

Russia Europe : Reset ?

lundi 1er mars 2010, par [Françoise THOM](#)

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[Françoise THOM](#), **Russia Europe : Reset ?**, *Diploweb.com : la revue géopolitique*, 1er mars 2010.

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WHAT strikes a historian when looking at the relationship between Russia and Europe is the unchanging illusions Russia produces in the imagination of Westerners, and Russia's ability to dictate the conceptual frameworks within which it wants to be interpreted —and misunderstood— abroad.

This explains another mystery in the relationship between Russians and Europeans : the astonishing imperviousness of the Western partners to experience.

The successive setbacks suffered by businessmen in Russia, the snubs regularly inflicted on European statesmen, the murders, the insults to diplomats, the abusive nationalizations, the broken commitments, the violations of international law, all are instantly forgotten.

No sooner had Russia launched a war of conquest allowing it to occupy 20 percent of the territory of a neighboring state, than the United States speak of a "reset" ; that is to say, of wiping off the slate (and thus erasing a valuable experience from which the lessons should have been drawn), while France is eagerly offering Russia the means for its next war of aggression against neighboring states by selling it Mistral helicopter carriers.

Rarely has the actual misunderstanding of Russia been as great as it is now, and as fraught with disastrous consequences for Europe. France, in particular, is going down a perilous path. Russia has seduced Paris an exciting role : that of a partner in the modernization of the large eastern neighbor.

We preening at having such an honor bestowed on us, our national vanity is flattered. We are dizzy from the Russian incense and fail to see the harsh realities. We believe Russia to be weak, handicapped by a demographic catastrophe, and an underdeveloped economy.

We figure that in the face of so many difficulties it will turn inward and heal its wounds.

We believe that the crisis has put a brake on Moscow's ambitions. We are a thousand miles from perceiving the world as the Russian elites do. We do not see the consequences they have drawn from the crisis.

To be sure, the optimism that prevailed in Russia at the beginning of 2008 has been tempered. Russia then saw itself as an emerging power, a part of the Brazil-China-India bloc whose irresistible rise was to dethrone the Western world, especially the hated United States.

Lavrov, Russia's Foreign Minister shamelessly welcomed the demise of Western values. "The old West has lost its intellectual and moral leadership in the world", S. Karaganov, a political scientist, gloated. [1] The undemocratic, authoritarian model seemed poised to win, a glorious revenge for Russia which never accepted the collapse of the USSR and the defeat of its one-party rule in 1991.

In the spring of 2008 the Russian president, who had just been elected, proposed the establishment of a new security system in Europe. The Europeans did not understand that this initiative reflected Moscow's new assessment of the « correlation of forces ». In the eyes of the Russian leaders, the fading of the U.S. was now a done deal and Europe was supposed to take it into account and give it an institutional form.

Law is perceived by the Russians, as the codification of a "correlation of forces".

Since that "correlation of forces" had evolved to the detriment of the United States and to the advantage of Russia, the European security architecture was to be amended accordingly.

As the Europeans were dragging their feet and continued to refuse to see "the realities", as

they say in Russia, Moscow decided upon a small show of force : the Russo-Georgian war was primarily intended to show Europeans that the alliance with the United States was worth nothing. Russia was in a position of strength and could act unilaterally when it so desired. As soon as the demonstration had ended, President Medvedev put his proposal for new European security system back on the table. Naïve Westerners were surprised to see Russia advocate collective security while blatantly flouting the Medvedev-Sarkozy agreements and marginalizing the OSCE : the Russians' reasoning as described above shows that from its point of view, Moscow's position was perfectly consistent.

Medvedev said nothing else when he declared on October 1, 2008 : "The old world order has collapsed and a new, safer and fairer world order is emerging. The proof thereof is the action taken by Russia in August to save the people of South Ossetia, to protect our citizens and the interests of the Russian Federation". [2]

Thus Russia's unilateral action was signaling the emergence "a new world order" which the Europeans had to recognize. Mr Obama's proposed policy of "resetting" Russian-American relations has been interpreted in Moscow as evidence that the Americans are aware of their weakness, and consequently as an invitation to Moscow to raise the stakes.

The Russo-Georgian war and the financial crisis have led to an evolution in Russian analyses, but not the one we naively believe in the West. The crisis has been seen as an opportunity not to be missed. First, it accelerated the weakening of the United States and their disengagement from Russia's "near abroad". Second, it weakened the pro-Western elites that had formed in the CIS countries and instead strengthened the mafia clans living from predation, which are pro-Russian. The crisis thus offered a golden opportunity to restore Russian influence on a periphery destabilized by the shock.

On the other hand, the Russo-Georgian war and the crisis have also revealed to the leaders of the Kremlin that the backwardness of the economy and of the Russian military machine could be an obstacle to their power ambitions. In Russia setbacks, especially on the battlefield, are the main impulse of modernization : that was the case with Peter the Great after the defeat at Narva, with Alexander II after the Crimean War, and Nicholas II after the Russo-Japanese War. In all three cases, the dramatic reforms implemented were intended to make Russia a great military power capable of challenging Europe, not to emancipate Russian society. The situation is similar today. The *modernization* program launched by Medvedev aims at strengthening Russian power and by no means at democratizing the country.

It is sufficient to look at the main thrust of the so-called "modernization". The political system remains unchanged, massive elections fraud still take place. On the other hand, the Russian regime has undertaken a radical military reform the outlines of which were set out by President Medvedev in September 2008 : To enhance the deployment capacity of troops, command and control systems and training, to develop high-technology weapons, to improve the material condition of personnel, to develop a fleet of cruise missile-armed submarines, to create a space-based defense system.

"War can break out suddenly and become very real. Local conflicts, frozen conflicts as they sometimes call creeping conflicts can turn into a real military conflagration. A guaranteed nuclear deterrent system to meet various military and political circumstances must be put in place by 2020"

Medvedev told Russian generals as he introduced the reform [3].

Defense legislation was amended in October 2009. From now on the Russian president may engage the armed forces without authorization from the Federation Council. He may engage the troops in case of an “attack against the Russian armed forces abroad”, to “defend Russian citizens abroad”, to “defend a state that has sought help from Russia” [4]; this last point is particularly important because it shows that Russia is ready to intervene militarily even if the Russian territory is not threatened. Last but not least, the new Russian military doctrine also states that Russia is entitled to use nuclear weapons to repel an attack using conventional weapons and Russia reserves the right to launch preventive wars and the possibility of using nuclear weapons even in a local conflict. Thus Russia is developing a legislative arsenal to justify military intervention against third-party countries. Nor should we forget that Moscow has suspended its participation in the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE). If we compare the media hullabaloo that accompanied the announcement of the so-called Bush doctrine and the almost total silence of the Western press on the evolution of the Russian military doctrine, we can measure the effectiveness of Putin’s propaganda machine. Speaking of which, the budget for propaganda abroad in 2010 has reached 1.4 billion dollars, outpacing that of unemployment relief, something which shows once again what the priorities of the Kremlin are. [5]

The novelty in the Medvedev plan consists in the fact that Russia has decided to harness Western Europeans to build up the instruments of its power (following Peter the Great’s example). The Mistrals purchase offers three advantages : first, Russia purchases high technology weapons without having to make the effort to develop them itself ; second, it undermines fatally Atlantic and European solidarity and third, it accelerates the vassalization of the second largest European country after Germany.

The multiple setbacks suffered recently by giants of French industry (as the humiliating rejection of French nuclear technology by Abu Dhabi in favor of a Korean firm) can only reinforce French dependence towards Russia, as for Moscow economic transactions are foremost instruments of influence, economic and commercial considerations playing only a subsidiary role.

A Russian expert recently compared that policy to that of China towards the United States : according to him, the pro-Chinese lobby in Washington, committed to business with China, has become so powerful that the U.S. can no longer oppose Beijing ; the same is already true of Germany vis-à-vis Russia and it will be of France after signing the Mistrals contract [6] France already can no longer say no to Moscow : it gave back the Cathedral of St. Nicholas in Nice to the Russian Orthodox Church, it agreed to fly to the rescue of *Avtovaz*, the hopeless Putin-supported car company with an abysmal deficit, it agreed to have its troops parade on the Red Square thereby forgetting, as the Putin historiography requests, that the victory of the Red Army led to a renewed enslavement for half of Europe.

Our Gaullists, once so concerned with national independence in relation to the United States, find nothing wrong with this policy, though the danger for our freedom and for that of Europe is real this time

For the « Schröderization » of the European political class proceeds in leaps and bounds ; and the Lisbon Treaty, which gives prominence to the larger countries, may accelerate this process

(which, by the way, is the assessment made in Moscow).

And the military threat is not the only one (although that should not be underestimated : when the Mistral are delivered to Russia in 2012, Putin may be the President once more, trigger-happy as ever with, as we have seen, a tailor-made constitution).

But most dangerous for Europe is the deleterious influence exercised on the European elite by the Russian ideologists.

Day by day we are being told by Russian propagandists that the nature of political systems is immaterial, provided they are “pragmatic” ; who whisper that concern for fundamental freedoms is but a hypocrisy used by the Anglo-Saxons to cover their intent to destroy nations ; that in international relations only a “realistic” and selfish approach is profitable, that is, one based on a cynical reckoning of force relationships ; that only the major countries must count in Europe, of course in a partnership with Russia ; that only national interests count, of course as defined for everyone by Russia.

Russian expert Lilia Shvetsova recently wondered why Europeans fall so easily for Russian propaganda [7]. She quoted an ecstatic remark addressed to Putin by Thierry de Montbrial at the Valdai meeting in 2007 : “Mr. President, you’re the first leader in Russian history who accumulated so much power and at the same time are willing to share it with others... This proves you’re a Democrat” [8] How many times have we heard that Russia had been “humiliated”, that each country had the “right” to defend its “values”, that we should not seek to impose on others our liberal democracy etc. According to former Chancellor Schröder, Russia “has the right to defend its security interests”, that is to say, to prevent the Ukraine and Georgia from choosing their allies. French “economist” Jacques Sapir seriously explained in *Le Figaro* in April 2008 that Russia was “a zone of stability and growth” in a crisis-torn Europe, while “the Russian banks had not been contaminated by the crisis” and that “large capital inflows were to be expected in Russia” [9]. After the Russo-Georgian war French Prime Minister Francois Fillon bent over backwards to prevent sanctions against Russia, parroting the arguments repeated *ad nauseam* by Russian propaganda for years, likening supporters of a policy of firmness with Cold Warmongers —Cold war for which, of course, the West was “largely responsible” :

“There are two possible options : either one is bent on recreating the Cold War, one points the finger at Russia, isolates it, one continues to trample on it as had been the case for the last ten years - this not the route chosen by France, this is not the way Europe has chosen-” or one chooses the option of dialogue (1st September 2008).

By their endless hammering away that the defense of liberal democracy is an instrument of US policy, Russian propagandists have encouraged the Europeans to deny the very foundations on which Europe has been built over more than fifty years. The idea of equal rights between the European states, large and small, the idea that a balance of power is excluded among Europeans, the idea of European solidarity, this is contemptuously swept aside in Moscow .

If this Kremlin “philosophy” gains ground, Europe may regress tremendously and forget the hard lessons learned from two world wars. We saw it in the 1930s : the presence of a revanchist state on the European continent can nullify all attempts at an international order based on law and arbitration.

How can we explain that so many Europeans, especially Frenchmen, can be found who agree to become the apologists of post-communist Russia's social Darwinism applied to international relations ? Nadezhda Mandelshtam, the widow of the poet Osip Mandelshtam who died in the Gulag, wondered in her *Memoirs* why the Russian intelligentsia offered so little resistance to Bolshevism. She concluded that it was the fascination of violence which had caused that complaisance among intellectuals. It seems today that Russian thuggishness, the bare torso and the crude language of former President Putin exert a fateful seduction on a number of European leaders. They may be seeking in this Hobbesian world an antidote to the stifling political correctness which seeps from the media and the European institutions - without seeing that the cure is worse than the disease.

Moscow now proposes an alliance of the United States, the European Union and Russia against threats from "the South" [10] ; Russia now poses as a bulwark of "Northern civilization", which sounds ironic when we remember how staunchly Moscow has defended the Iranian nuclear program, contributing greatly to the emergence of this "Southern threat", and how it celebrated the demise of Western civilization only a year ago.

Russia obviously counts on the Westerners rebooting, or even on the complete erasure of their hard drives.

Let's hope it's mistaken.

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NDLR : Ce texte est une traduction en anglais d'un article inédit de Françoise Thom publié en français le 2 février 2010 sur le site diploweb.com "Russie Europe : les risques du redémarrage". [Voir](#)

P.-S.

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Notes

[1] Quoted in : *Nezavisimaja Gazeta*, 29/10/08

[2] http://www.kremlin.ru/appears/2008/10/01/1401_type63374type82634type122346_207081.shtml

[3] http://www.kremlin.ru/appears/2008/09/26/2013_type63374type63376type82634_206944.shtml

[4] gazeta.ru 8/12/09

[5] *The Guardian*, 18/12/09

[6] Fiodor Lukianov, « Integracija po ponjatjam », *gazeta.ru*, 26/11/09

[7] Lilia Shevtsova, « The Kremlin Kowtow », *Foreign Policy*, January 5, 2010

[8] Lilia Shevtsova, « Druzja Rossii », *Ežednevnyj žurnal*, 29/06/09. The quotation is translated from the Russian.

[9] J. Sapir, « Crise financière, la Russie au secours de l'économie européenne », *Le Figaro*, 4/04/08

[10] V. D. Rogozin, « Bez tarakanov russofobii », *gazeta.ru*, 15/12/09. This at a time when a Russian propaganda nest was covering Great Britain with propaganda posters representing Obama and Ahmadinezhad, with the mention : Who represents the greater nuclear risk" ? Cf. *The Guardian*, 18/12/09