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Russian domestic reaction to the Russia-NATO Council and its consequences for Putin's pro-Western policy

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Many analysts agree that the creation of the Russia-NATO Council has left Vladimir Putin isolated at home, hostage of his foreign policy and security establishments, without qualified and willing people to make it succeed and with public opinion suspicious, if not directly afraid, of the Western threat. However, as recent events are showing, the future of the Russia-NATO Council does not depend exclusively, or even fundamentally, on Russian domestic reaction but also on the security policies pursued by the West, above all by the U.S. and the EU as a whole. These policies have implications for Putin's pro-Western policy at home. Depending on their nature they can facilitate or hinder Putin's ability to sell his foreign policy course internally. At present, they seem to be hindering more than facilitating Putin's stance among the Russian security and foreign policy establishment.

Perception of threats to Russian Security

The Security Concept of the Russian Federation approved in September 2000 leaves one thing clear: Russia is facing new security threats while the old ones still persist. At present, the primary dangers to Russian society are of an internal nature: the economy, terrorism, separatist movements, environmental degradation. In this sense, the Concept reflects what is in the minds of most Russians. According to the surveys undertaken by William Zimmerman between 1993 and 2000 for his book *The Russian People and Foreign Policy* (2002), 84% of Russian political and economic elites and 79% of the public perceive the failure to handle domestic problems as a security threat for Russia. The Concept admits that the lack of economic development is becoming a security threat: "Russia's national interests may be assured only on the basis of sustainable economic development". A weak economy undermines Russia's "ability to defend itself" and Russia's capacity to be a global power. At the same time, the Concept admits that "adverse trends in the economy lie at the root of the separatist aspirations of a number of constituent parts of the Russian federation". Putin's main priority for Russia is therefore economic development. He understands that only an economically strong Russia will be able to fulfil other ambitions. In this light it is easy to understand Putin's pragmatic reasons to seek rapprochement with the West, especially after 11 September, when the window of opportunity for closer Russia-U.S. relations was opened widely. Since then, Putin has made several relevant concessions to the United States: he accepted the deployment of U.S. troops in the Central Asian states during the campaign in Afghanistan and he put a good face on Washington's decision to opt out of the ABM Treaty and on NATO's expansion eastwards. Among the old threats to Russian security, however, the U.S. and NATO remain the most serious ones. "The desire of some states (...) to diminish the role of existing mechanisms for ensuring international security, above all the United Nations and the OSCE, NATO's eastward expansion, and the possible emergence of foreign military bases and major military presences in the immediate proximity of Russian borders" are cited in the Concept as fundamental threats for Russia in the international sphere.

These new and old threats make contradictory demands on the leadership. The economic development that Putin is striving for will mostly come from rapprochement with the West and to Western-led international economic organisations. Integration in the West seems, from this point of view, inescapable. This is however the same West that is considered one of the fundamental military threats for Russia, the same West that demands from Russia economic sacrifices on behalf of Western security needs (i.e. economic deals with Iran, Iraq and North Korea), the same West that competes with Russia for geopolitical and geoeconomic influence on former Soviet territory (i.e. Central Asia and the Caucasus). As a consequence, Russian foreign policy is unstable, sometimes even erratic, as if there were more than one. Putin is only partly in control, and his success at home depends as much on what he does as on what Western powers do. Public opinion is so far his strength, even on such a sensitive issue as NATO. The security and foreign policy establishments are his weakness.

Public opinion, NATO and the West

Putin is known for tracking public opinion closely and working to meet its expectations. According to all surveys, Russian public opinion sees NATO and the West as a security threat for Russia. The 2000 New Russian Barometer shows that 48% of respondents perceive the US as a substantial threat; 68% in Zimmerman's 2000 survey; 52% according to the 2002 Public Opinion Foundation survey. Following Zimmerman's 1999 survey, 65% of the Russian public and 59% of Russian political and economic elites perceive the spread of NATO in Eastern Europe as a security threat; 40% according to the June 2002 VCIOM survey, a bit less than in 1999, but still a considerable figure. Much as it may seem that this is a limitation to the pro-Western policy pursued by a president who likes to cultivate public support, there are many advantages on Putin's side in his struggle to maintain high popularity ratings. Public opinion supports Putin and Putin's foreign policy. According to a July 2002 survey by VCIOM, 73% of Russians approve of Putin's performance. This figure has been above 70% since December 1999. By a majority, they also approve of his foreign policy (74%), of the full support he gave to American actions against international terrorism after 11 September (77%), and even of his recent contacts with Iraq, Iran and North Korea (57%). Also, 57% think Putin

has coped successfully with strengthening Russia's international position (VCIOM, June and August 2002). If there were to be presidential elections now, a majority of Russians would vote for Putin (56%), followed by Gennady Zyuganov (10%), far behind Putin in voting intention (VCIOM, June 2002). There is no rival for Putin on the political scene right now. Moreover, despite popular consideration of NATO and the US as a security threat for Russia, a majority thinks that at present Russia should strengthen its collaboration with NATO, a figure that has been growing since 1999 until now. In May 2002, 62% were advocates of this collaboration, 58% in September 2001 and 45% in July 1999 (Public Opinion Foundation, May 2002). This is also true of regional elites. According to the survey conducted by ROMIR in September 1999, no matter how bad an opinion regional elites had about NATO, 78% said that the best option when dealing with NATO was to cooperate but not to join and only 11% said Russia should avoid all cooperation. The June 2002 VCIOM survey shows that although 40% of respondents perceive NATO expansion as a threat, nearly as many (39%) either do not consider NATO expansion a threat or think it strengthens Russian security. When asked about what Russia should do in response to NATO expansion in 1997, the Russian public was quite prudent, as Zimmerman has found out (2002: 189). In fact, the first wave of NATO expansion did not produce the adverse policy reaction Western critics of expansion had considered probable. At the same time, the figures corresponding to those who don't know about foreign policy questions is generally quite high: 21% do not know about the consequences for Russian security of NATO eastward expansion; 21% do not know whether Russia should strive to join NATO; 23% do not know how Russia should react to an American attack on Iraq (VCIOM, March and June 2002); as many as 60% do not know where the interests of Russia and NATO coincide or differ (Public Opinion Foundation, May 2002). All this provides Putin a wide room of manoeuvre to convince public opinion of the goodness of his policy. Popular support for Putin does not seem to put his pro-Western foreign policy at risk. If anything, Russian public opinion is on the whole quite pragmatic about the rapprochement with NATO: even if they are not happy about it, they see it as a necessary step given the present conditions for Russia in the international sphere. Just as Putin does (or precisely, why Putin does?). As Zimmerman has concluded after a careful analysis of Russian people and foreign policy: "Whatever the role of mass publics in Russian foreign policy making, it has not been one that increased the likelihood of Russian foreign policy risk-taking in response to NATO actions" (2002: 213).

The relevance of public opinion does not, to be sure, rest on its ability to influence in a direct way the foreign policy decisions of the political leadership. After all, the fate of ministers and high-ranking officials in Russia depends almost exclusively on the will of the president. However, who the president is depends increasingly on the will of the people. Putin knows it, and this is why he cherishes public opinion. Therefore, Putin now needs to sell his rapprochement with NATO to the Russian public. Given his popularity ratings and the public support for his foreign policy, he is in a good position to get people to trust him on this. The only obstacle could come from the fact that Russians perceive NATO as a security threat. Putin must therefore convince them that NATO is not a threat for Russia. He can do this by showing the Russian public the possible advantages of closer relations with NATO and the West. Some of these advantages are directly appealing for the Russian public: NATO could help Russia with its much needed military reform (in fact, the decay of the Russian military is such that it is becoming a security threat for its own people); cooperation with NATO and the US would help Russia to fight international terrorism around its borders; a good relationship with NATO, based on mutual confidence, would allow Russia to free up military resources to fight other more pressing threats, such as the southern and eastern borders. Moreover, since closer ties with NATO imply closer ties with the West in general, Russia could get support to develop its economy and facilitate one of the country's priorities, the international integration of the Russian economy (Security Concept, 2000).

Nevertheless, all the possible advantages of cooperating and getting closer to NATO will not be credible for the Russian public unless NATO gives Putin something to present at home. US unilateralism in the international arena since 11 September and its determination to attack Iraq is not helping Putin much in the direction of confidence-building towards NATO among the Russian people. Russian public opinion is highly volatile over foreign policy issues. Particular events can have a big, although transient, effect on its mood. Until 1997 the Russian public was surprisingly unaware of the NATO issue, as various surveys demonstrate (Zimmerman, 2002; ROMIR, 1997). This could be the reason why they responded prudently to NATO's first eastward expansion. It was only after the bombing of Serbia in 1999 that concern about NATO was evident among Russians (Zimmerman, 2002) and that anti-American and anti-Western attitudes began to spread. The Serbia effect has been waning over time, especially after the attacks of 11 September on US soil and the formation of an anti-terrorist international coalition. However, a unilateral attack on Iraq by the US could take things back to where they were in 1999 for Russian public opinion on NATO. In fact, asked about an eventual US attack on Iraq, 53% of respondents to a VCIOM survey (August 2002) show themselves against it while 27% approve. Furthermore, only 1% thinks Russia should participate in the attack and only 14% think Russia should support the attack but not participate. The survey also shows that 42% of respondents, a clear majority, believe that Russia should stay on the sidelines, but remain an ally of US in the anti-terrorist coalition -again, a prudent reaction. Pragmatism seems to guide the Russian public, much in consonance with Putin's foreign policy during the last year. Pragmatism, however, is a conjectural factor, not built upon confidence, and for the Russia-NATO Council to have supporters inside Russia, confidence-building is in the long term more important than context-bounded pragmatism. The NATO Prague summit next November offers the best opportunity to start in this direction.

Opposition in the foreign policy and security establishments

Putin's wish to cooperate with NATO is not widely shared by the foreign and defence officials he will have to rely on to make the whole thing work. The 2000 Security Concept, which guides Russian defence policy and military strategy, considers NATO a security threat and, therefore, an organisation against which Russia should defend itself. The Concept perceives NATO as using force freely and believes that NATO would not hesitate to use force against Russia over political disagreements. Moreover, the Concept recognises Russia's weakened conventional forces, unable to resist a large-scale conventional attack by NATO. True, the Concept was influenced by the threatening

events of previous years, beginning with NATO expansion and followed by Western criticism of Russia's military campaign in Chechnya and by the NATO attacks against Serbia. The situation after 11 September changed considerably in this respect. After the anti-terrorist international coalition was forged, Putin repeatedly declared in public that NATO was not a threat for Russia anymore, that the relations between Russia and NATO should be perceived more like allies than enemies. However, the President's declarations have not been enough to counteract resistance inside the military. As a matter of fact, Putin's siding with the West is not backed by a credibly pro-Western military strategy. For the military, NATO is still a potential adversary. To change this would imply changing many cherished things in the military establishment, such as the size and organisation of the army (conscription as opposed to a professional army), or the excess of generals, and removing the last obstacles to reform. The defence minister Sergey Ivanov seems to be siding with the generals' interests in everything concerned with the reform of the military and with relations with the West. Disagreements between minister Ivanov and Putin are becoming evident, despite the fact that Ivanov was, when appointed, Putin's man of confidence. Their public statements are increasingly dissonant. When Ivanov says that "the appearance of new NATO members in Europe, not subject to the existing arms control measures, will have a disastrous effect on the framework of treaties in general", Putin declares that "preventing Estonia's membership of NATO would be incorrect tactically and strategically. If Estonia wants that, let it join NATO". They have also disagreed publicly on how much to support the US after 11 September. More worryingly, on 6 June, Ivanov declared that Russia was refusing to participate in NATO's autumn summit in Prague "on account of its disagreement over the expansion of the Alliance". At the first session of the Russia-NATO Council Ivanov warned: "I ask you not to be deluded into expecting breakthrough, epoch-making decisions or anything like that. This is like starting first grade at school for the first time." Scepticism and mistrust are widespread among the security establishment. Putin can of course launch foreign policy decisions without the support of these establishments. He has no political rival and the regime he has established in Russia provides him with a docile press and a docile, even supportive (with few exceptions), parliament. However, Putin will not be able to force the correct implementation of his decisions. The generals may try to sabotage his new relations with NATO, much as they have done with the implementation of military reforms.

Conclusion

Putin has only two choices ahead: he must either convince the foreign and security establishments that NATO is not a military threat for Russia anymore or purge these bodies of its most recalcitrant officials. The first one is difficult and slow. The second one could be politically risky for him. Convincing the foreign policy and security establishments that NATO is not a threat is something Putin cannot do alone. NATO's next eastward expansion leaves many things uncertain: will the new members deploy the military structures of other countries on their territory? Will they make their territory available for the deployment of nuclear weapons? Will they comply with the treaty on conventional weapons in Europe? Questions like these make the Russian military suspicious about the non-threatening character of NATO expansion. Therefore they tend to see the new Russia-NATO Council as a phony attempt to establish a true partnership. This perception is strengthened by the Alliance's closer contacts with other post-Soviet countries and its lack of control over US unilateralism. Confidence-building measures among NATO and Russia are therefore of utmost importance to set this relationship on the right track. Concerning expansion, NATO should be able to attend to Russia's legitimate sensitivities. And it should also be able to collaborate with Russia in the Caucasus and Central Asia rather than engage in geopolitical competition. This would make things easier for Putin at home. Putin's striving for Russia's economic recovery makes it unlikely that he will change his mind about the need for close ties with NATO and the West. He might on the other hand make tactical moves in order to press the West into delivering the benefits he seeks and to silence internal opposition. We, as members of NATO, should be able to distinguish between tactical moves and a change of strategy, and act accordingly. The stakes are high for European security.

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