

## "Russia in Global Affairs"

### A Silent Cold War

№ 2, April - June 2006

News stories coming out of the Commonwealth of Independent States these days sound like reports from the frontline: Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and Kyrgyzstan are lost; Adzharia has fallen; Transnistria is under siege. Enemies have engaged in subversive activities in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and are approaching the gates of Belarus. Minsk is standing firm, but if it (God forbids) falls, the road to Moscow will be wide open. What kind of war is going on in the expanses of the CIS? Who are the combatants and what are they fighting for?

This war is a less menacing continuation of the Cold War that was waged by the West and the Soviet Union for almost half a century, and now entails a smaller space and a different alignment of forces. Obviously, the struggle between Russia and the West for Ukraine and Belarus is a direct extension of the struggle between the Soviet Union and the West for Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The support given by Europe and the United States to the presidents of Ukraine and Georgia, Victor Yushchenko and Mikhail Saakashvili, is the continuation of their support for Alexander Dubcek, a reformist Communist leader of Czechoslovakia, and Lech Walesa, a Polish labor and political leader. Russia's support for Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko may be explained as the continuation of the Soviet Union's support for Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, now described as Central Europe. Why didn't that struggle end together with the collapse of the Communist system and with the declaration of Russia a democratic and market-economy state, which is supposed to espouse the same values as the West?

#### PERPETUAL ANTAGONISTS

A person's behavior toward other people is determined by what kind of man he or she is. Similarly, the foreign policy of a state is determined by what kind of state it is. The nature of a particular society is manifested in its foreign policy.

The Soviet Union was "the world's first state of victorious Communism," and its foreign policy was determined by this title. Of course, all states seek to create a safe environment around themselves. For the Soviet Union, the creation of such an environment predetermined the victory of Communism in other countries as well. In pursuit of this goal, therefore, Soviet policy can be described as highly cynical ("the end justifies the means") as well as idealistic – billions of dollars were thrown down the drain in a bid to help countries like Angola "embark on the path of non-capitalist development." When it came to the security and survival of the Communist state, the "idealistic" and "egoistic" components of that policy were inseparable.

The policy of the U.S. and other Western countries was also dictated by their own nature. They also sought to create a secure environment for themselves in the world, which would guarantee their survival. For the Western countries – most importantly the U.S., a country whose sense of self-identity is inextricably linked with the system of values proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution – the struggle for national interests is inseparable from the struggle for the "ideals of democracy."

Both sides made compromises with reality, thus supporting nations that were ideologically alien to them yet still "enemies of their enemies." At the same time, the fear of nuclear war forced both sides to be cautious and speak of peaceful coexistence. In its last years, the Soviet Union had lost many of its ideals, was in a state of decay and did not quite understand what it was fighting for. It had completely forgotten about the "victory of Communism all over the world," and attempted to protect itself against old age and death, whose coming it felt somewhere in the depth of its consciousness, with missiles. Nevertheless, the Soviet formula about the "uncompromising struggle between the opposite social systems" correctly reflected the reality. The conflict between the Soviet and Western systems was really antagonistic, and peaceful coexistence could only be a "continuation of the class struggle by other means." The struggle was irreconcilable and would end only if one of the conflicting parties disappeared – exactly as what happened in reality. Today, Russia's foreign policy is necessarily determined by the nature of post-Soviet Russian society.

Now it is important to ask: What is the nature of post-Soviet society?

#### DETERMINE MEANS DESTROY

Russian society has nominally broken with its Soviet past and adopted democratic values. There is no serious and real ideological alternative to democracy, and it is doubtful there ever will be. However, this society is unable to live

in accordance with democratic values. It is recreating a system of “uncontested power” that is increasingly similar to the Soviet one but void of any ideological foundation. The post-Soviet Russian system is based on a profound contradiction between the formal and informal social arrangement – a contradiction which society has to hide from the world and itself (seemingly democratic and contested elections, the outcomes of which are generally known in advance; seemingly independent courts that pass judgments that serve the interests of the authorities, etc.).

As is the case with the U.S., the Soviet Union or any other country, post-Soviet Russia seeks to create a safe environment around itself, but the highly contradictory nature of Russia’s social arrangement predetermines contradictory requirements to maintain security. If we describe the social system in this country as “managed democracy,” then the dual components of this description dictate a different policy.

This camouflaged democratic system requires partnership with the West; however, its authoritarian and “managed” content makes this difficult. A safe environment for our system is an environment of political systems of managed democracies of the same type, which we actively support in the CIS and elsewhere, such as in Serbia, the Middle East, and even Venezuela.

The past policy of the Soviet Union might be described as quixotic – after all, why spend so much money in the name of “proletarian internationalism?” However, if an empire does not expand, it will dissolve. The same can be said of Russia’s policy toward the Lukashenko regime of Belarus: managed democracy in Russia will cease to exist if Russia is surrounded on all sides by unmanaged democracies. After all, it is again a matter of survival.

The West has to support the establishment of systems similar to its own, thereby expanding the zone of its security. Russia, of course, opposes these moves; therefore, the internal struggle in the CIS countries is turning into a Russia-West confrontation. Any opposition immediately looks to the West. At the same time, presidents do not want to jeopardize their relations with the West, because the West gives their regimes some aspect of legitimacy. But when there arises a threat of these leaders losing power, presidents like Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan, or Leonid Kuchma of Ukraine, never forget that they have an influential friend that will never betray them in a difficult time – Russia.

The Russia-West struggle in the CIS is a struggle between two irreconcilable systems, as was the struggle between the worlds of Capitalism and Communism. Unlike Communism, however, managed democracy has no ideological foundation. This system is based on a contradiction between the reality and the proclaimed principles. Thus, Russia must conduct this struggle covertly, without declaring its objectives or even admitting them to itself. The Soviet Union had a rich language of rhetoric to describe its policy, such as the “victory of Communism all over the world,” “international solidarity,” “peaceful coexistence of the two systems,” “peaceful competition between the two systems,” etc. Russia, by comparison, does not have, nor can have, such a language. Slogans like “Long live the victory of managed democracy all over the world!” are simply impossible. We cannot admit even to ourselves, or others, that our real goal is to prevent fair and unrigged elections, for example, in the CIS countries. But if there is no language, there cannot be well-articulated thoughts and strategies either.

Some of the reasons for our foreign-policy setbacks, and weakness in general, stem from the contradictory nature of our policy and the impossibility of adequately formulating it in principle (this requires defining our socio-political system, yet this is impossible since the nature of the system remains camouflaged). There is the need, stemming from the nature of our system, to pursue two contradictory goals at once: admittance into Western society, and opposition to the West whenever possible. Yet there are still deeper reasons for our failures.

## THE FATAL PERSISTENCE OF LOSERS

President Vladimir Putin once stated that the Soviet Union collapsed because it “proved unviable.” He is absolutely right.

Western democratic and market-economy systems, characterized by a constant struggle between political forces, can adapt to various kinds of challenges presented by a fast-changing world; they stand up to the challenges of this world.

The Communist system was viable at a certain stage of its development and for certain countries, for example, those with a relatively low level of development and cultural type, which prevents the establishment of democracy and the market economy. But this system, based on dogma, was organized in a way that soon made it rigid, closed and unable to adapt to a changing reality. The rapid expansion of Communism stopped at the boundary of the more developed world; its stagnation and decay was not far behind. This process was somewhat delayed by the rigid socio-political system, yet the system grew increasingly squeezed for the irreversible development of Communist societies.

Managed democracies are actually a soft variant of the Soviet system. They are not constrained by dogma, but they also lack free struggle between political forces. Furthermore, their political systems do not have a rotation of power, which would enable their respective societies to better adapt to new challenges. The lack of an ideological basis, and the inherent contradiction between form and content, make these regimes even more fragile and unstable than Communist systems.

Managed democracies are natural regimes in societies that have outgrown Communist systems, yet are unprepared to live in democratic conditions. These are transitional entities based on compromise on the way to real democracies. The development of society corrodes such a system in the same way – only faster – than it corroded the Communist societies. This is the main cause of Russia's present foreign-policy setbacks.

In the 1990s, immediately after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia experienced a series of achievements: in Azerbaijan and Georgia, the romantic nationalist and pro-Western regimes fell and these countries eventually became part of the CIS. In Ukraine, the pragmatist Leonid Kuchma replaced the architect of Ukrainian independence, Leonid Kravchuk, while in Belarus, Lukashenko took over the helm of government. It seemed that Russia was once again beginning to “gather lands together,” creating in its periphery a convenient environment, something of a kind of small-scale variant of the Communist bloc. Those achievements, however, did not result from a smart or far-sighted Russian policy, but rather from natural failures to switch to democracy made by countries that were not ready for it. Those were countries gravitating toward Russia and having regimes established by uncontested presidents. During that period, time was on Russia's side.

But the next decade was a period of setbacks. And again, those setbacks did not stem from mistakes but from natural processes, from the degradation of managed democracies. These regimes were plunging into corruption, losing contact with society, resorting to overt reprisals and assassinations of opponents, and generally losing the legitimacy to govern. The regimes continued to degrade while the normal societies were developing. Today, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan are much more ready for democracy than they were in the early 1990s. The wave of ‘colored revolutions’ has stopped, having covered the more developed societies and cleared the weaker regimes of managed democracy. The fall of the remaining regimes of this type, however, is only a matter of time.

It seems that Russia is doomed to failure because it seeks to check inevitable and irreversible processes; this behavior seems to stem from its nature.

The Cold War, which continues in disguised form, will stop only when Russia moves from managed democracy to democracy proper. If the structure of our society changes, then the entire system of our national interests will change as well. Russia's lingering problems will disappear by themselves, just as the victory of democracy in Europe removed many seemingly eternal problems. Of course, new problems will arise but we will be better prepared to handle them. But before Russia can proclaim any sort of a victory, new battles and new defeats are in store for us.