

## **Handout C: The Russian alternative**

### **Russian-Western relations in the post-Soviet era**

During its post-communist transition in the 1990s, Russia moved towards a capitalist economic model and a democratic political regime. At the same time, Russia took many steps towards integration with the West, including joining NATO's Partnership for Peace programme in 1994 and the Council of Europe – a regional intergovernmental organization with the stated goals of promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in Europe – in 1996. In 1997, a Partnership and Cooperation agreement between Russia and the European Union entered into force. This agreement was designed to increase political dialogue, stimulate economic liberalization, and improve cooperation in the social, cultural, and technological fields. This was followed by the creation of four “Common Spaces” – Economic, Cultural & Technologic, External Security, and Freedom, Security, & Justice – that were areas where greater EU-Russia cooperation was encouraged.

On December 31, 1999, Boris Yeltsin, the first president of the Russian Federation, stepped down and named Vladimir Putin as his temporary replacement. Putin went on to win the elections in 2000, cemented his control over Russian politics, and remains in power today. Cooperation on counter-terrorism and security became an important element of the relationship between Russia and the West in the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks, terrorist activity in Chechnya and the war in Afghanistan. Despite these initiatives, greater cooperation was stymied in part because the Russian leadership perceived that the Western world was not treating Russia as an equal partner. On the one hand, systemic corruption and the unsuccessful political reforms of the 1990s resulted in the establishment of a “managed democracy” (or what some would call a semi-authoritarian system) under President Putin, which created suspicion in the West about Russia's commitment to liberal democracy. Putin capitalized on high oil prices to create economic growth while concentrating power in the hands of the state. On the other hand, Putin's Russia felt that the West was encroaching on what it saw as its legitimate sphere of influence in neighbouring regions. NATO and EU enlargement included countries that were formerly in the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe or had been part of the Soviet Union itself. Mass protests in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005), called the “coloured revolutions”, challenged local elites that had close ties to Moscow. Russian leaders felt that the West was supporting these movements. In response to these developments, Russia began to promote a series of its own integration projects to bolster its influence in neighbouring countries that were formerly part of the USSR.

### **Russian civilizational ideology**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian leadership affirmed Russia's identity as a European country and supported close relations with the European Union. Over time, as Russia's economic and political power was bolstered by its energy resources, the leadership began to take a more assertive stance in its foreign policy, insisting on an equal status with the US and the EU. In recent years, the framework for the official Russian doctrine, under Putin's presidency, has shifted. Russia is more often depicted as an alternative Eurasian civilization, distinct from both Europe and Asia. The political concept of that doctrine is called the “Russian World”. Established in 2006, this concept is an attempt by the Kremlin to unite the Slavic peoples and former Soviet republics under Russian guidance. The “Russian World” policy is built upon three pillars: Eastern

Orthodox Christianity, the Russian language & culture, and a common historical memory with common views on social development.

This formula of Russian civilizational identity is not new, and has often focused on Russia's close ties to Belarus and Ukraine. Accordingly, Russia sees Ukraine as an integral part of this civilizational identity. During the tsarist period, Imperial Russia applied a similar formula that consisted of Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality, expressed by the "triune Russian nation": Ukrainian and Belarusian languages were forbidden from official use and labelled as being spoken dialects of Russian. In the Soviet Union, the concept of the triune Russian nation was replaced with the concept of three fraternal nations that shared a common root. In post-Soviet Russia, this notion is extremely popular, and has contributed to the view that the former Soviet republics are in Russia's natural sphere of influence.

#### Russian-led political and economic integration projects

Russia mimicked several Western integration projects and reshaped them for its own use. However, these projects have been of limited success, and in some cases only a subset of Russia's former allies have joined the various integration projects. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), formed right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, is a regional organization that unites the former members of the Soviet Union, with the exception of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which elected to join NATO and the EU instead. The members of the CIS are officially equal, but the organization is heavily influenced by Russia. There are three main vectors of Russian integrationist ambitions: military, economic, and political.

**Military:** in order to create an alternative to NATO, a Collective Security Treaty military alliance was signed by several members of the CIS. In 2002, this agreement took the form of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). As of 2016, CSTO member states are Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

#### *Stages of integration between the Russian Federation and other post-Soviet states:*

- 1992 – The Collective Security Treaty signed
- 1994 – Ratification of the Collective Security Treaty
- 2002 – The CSTO established
- 2003 – Ratification of the CSTO by member states

**Economic:** the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is the most ambitious Russian integration project thus far. It was initiated as a customs union, but Moscow hopes to craft it into a larger cooperative framework that will become an economic alternative to the EU. As of 2016, the members of EAEU are Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.

#### *Stages of economic integration between the Russian Federation and other post-Soviet states:*

- 1991 – Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)
- 1996 – Treaty on Increased Integration in the Economic and Humanitarian Field
- 2001 – Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC)
- 2010 – Eurasian Customs Union (EACU)
- 2011 – Commonwealth of Independent States Free Trade Area (CISFTA)
- 2012 – Eurasian Single Market

- 2015 – Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)

**Political:** Russia seeks to emulate the EU by transforming the Eurasian Economic Union into a political Eurasian Union. However, Russia's allies and economic partners have expressed doubt about Russia's ambitions and have been hesitant to give up their independence and sovereignty to a Russian-led organization.

*Stages of political integration between the Russian Federation and other post-Soviet states:*

- 1991 – Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)
- 1995 – The Union State of Belarus and Russia
- ? – The Eurasian Union