most sociologists' dismay, they also supported the anti-Georgian campaign of the autumn of 2006. Perceptions of the Balts do not fare any better. In Russia today, “national identity” is being artificially and negatively constructed on the basis of distorted images of the enemy.

As Salomé Zourabichvili recalls, Russia's policy has not always been negative, which proves that there is no fatalism and that alternative policies exist. For instance, Foreign Minister Lavrov signed an agreement with her in August 2004, when she was his Georgian counterpart, about the withdrawal of Russian troops. The same can be said of Moscow's counterproductive policy toward Lukashenko's Belarus. Relations have been difficult all along, but they became much tenser in 2002–2003 and are at a deadlock in 2007. And when Vladimir Putin brags about his alliance with Central Asian states, he conceals the numerous tensions that poison Russia's relations with Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, to name the biggest states.

In fact, Kremlin feels threatened by any form of democratisation in countries of the former USSR – countries that might still be stopped on their way to Westernisation, i.e. NATO and EU membership. Domestic change is seen by Moscow as the main danger jeopardising the status quo. It is therefore vital to convince ordinary Russians that responsibility for the worsening of relations lay with the Ukrainians, and the Georgians, and all the others. If the “others” are bad, then Russians are right... The lack of accountability in Russian governance means the lack of responsibility for rulers and ruled alike. This is the most serious bias. The problem with the Russian ruling elites is that they are not accountable to anyone, either in domestic government, or in foreign affairs.

The image of the Enemy cannot agree with democratic trends. Polls show a strict correlation between attitudes to Europe and the West and attitudes to democracy. The EU-Russia Centre survey, monitored by the Levada Centre, offers an interesting, and very ambivalent, picture of how Russians view democracy. “Russian understanding of democracy, liberalism, freedom and human right is confused and often contradictory, and Russians appear to see little application of these values to their own lives. Some 65% of the sample were unable to describe what liberal democracy means to them”. Almost half the respondents, however, say that “Western democracy and Western culture can be benefited from a lot”. But the 2000-2006 comparison shows that the Western model is losing ground in the mind of ordinary Russians.

Table 4. Do you believe that Western democracy and Western culture...

	2000 April	2006 December
Are necessary, will have a recovery effect for Russia	2	3
Can be benefited from a lot	55	45
Are not suitable for us	25	30
Are destructive, pernicious for Russia	10	12
No opinion	8	10

Those findings echo survey data on Russians' "mirovozrenie", or "world-view", and distrust of most foreign countries. Such distrust is daily conveyed by government-controlled media and officials' speeches. Vladimir Putin's address to an international security conference in Munich on 10 February 2007 exemplifies the hostile and sharply worded discourse that the President himself now chooses to adopt when facing foreign heads of state and government. His Munich attack was mostly anti-American, but also strongly critical of NATO and the OSCE. Putin assailed Washington's "unilateral" and "militaristic" approach that made the world a more dangerous place than at any time during the Cold War. "The United States has outstepped its national borders in every way. Nobody feels secure anymore, because nobody can take safety behind the stone wall of international law"¹³.

He appealed to the European countries to counter this "unilateralism", but warned that new emerging powers – Brazil, India, Russia, and China – would take the lead. The tone was markedly cooler than in his diplomatic article of November 2006, published in several main European newspapers, where he tried to calm down European concerns. "Those who warn of the danger of Europe becoming more dependent on Russia see Russia-EU relations in black and white and try to fit them into the obsolete mould of 'friend or foe'. (...) The past must not be used to divide us, because we cannot rewrite history". His appeal appeared on the eve of the Russia-EU summit that failed to renew the Partnership¹⁴.

The dichotomic view of the outside world means that Russia has no friends. How can it hope to regain influence? Russia has no cultural, ideological or political appeal beyond its borders. What country in the world today would take Russia for model? Can energy be a sufficiently effective tool for imposing one's views and one's decision over organized states and a community of states?

¹³ Full transcript on www.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2007/02/11/118109.

¹⁴ Vladimir Putin, "Europe has nothing to fear from Russia's aspirations", Financial Times, 22 November, 2006, p. 13.

Here lies the true and deep contradiction of the Kremlin's strategy: distance and isolation, together with energy deterrence and confrontational policies, are unlikely to bring power, influence and radiance to Russia abroad. The weakest point here is the lack of vision for the future, a vision that would combine a project for Russia itself as a nation and as a state, and a project for Russia on the continent and in the world.

A partner that resists partnership

Russia has no allies. Russia wants no allies. We did not isolate Russia against its own will. Putin's leadership, supported by the diplomatic, military and intelligence elites, made the conscious choice of preferring an outsider's position to an insider's hand in a multilateral game. Russia wants to impose its own rules, hence defy our European usages, in the realms where it feels stronger: energy, security, control of the media and public opinion. It is not prone to placing trust at the heart of foreign relations. *Rapport de forces* and carrot-and-stick continue to be the natural method for many Russian government officials. It also tends to use one partner against another. It has recently put much emphasis on its warmer relations with India and China, presenting Asia as an alternative to Europe, in case Europe becomes too demanding. Asian powers will play a very significant role in Moscow's policies in the future, but they cannot in any way constitute a replacement to the partnership with the EU and with NATO. Furthermore, perceptions of China in the Russian public as much as among the elites remain very suspicious¹⁵.

Vladimir Frolov, director of the National Laboratory for Foreign Policy in Moscow insists that one of Russia's main impediments to more productive relations with the West and Europe is that it has never been a true supporter of multilateralism. The big exception was 1990–1995 (Kuwait, Yugoslavia), he argues. Frolov is sceptical about EU–Russia relations: For now, Russia's

¹⁵ Vladimir Shlapentokh, "China in the Russian Mind Today: Ambivalence and Defeatism", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 59, N. 1, January 2007, pp. 1–21.

relations with Europe in general continue to be best characterized as maintenance of the status quo, although they are occasionally irritated by small but important issues, such as energy security and unpredictable US foreign policy initiatives¹⁶. Fyodor Lukyanov, Editor of *Russia in Global Affairs*, believes the true problem in Russia's attitudes is psychological¹⁷.

Russia's behaviour is not framed in a well-defined blueprint with long-term goals. It is a day-to-day adjustment to new constraints and new opportunities, with the natural propensity to secure immediate gains and give little attention to the delayed consequences of today's decisions. It is often said that Russians are good chess players. Western governments tend to believe in this axiom, thereby expecting Moscow to always have ulterior motives and prepare their next ten moves. I do not see any sign of long-sightedness of the Putin leadership in its management of foreign relations. We tend to read Russia's intentions through our own rational lens. But a non-democratic government that is not accountable does not have the rationality of a democratic government. It does not need to abide by its words. Above all, it does not need to care about securing the population's well-being in 20 or 30 years. The new catchword of "Russia for the Russians" clearly closes the horizon beyond the very immediate present. What other big country would seriously herald such a protectionist and self-serving policy? Is not the Kremlin trapped in its own game of antagonizing partners? For Russia is an open country and will never again be a closed fortress. Soviet days and Cold War politics are over.

The challenge that Western countries are facing is how to deal with an ideocratic, closed-up, unaccountable and rent-seeking leadership. May we be forced to play by Moscow's rules as Moscow will not change its position in the near future, and we cannot disengage from Russia? Can we remain impervious to Russian methods? The key lies in a clear and cold-headed understanding of how and why Russia acts the way it does, and what we can expect from it. Moscow's emotional and artificially worked up attitudes

¹⁶ Vladimir Frolov, „A Complex Relationship“, *Russia Profile*, vol. 4, N. 1, January 2007, p. 47.

¹⁷ *Izvestiia*, 28 April 2006.

need not be met by equally emotional attitudes, either excusing Russia (“this old empire has been traumatized and should not be hurt in its feelings”), or refusing to go ahead with a difficult dialogue (“better disengage than lose one’s values”). More importantly, one should consider that Russia’s current politics are not fixed forever, and that alternative policies to today’s authoritarianism and self-inflicted isolation potentially exist. It is also up to the Europeans to keep options open, and work in their favour.