

COMING TO TERMS? THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AND ITS 'NEAR ABROAD' DILEMMA¹

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Abstract: The unexpected and rather peaceful disappearance of the Soviet Union had irreversibly modified the structure of the international relations stage, announcing, in the same time, the beginning of a new era. As for its predecessor, one of the most important variables of Russia's security equation is its new geography, namely its post-communist borders and, nevertheless, the type of relation it develops with the former Soviet republics. The present paper analyses Moscow's controversial role within the post-Soviet geopolitical assembly, emphasizing upon the tensions, but also the mutual interdependence that exists between Russia and its 'near abroad'.

Key Words: Russian Federation, near abroad, nationalism, geopolitical tensions, mutual interdependence

A geopolitical metamorphosis: from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation

When Gorbachev resigned, in December 1991, from his post as president of the USSR, the state that he was ruling ceased its de facto existence for at least a few months before.² The East European revolutions folded on the peripheral tensions of the Union's itself, amplifying the nationalist centrifugal tendencies, which were already extremely powerful.³ However, nationalist movements were not the single cause of collapse, although they were among the most important one. Cultural and social factors, like the attraction of Western ideas, habits, products, prosperity, the Western way of life, in general – opposed to the insipid, poorly and psychologically unbearable Soviet way of life – were highly important too. Economical factors, like the uncompetitive planned economy, the failures of which were endured exclusively by the society, constitute another argument for the understanding of the 'Leninist extinction'.⁴ In this regard, observing the relations between Moscow and its satellite states, Leslie Holmes's argues that the labeling of the Soviet Union as an empire could be a risky, even improper enterprise. In his own words, 'the USSR constituted a special type of empire'.⁵ The

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² Michael Beschloss; Strobe Talbott., *La cele mai înalte nivele. Relatare din culisele puterii referitoare la sfârșitul Războiului Rece*, Editura Elit, București, 1994, pp. 633-664

³ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Marele Eșec. Nașterea și moartea comunismului în secolul XX*, Editura Dacia, Cluj Napoca, 1993, pp. 129-140

⁴ Kenneth Jowitt, *New World Disorder. The Leninist Extinction*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1992, p. 249

⁵ Leslie Holmes, *Postcomunismul*, Editura Institutul European, Iași, 2004, p. 67

author stresses the fact that ideological considerations, like the “socialist internationalism”, prevented Moscow to ‘publicly exploit its “colonies”’. Therefore, this ‘special type’ of imperialism ‘had a negative effect’ upon the Soviet economy, because the USSR had to sell much of its energy resources at lower prices to its CMEA (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance) partners, due to the ideological implications - when it could have sell it, much more expensively, to ‘the world market’⁶ . The argument proves the overwhelming importance ideology possessed for the Soviet Union. But its appliance is limited only at the second half of the Union’s existence. One must not forget the brutal, Stalinist exploitation of the satellite countries, especially those of postwar Eastern Europe. Geopolitical factors, like Reagan’s combative approach towards the Cold War, which over-solicited the already dysfunctional Soviet economy, are also to be taken into account. Nevertheless, Mikhail Gorbachev can be considered the individual factor that led to the disappearance of the Union. However, none of these factors, taken separately, can adequately explain the event; only their combination can ensure to a greater, not certain extent, a comprehensive approach to the subject.

By the summer of 1991, the Soviet Union had already fallen apart. Even if in a referendum which was held in March the same year, about the necessity of preserving the Union, only six from the fifteen republics were against⁷, it is presumable that the other ones adopted an expectative, not necessarily pro Union position. Gorbachev’s struggle to preserve, at any cost, the federal form of the Union, became less and less feasible as the political influence of his former ally, Boris Eltin, was increasing. A last attempt of the conservatives to restore ‘orthodox’ communism, the coup d’état from August, failed, and Gorbachev was reinstalled in function.⁸ But, although ‘officially’ the General Secretary ‘regained its prerogatives’, ‘in reality, the things were changed forever. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (...) was fatally discredited (...)’.⁹ On the other hand, the coup allowed Boris Eltin, now an anticommunist politician, to obtain an enormous political capital, by condemning the party as being the main obstructive force of the reform process, while Gorbachev, now ‘a man exceeded by history’ , obstinately sustained ‘the indispensable role that the party will continue to have in promoting the reforms’.¹⁰ This ambiguous, even paradoxical position fueled the social and peripheral tensions and sealed Gorbachev’s political career. Even if, trying desperately to safeguard the Union, he suspended the party in the 24 of August, it did not make any difference: until the end of September, most of the federative republics declared their independence.

In October, KGB – the architect of the coup d’état - also ceased to exist. Gorbachev’s attempt to maintain even a confederative form of the Union, was simply ignored by the now independent republics. ‘The Soviet Union was now a shell-state, emptied of resources and power’.¹¹ The final blow came in the 8 of December, when ‘the presidents and prime-ministers of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus – the main Slavic states from the soviet empire – agreed to meet near Minsk and denounce the Union Treaty from 1992, practically abolishing the

⁶ Idem, pp. 67-68

⁷ Idem, p. 184

⁸ Tony Judt, *Europa Postbelică. O istorie a Europei de după 1945*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2008, pp. 598-599; Vasile Buga, *Apusul unui Imperiu. URSS în epoca Gorbaciov*, Institutul Național pentru Studiul Totalitarismului, București, 2007, pp. 106-119

⁹ Tony Judt, *op. cit.*, p. 599

¹⁰ Idem

¹¹ Idem, p. 600

Soviet Union. Instead of it was proposed the setting up of a Community of Independent States (CIS).¹² All what Gorbachev was left to do was to resign.

Nationalism against ideology and the dismantling of the Soviet Union

The ideological void which followed the USSR's collapse was quickly filled by a plethora of nationalist, even fascist beliefs.¹³ In fact, as Brzezinski pertinently argued, 'although it proclaims itself to be a doctrine of internationalism, communism actually intensified the nationalist populist passions. It produced a political culture impregnated by intolerance, by hypocrisy, by rejection of social compromise and a massive disposition towards the adulation of exaggerated simplification. In the conviction plan, dogmatic communism fused, in this way, with intolerant nationalism and even strengthened it; in the practice plan, the destruction of some relatively internationalist classes, like the aristocracy or the commercial elite, also intensified the populist disposition towards nationalist chauvinism'.¹⁴

The long and oppressive communist ideology revealed its fragileness as it tried to reform itself, in order to maintain the center's authority and the cohesiveness of the Soviet Union's mosaicated components. It even allowed some manifestations of 'localism' and 'narrowminded nationalism'¹⁵ in the more harder attempt to preserve the political architecture of communism. But it was in vain. Once the regime had irremediably lost the possibilities of *rational legitimation* (a functional economy, the improvement of the quality of life, decent social assistance services, etc.), and it started resorting to *passional, irrational types of legitimation*, such as temporary appeals to nationalism (like Stalin putted into practice when the USSR was invaded by Nazy Germany), or the eternal myth of the scapegoat, personified in this case by the 'imperialist camp'¹⁶ the regime unwillingly amplified, and finally liberated the corseted, peripheral cultural identities, which resulted into its tumultuous demise. In fact, the USSR's hermetical seclusion, despite its claimed internationalist ethos, was very much of daily occurrence. At least in the Stalinist epoch, the sympathies toward strangers, foreign cultures or foreign ways of life, could easily have resulted into prison sentences.¹⁷

'Geocultural nationalism' and the reorganization attempts of the post-soviet space. The case of Eurasiatism.

The revival of nationalism was accompanied by social and ethnic tensions all over the former empire. The long and oppressive communist ideology's failure to create a 'socialist internationalism' was best brought abroad by the multitude

¹² Idem. See also Vasile Buga, *op. cit.*, p. 140; M.B. Olcott; A. Åslund; S. V. Garnett, *Getting it Wrong. Regional Cooperation and the Commonwealth of Independent States*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Massachusetts, 1999, pp. 5-7; Michael Stürmer, *Putin și noua Rusie*, Editura Litera Internațional, București, 2009, pp. 107-108

¹³ James Gregor, *Fețele lui Ianus. Marxism și fascism în secolul XX*, Editura Univers, București, 2002, pp. 133-156; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *op. cit.*, p. 241; Ylia Prizel, 'Naționalismul în Rusia postcomunistă. De la resemnare la furie', in Sorin Antohi, Vladimir Timăneanu, *De la utopie la istorie. Revoluțiile din 1989 și urmările lor*, Editura Curtea Veche, București, 2006, pp. 504-538.

¹⁴ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Europa Centrală și de Est în ciclul tranziției*, Editura Diogene, București, 1995, p. 88

¹⁵ Bohdan Nahaylo, 'Nationalities', in Martin McCauley, *The Soviet Union under Gorbachev*, MacMillan, London, 1987, p. 88

¹⁶ Andrei Zhdanov, 'The two-camp policy', in Gale Stokes (ed.), *From Stalinism to Pluralism. A documentary History of Eastern Europe since 1945*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1991, p. 42

¹⁷ Svetlana Alliluyeva, *Tatăl meu, Stalin*, Editura Elit, București, 1998

of forms the powerful nationalist credo incorporated, spreading from 'milder', civic forms to organic, fascistic forms.¹⁸ Among them, Eurasiatism occupied a special place. Inside this new cultural climate, its rediscovery was almost unavoidable. Stressing the cultural uniqueness of Russia as a bridge between Europe and Asia and influenced in a great extent by Slavofilism and Pan-Slavism, eurasiatism appeared as an ideatical orientation of some influential Russian artists and scientists which were forced to leave the country by the Bolshevik Revolution (N. Troubetskoi, P. Surcinski, G. Florovski). Eurasiatists perceive cultures as closed geographical spaces, often placed in antagonistic positions. What they considered to be their greatest enemy was the "Roman-German" (European) culture: communism was an idea originated from the European cultural space which destroyed Russia. A very important element in the Eurasiatist equation was the Muslim one, which, paradoxically, is considered to have largely contributed to the orthodox Russian identity.¹⁹ Progressively, the movement divided as some of its followers begun to favor the Soviet regime because of the anti-European Stalinist nationalism and the Asian geopolitical orientation. Of course, the atheist component of the regime was still disregarded, but it was thought that in time, the USSR will create a geographical and cultural consciousness of the Eurasian space.²⁰

Neoeurasiatism, structured on the Eurasiatist legacy, also tries to articulate the post-soviet space around a cultural ideal, but without the preeminence of the Russian element, an error which proved to be fatal to the former USSR. Using nationalist themes and trying to avoid the recurrence of this mistake, Neoeurasiatism proposes a more inclusive thinking' and also 'a new form of sovereignty, both for ethnics and nationalities inside the (Russian) Federation and also for the peoples of the former soviet republics'. Until that 'new form of sovereignty' is achieved, Neoeurasiatist value, the contemporary strong Russian state, that Vladimir Putin had built and the degree of economic and social cohesiveness achieved by it.²¹ The main exponents of Neoeurasiatism are Lev Gumilev, Alexandr Prohanov and Alexandr Dugin.²²

Furthermore, the new cultural threat is that of "atlantism" and globalization, politically incarnated by the United States. However, unlike their predecessors, Neoeurasiatism, which happens to be one of the main ideological directions of the actual political elite from Russia, tends to be more pragmatic and occasionally collaborates with "atlantism" in geopolitical fields (the war against terrorism) or economic fields (massive energy and military technology exports).²³

To conclude that Neoeurasiatism is simply a fascist or fascistic movement would be improper, although it 'flirted' during the 90's with this kind of ideas and symbols (Idem p. 98). It misses the racial and the anti-Semite dimensions, which are constitutive for every type of fascism. It would be more adequate to consider an

¹⁸ James Gregor, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-156; Emanuel Copilaș, 'Between continuity and change: the resurgence of nationalism in post-soviet Russia', in *Revista Română de Geografie Politică*, nr. 2, 2008, pp. 69-71

¹⁹ D. Chaudet; F. Parmentier; B. Pélopidas, *Imperiul în oglindă. Strategii de mare putere în Statele Unite și în Rusia*, Editura Cartier, Chișinău, 2008, pp. 73-84; Paul Dobrescu, Alina Bărgăoanu, *Geopolitică*, SNSPA, București, 2001, pp. 132-135; Vladimir Maximenko, 'The russian-eurasian idea (Pax Rossica)', in *Russian Analytica*, nr. 6, 2005, pp. 5-15

²⁰ D. Chaudet; F. Parmentier; B. Pélopidas, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-89

²¹ Idem, p. 90. See also Emre Erşen, 'Neo-Eurasianism and Putin's "Multipolarism" in Russia's foreign policy', in *Turkish Review of Eurasian Studies*, nr. 4, 2004, pp. 135-172

²² D. Chaudet; F. Parmentier; B. Pélopidas, *op. cit.*, pp. 73-111

²³ Idem, pp. 109-112

endemically emanation of the post-soviet space, a 'geocultural' form of 'nationalism'²⁴, which 'discloses (...) the symptoms of a classic power politics, ennobled with a cultural legitimation, meant to serve an eminently restoring objective, as it being attested by the already fixed geographical limits of the empire which must be rebuilt'²⁵. Still, the new form of the old empire remains a much debated topic.

The Commonwealth of Independent States or the reconfiguration of the centre-peripheries relation

During the 90's, Moscow struggled to prevent the further decomposition of its geopolitical sphere. The Soviet Union ceased to exist, but its former territory, composed now from fifteen independent republics, was very much united by strong economical and logistical bonds. After the euphoria of independence had passed, many of the new states found themselves in critical situations. Long contained ethnic conflicts were reemerging, especially in the Caucasus area, their economy – in the absence of the centre's supplies - was dropping; not even their borders were not 'fully delineated'.²⁶ The new states faced enormous economic challenges. Some economic authority had already been transferred from Moscow to the republics before the breakup, but at the time of independence, the new national leaders did not yet know either their full inventory of their national economic assets, or how to assert control of them, since many of these assets were administered by people who's loyalties to the new political entities were dubious. Even if all potential sources of revenue could be identified, it still remained unclear how most of this states could meet their payrolls and social service obligations, since they had no banking system, and currency emissions had always been controlled in Moscow. The new states shared a single transportation and communication system, which had been designed to integrate the USSR, not to serve or supply its now independent units'.²⁷ But not the 'near abroad' alone faced serious 'economic challenges. Russia itself struggled to connect its exhausted and inefficient economy to the global market, but, at least during the 90's, it achieved a limited or no success at all. The causes were both external – inefficient economic strategies suggested by the International Monetary Fund²⁸, and internal, residing in a massive and destabilizing corruption.²⁹

This failure was combined with what can be called a geopolitical resentment. In the first years following the Soviet collapse, Brzezinski argued that the encouraging, even 'friendly attitude' of the West towards the new Kremlin leaders, along with their rediscovered 'Occidentalism', 'personally seduced them' into believing that Moscow retained its superpower status.³⁰ However, 'America was not inclined to share the global power with Russia and it could not do it, even if it wanted to. The new Russia was simply too weak, too devastated of the three quarters of a century of communist regime and too socially backward to be a real global partner'.³¹ The disappointment Moscow

²⁴ Idem, p. 169

²⁵ Idem, p. 190

²⁶ M.B. Olcott; A. Åslund; S. V. Garnett, *op. cit.*, p. 1

²⁷ Idem, pp. 1-2

²⁸ Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalizarea. Speranțe și deziluzii*, Editura Economică, București, 2005, pp. 213-258

²⁹ Vladimir Fedorovski, *Istoria Kremlinului. De la Ivan cel Groaznic la Vladimir Putin*, Editura Lucman, București, 2004, p. 179

³⁰ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Marea tablă de șah. Supremația americană și imperatiile sale geostrategice*, Editura Univers Enciclopedic, București, 2000, p. 115

³¹ Idem, p. 116

experienced translated itself into a reorientation towards its traditional geopolitical sphere and a gradual hostility towards the Western world.³²

The long intertwined history of Moscow and its peripheries, which was, beside economical, also demographical (many Russian communities were now living in the exterior of the mother country), was now obstructing the possibilities of a real and functional 'political divorce process'.³³ However, some analysts perceive CIS exactly in this manner. It's the case of Pierre Lorain, who argues that CIS 'had only the purpose to save the appearances and to keep the contacts necessary to solve the problems raised by the close economic, social and human interdependence of the new independent states'.³⁴ On the other hand, scholars, like Janusz Bugajski, believe that the new organism 'was conceived as an approaching mechanism towards Russia of the smaller and weaker neighbors, but also to prevent an eventually definitive departure of them from Moscow's orbit'. Inside it, 'Russia operates in concordance with a modified "Brezhnev doctrine" of "limited sovereignty"'.³⁵ My intention is to prove that the Community and, in general, Moscow's activities in its sphere of influence represents an osmosis between the above mentioned positions, although for the last decade, Bugajsky's analyses seems to be the more veracious one.

The Russian Federation is, just like the political entity from which it emerged, a multinational state. It encompasses around 100 different ethnic groups, from which, also like in the case of the Soviet Union, the Russian element is the largest and the best represented one. But its territorial dimensions, economy, military and nuclear arsenal and, to a lesser extent, its ethnical composition, all of these differentiates it from its predecessor. The creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States served mainly this purpose: to recreate the 'Moscow centre', but not necessarily in a brutal, despotic way, although this desideratum often manifested itself in an aggressive, even military manner. As we have seen, the Russian Federation and the 'near abroad' countries are economically, socially, demographically and, to some extent, culturally - deeply intertwined.

Reinforcing centralism: Moscow's renewed ambitions with reference to the post-Soviet space

"No one and nothing will relieve Russia of her political and moral responsibility for the fate of the countries and peoples which for centuries went together with the Russian state".³⁶ This statement was made by a president which, in comparison to his successor, Vladimir Putin, is referred to having deepened Russia's economical and political difficulties, while he was concentrating less or insufficiently on the peripheries of the former USSR. Putin came to power with the main objective to restore Moscow's greatness and its former geopolitical weight on the stage of international relations, using a 'multidirectional, balanced

³² Idem, pp. 114-134. See also Gilbert Achcar, *Noul Război Rece. Lumea după Kosovo*, Editura Corint, București, 2002, p. 34

³³ M.B. Olcott; A. Åslund; S. V. Garnett, *op. cit.*, p. 2

³⁴ Pierre Lorrain, *Incredibila alianță Rusia-Statele Unite*, Editura Științelor Sociale și Politice, București, 2003, p. 78

³⁵ Janusz Bugajski, *Pacea Rece. Noul imperialism al Rusiei*, Editura Casa Radio, București, 2005, p. 77; Mihail Ionescu, *O istorie trăită. Relațiile internaționale 1990-1995*, Editura Modelism, București, 1996

³⁶ Boris Eltin, apud. A Clesse; V. Zhurkin, *The future role of Russia in Europe and the World*, Luxembourg Institute for European and International Studies, 1997, p. 107

and pragmatic external strategy'³⁷; in the internal policy, he aimed to combine the new democratic system with a strong and functional state, able to meet the society's needs and demands. 'For Russians – Putin stated - a strong state is not an anomaly which should be got rid of. Quite the contrary, they see it as a source and guarantor of order and the initiator and main driving force of any change'.³⁸ Furthermore, he declared Russia's will to overcome the difficulties and also the practices of the past, the ones which, paradoxically, ensured its great power status. 'In the present world the might of a country as a great power is manifested more in its ability to be the leader in creating and using advanced technologies, ensuring a high level of people's wellbeing, reliably protecting its security and upholding its national interests in the international arena, than in its military strength'.³⁹ However, the reality is backwards: Russia maintained, even reinforced its 'diplomacy of force' and did not hesitate to display its military might in order to combat the centripetal forces operating at its peripheries. Chechnya, Ukraine, or, more recently, Georgia, can be offered as examples. Moreover, NATO's implications in Afghanistan or the American military bases from Central Asia, used to support the 'war against terrorism' and the Second Gulf War, were, after a short period of support, disavowed.⁴⁰ Putin also insisted that, in the new international context, 'patriotism', purified of its totalitarian excesses, was the most important value for his people. The Russians must be proud of their country's past and present achievements and they must sustain their government, the only force able to efficiently administrate the vast and diverse territories of the Russian Federation. This attitude was conceptualized by Janusz Bugajski as 'state nationalism' and its genesis was traced to the first half of the 90's, when, he argues, 'nationalism and etatism became important ideological and mobilization mechanism for the leaders of Russia'.⁴¹

It is obvious that Russia tries to restore its preeminence over the territory of the former Soviet Union, while the majority of the ex-Soviet republics, experiencing different forms of Western influence, wish and struggle for a way out from Moscow's geopolitical orbit.⁴² What is more difficult to observe is that the peripheries' wellbeing is conditioned, to a considerable extent, to the wellbeing of the centre itself. This does not mean that Moscow's excesses and its authoritative behavior should be overlooked; quite the opposite, they represent the main factor which strains the centre-periphery relations within the post-Soviet geopolitical assembly. But, apart from that, the Soviet economic centralism, which resulted into a 'countrywide economic complex'⁴³, the demographic and logistic interconnection of Russia with the 'near abroad', its capacity to ensure its security and, nevertheless, its cultural influences, are all

³⁷ T. Zakaurtseva, 'The Current Foreign Policy of Russia', in I. Akihiro (ed.), *Eager Eyes Fixed on Eurasia. Russia and its neighbors in crisis*, vol. 1, Slavic Research Centre, Sapporo, 2007, pp. 87-88

³⁸ Vladimir Putin, *Russia at the turn of the millennium*, 1999, the first important speech of Vladimir Putin after he was nominated by the former president as its successor, available at <http://www.geocities.com/capitolhill/parliament/3005/poutine.html>

³⁹ Idem

⁴⁰ Emanuel Copilaș 'De la ideologie la geopolitică. Relațiile ruso-americane în epoca ulterioară Războiului Rece', in *Impact Strategic*, nr. 4 (29), 2008, pp. 74-83

⁴¹ Janusz Bugajski, *op. cit.*, p. 17

⁴² M. Rywkin, 'Russia and the Near Abroad Under Putin', in *American Foreign Policy Interests*, nr. 25, pp. 3-12

⁴³ Mihail Gorbaciov, *Raport politic al Comitetului Central al P.C.U.S. la Congresul XXVII al partidului*, Editura agenției de presă Novosti, Moscova, 1986, p. 67

very important variables that should be taken into account by any serious analysis of the post-Soviet space.

The attempts to re-centralize the peripheries around the Russian nucleus can be circumscribed to a typology composed of five main dimensions. The *military* dimension consists in Moscow's attempts to control as much as possible the armies of the 'near abroad' countries and, especially, their nuclear capacities.⁴⁴ The Community of Independent States was intended in the first place as a prominent security and military organization. However, its functionality and also its relevance became highly questionable during the 90's, as 'most of the problems from which the CIS was created remain [even to this day] unresolved'.⁴⁵ To support the aims of the CIS, a Treaty of Collective Security was signed even from 1992, but not by all the former Soviet republics. The treaty was reinforced after ten years, under the name of The Organization of the Treaty of Collective Security, aiming 'to consolidate the Russian influence in the space of the former USSR'.⁴⁶ Still, the chances for the CIS to become truly functional in the future are minimal: they are undermined by the fact that 'the whole conception is too openly about Russian interests'.⁴⁷

Another dimension could be referred to as the *cultural-geopolitical* one. It resides in Eurasiatism and mainly Neoeurasiatism, an ideatic orientation which stresses, as we ascertained, the uniqueness of Russia as a cultural entity, influenced, but in the same time different both from Europe, but also from Asia. Experimenting diverse sub-tendencies, from organic to more pragmatic approaches, Neoeurasiatism is basically a geopolitical project wrapped in a rather ambiguous and contradictory philosophical discourse. But this does not mean that the Russian culture itself is not a very important cohesion factor in the post-Soviet space. 'Besides the West, Russia (to be exact, the language and Russian culture) are still the promoters of opinions, views, modern technologies, necessary in the process of modernizing the CIS countries. The Russian language is the language of business, of culture and inter-state official communication from all over the CIS space and this will remain unchanged at least for a medium term'.⁴⁸

The *economical* dimension is probably one of the most efficient means to obstruct the centrifugal tendencies manifested from time to time by the countries from the "near abroad". Speculating the energy dependency of this countries towards Moscow, or the incapacity to fructify their energetic potential on their own and preventing them as much as possible from cooperation with Western countries in the energetic sector, Russia is also highly present in the local refinement facilities, a fact which limits in a great extent the possibilities of independent economical policies of these countries.⁴⁹ However, it must be taken into account that the Russian Federation is the main and, sometimes single market for the merchandise produced in the "near abroad" countries.⁵⁰ It is understandable that most of the new states are hostile towards Moscow, yet, they

⁴⁴ Janusz Bugajski, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-78

⁴⁵ M.B. Olcott; A. Åslund; S. V. Garnett, *op. cit.*, p. 3

⁴⁶ S. Petrescu, 'Rusia în sistemul global de securitate', in *Geopolitica*, nr. 16-17, 2006, pp. 214-216

⁴⁷ Barry Buzan; Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers. The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2003, p. 411

⁴⁸ Viorica Cojocaru, 'Miza "vecinătății apropiate" a Rusiei', in *Geopolitica*, nr. 16-17, p. 281

⁴⁹ Janusz Bugajski, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-62

⁵⁰ Viorica Cojocaru, *art. cit.*, p. 280

'nevertheless need it'. On the other hand, Russia too is 'aware of these needs and concerned not to destabilize these countries'.⁵¹ Overall, the commercial activities with the peripheries, Bugajski argues, have a double role: they are used 'both as seduction weapon, through the subsidizing of different products and rolling material and also as a punitive mean, through total or partial interruptions of the deliveries or through the imposing of double tariffs on imports'.⁵²

Politics represents another key domain to prevent and contain the centripetal forces from the 'near abroad'. Russia tries, as much as possible to infiltrate the local governments with agents whose loyalties towards the centre are unquestionable and which will surely promote its interests in a satisfying manner.⁵³ Taking into account the lack of political experience of the 'near abroad' states combined with their economical semi-dependence to Moscow, the objective seems a pretty feasible one. However, the strategy is not always workable, as the political and sometimes social opposition's presence leads to tensions which interfere with Russia's political ambitions.

Finally, the last dimension of Moscow's recentralization of the peripheries effort is the *social-demographic* one. It consists in the 'exploitation of the ethnic divisions'⁵⁴ which the Soviet regime created or fueled during the last century, but also in the protection and the favoring of the approximately 25 million Russians living outside the mother country.⁵⁵ This situation offers the Kremlin leaders the possibility to legitimize the interventions in the 'near abroad' territories in an advantageous manner for the centre. Furthermore, 'traditional social, religious, regional and ethnic cleavages'⁵⁶ from the former Soviet republics are used in order to amplify the centre's influence upon the peripheries.

Concluding remarks: an inevitable mutual interdependence

The Eurasian space represents a unique geopolitical aggregate, inside which the Russian pole is the central one. An 'outsider' cannot be certain that he fully comprehends the profound economical, social, demographical and cultural intertwining of this space, achieved over many centuries of gradual expansion. The most frequent mistake made in this regard is to ascribe Russia the Western image and concepts of security, human rights or freedom and to vehemently blame it for not following them. But these ideas have a different cultural background. There is no such thing as universal solutions to the multitude of human problems and Moscow must achieve, of course, in the parameters of international right, its own answers to the 'near abroad' problem. However, these answers must not satisfy exclusively Moscow, but also the rest of the important actors from the international relations stage. 'It seems quite obvious that to turn the post-Soviet geopolitical space into an area of stability would hardly be possible without Russia – and even least so against Russia. But achieving this objective with Russia's efforts alone also seems doubtful. In other words, in order to pacify the turbulent heritage of the former superpower, it is of utmost importance for Russia and the world to act hand

⁵¹ Karen Dawishna, 'Imperialism, dependency and autocolonialism in the Eurasian space', in Ken Booth (ed.), *Statecraft and security. The Cold War and beyond*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 176

⁵² Janusz Bugajski, *op. cit.*, p. 63

⁵³ Idem, pp. 66-67

⁵⁴ Idem, p. 64; Olivier Roy, *Noua Asie Centrală sau fabricarea națiunilor*, Editura Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 2001, p. 274

⁵⁵ D. Chaudet; F. Parmentier; B. Pélpidas, *op. cit.*, p. 175

⁵⁶ Janusz Bugajski, *op. cit.*, p. 66

in hand; cooperating politically (and if necessary, militarily) seems a basic precondition for the success of the whole enterprise'.⁵⁷

When writing about Russia, Kissinger acknowledges that it 'has always been sui-generis – especially when compared to its European neighbors'.⁵⁸ However, present difficulties induced an idealization of the past and the will to restore its historical greatness, an aspect which proved to be dangerous, both for the 'near abroad', but also, to some extent, for the rest of the world. When referring to the Russian Federation from an international perspective, Kissinger argues that 'One of the key-challenges to the relations of the Atlantic nations with Russia is whether Russia can be induced to modify its traditional definition of security. *Given its historical experiences, Russia is bound to have a special concern for security around its vast peripheries* and, (...) the West needs to be careful not to extend integrated military system to close to Russia's borders. But, equally, the West has an obligation to induce Russia to abandon its quest for the domination of its neighbors. *If Russia becomes comfortable in its present borders, its relations with the outside world should rapidly improve.* But if reform produces a strengthened Russia returning to a policy of hegemony – as, in effect, most of its neighbors fear - Cold War-style tensions would inevitably reappear (my emphasis)'.⁵⁹

Finally, I would venture to conclude that the economical prosperity and the political stability of the former Soviet republics is highly dependent on the economical prosperity and the political stability of the Russian Federation itself; if it will succeed in becoming more attractive from an economical and cultural point of view, by transplanting some "soft power" elements on its traditional "hard power" structure, the relations between the centre and the periphery of this space might even get a chance to function in a more normal, less tensioned way.

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⁵⁷ Vladimir Baranovsky, "Russia's Priority: Organizing the Post-Soviet Space", in Armand Clesse; Richard Cooper; Yoshikazu Sakamoto, *The international system after the collapse of the East-West Order*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Dordrecht, 1994, p. 328

⁵⁸ Henry Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Toward a Diplomacy for the 21st Century*, Simon & Schuster, London, 2002, p. 71

⁵⁹ Idem, pp. 76-77

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