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**Recent Kremlin Aggression: The Bear is Back**  
**But is Russia Ready to Be a Superpower Again?**

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The world of the twentieth century saw astounding change, but one country at the heart of the global political system had an especially turbulent and significant 100 years. From the rule of the Tsars through the Cold War, Russia arose from its backward nation status to become a contending world power. However, following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, much of the western world breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed the United States no longer needed to worry about its long-feared enemy. During the next decade Cold War jargon fell into disuse, Russian language programs were cut back, and academic and political foci shifted more fully to the Middle East. But in recent years it appears that, while Russia may be down, she is certainly not out. The previous Russian president Vladimir Putin made several controversial remarks which made it clear that his country would not sit idly by and allow the U.S. to act without being questioned. At the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Putin claimed that “the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today’s world” (Putin, 2007). He then went on to say that the international community was “witnessing an almost uncontained hyper use of force” (Putin, 2007). Also, the most recent conflict in Georgia was tangible proof that Russia would do what was necessary to maintain hegemony in the region. With a growing economy, strong, centralized government and echoes of Soviet power, one is compelled to ask: Is the bear back?

By examining the current status of the Russian Federation one may determine its potential to carry out rumored efforts to replace the United States and become the new world hegemon. The following paper will focus on three important aspects of Russia today: state of the military, national interest and political culture. Within each area, this paper will attempt to offer a holistic view beyond nostalgia for Soviet power, oil-rich businessmen and secret nuclear stockpiles. Russia today is changing, and every element of its power becomes increasingly more

complex. However, the three characteristics listed above represent unique facets of Russian culture and capability. When combined together, these perspectives can offer a critical assessment of a country long perceived as the head of an evil empire. Increasing interconnectedness suggests that we attempt to learn more about our friends, our enemies and those we perceive as such. In addition, the dubious past of U.S. international relations demands that our future be better informed.

## **II. RED ARMY REALITIES**

All conquering nations in history had an efficient and effective military to carry out matters of national interest and security. While Russia may not aspire to create *Pax Rossiya*, military capabilities are a necessity if the country is to take the place of the United States. After all, according to GlobalSecurity.org, U.S. forces are currently deployed in nearly one hundred thirty countries. Such widespread involvement of the military demands a great deal of the country, and Russia faces a number of additional challenges. As with any facet of post-Soviet Russia, history is a primary source of these challenges. The following assessment includes lingering affects on the Soviet military juggernaut as well as prospects for future global involvement. The state of Russia's military is affected by the following issues: ideological rediscovery, technical and logistical difficulties and redefining its political and social role.

### **An Idea To Serve**

In 1994, Eugene Rumer completed a brief study on the emerging ideological crisis in the Russian military. His findings still resonate today as the potential world power seeks to reform and modernize its armed forces. He wrote that the military was the only institution that “could lay claim to being truly Soviet” (Rumer, 1) or “had aspired to the status of a truly Soviet institution” (Rumer, vii). No other institution was able so to fully incorporate Soviet doctrine

into its organizational structure and personnel. In a domain as wide-spread and diverse as the USSR, the Soviet military faced the inevitable issue of ethnicity. To override ties to ethnic homelands, the concept of the Soviet citizen was put into practice. Military units were meant to be homogeneous with “no regional differences” (Rumer, 1). But with the dissolution of the Soviet army, nationalist sentiments arose and citizenship was no longer prescribed by the state. Ethnic Russian soldiers stationed in places like Ukraine, Estonia and Kazakhstan were forced to reexamine their national identity. This was most difficult for career military officers who have been deemed “the most Soviet of all Soviet people” (Rumer, 2). The military at large was also experiencing social pressure; years of *perestroika* and *glasnost* revealed the inner workings of this most-Soviet institution. Previously buried problems “became matters of public knowledge, undermining the military’s standing in society...” (Rumer, 3). In light of ethnic divisions, loss of Communist ideology and drop in public support, the post-Soviet military had to “find both a country and an idea to serve” (Rumer, 3). In addition to finding that idea, it was yet to be determined how capable the military was of serving at all. The “sorry condition of the military institution and its questionable internal cohesion” (Rumer, xi) left many wondering about its ability to support or undermine the new direction of the central Russian government.

The years just after the fall of the Soviet Union were filled with questions regarding Russia’s future foreign policy interest as well as the goal of the military. To what extent would the great nation attempt to maintain its previous power? One major ideology that emerged during the period of transition was the notion of ‘little Russia.’ This model suggested “a looser, voluntary association of republics, including the right of outright secession from the Soviet Union” (Rumer, 13). According to Rumer, the significance of this ideology “should not be underestimated” (Rumer, 14). For the first time in the country’s modern history, Russia was

envisioned without its empire. “[Little Russia] also articulated a rather benign, nonexpansionist version of Russian nationalism” which “had significant appeal at the grass-roots level” (Rumer, 14). However, there were also a number of advocates for a united Russia ruled by a strong central government. These individuals “found natural allies in the neoimperialists” and had a different outlook on the future” (Rumer, 22). If their rhetoric were to be translated into policy, Russia would commit to “the course of reexpansion abroad and reconstitution of a firm central regime at home” (Rumer, 22). The connection between policy and military action is understood within the statement that the “military remains the sole institutional actor or instrument in the hands of political leaders that can potentially restore Russia to the expansionist course” (Rumer, x). This being the case, it is necessary to move beyond ideology and consider the technical and logistical challenges facing the military today.

### **Cogs in the Military Machine**

The nature of the Cold War played a decisive role in the type of growth and development experienced by the Soviet military. Arms races, Third World battle grounds and extensive border control are just some of the realities which required conventional and nuclear weapons. To a large extent, these geopolitical factors predetermined the capabilities of the military today. The first item to consider is the extensive “military machine” (Miller, 1) or military complex which the Soviet Union possessed. Russia obtained “the largest inheritance from the Soviet military juggernaut” (Miller, 2). The implications of this inheritance were beneficial as well as problematic. Its massive military complex required an enormous amount of economic and personnel support. The Soviet military was previously able to rely on the resources of its republics to fulfill a large portion of these needs. With each republic’s independence, an increasing burden of responsibility fell on Russia. Yet despite the size of Russia’s military

inheritance, the “industrial infrastructure, including its defense industrial base, is lacking major elements that are now located in other countries” (Miller, 2). The Russian military was left with considerable potential but lacked adequate tools to adapt and utilize its capabilities.

**i. Nukes and know-how**

In addition, after multi-lateral negotiations Russia also obtained “sole possession of the Soviet Union’s huge nuclear weapons inventory and complex” (Miller, 2). The current day effects of Russia’s nuclear capabilities are manifested in policy as well as weapon development. The fall of the Soviet regime had definite regional implications, and Western officials had a short-lived opportunity to attempt to shape the political climate of the region. “Western diplomacy made strenuous efforts to promote the consolidation of the entire Soviet nuclear arsenal within Russia” (Miller, 7). Widespread proliferation within the former Soviet states was seen as unwise. As a result, Russia “retained pretensions to being a nuclear superpower even if it was a superpower in no other respect” (Miller, 7). However, as the previous statement suggests, the mere ownership of these types of weapons does not guarantee Russia a place on the international stage. Issues regarding nuclear weaponry remain an ongoing challenge for Russia’s domestic and foreign policy. In addition, despite numerous treaties and agreements, international and domestic debates still take place regarding the role of nuclear capability. Certainly within Russia, “nuclear forces have been on something of a policy roller coaster for the past 15 years” (Miller, 186). For example, Igor Sergeev, Defense Minister from 1997 to 2001, believed that “strong nuclear forces help to keep all threats in check” (Miller, 193). He claimed that “a strong nuclear deterrent equates with a strong Russia” (Miller, 193), and the modernization of nuclear weaponry should be foremost. However, a 2005 report by the Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI) states that “the official Russia view” is that nuclear deterrence must develop in

direct proportion to conventional units. Ultimately it seems as though a compromise has been reached by retaining “strategic nuclear weapons ‘on the cheap’” (Miller, 193).

Indeed, according to the World Bank Group, Russia’s overall military spending as a percentage of GDP has decreased from seventeen percent in 1989, to only four percent in 2007. Yet despite the enormous decrease in spending, Moscow has increasingly attempted to “showcase new nuclear technologies and has altered its declaratory nuclear doctrine to suggest a diminished inhibition about using nuclear weapons” (Legvold, 280). In terms of non-proliferation, “the safety surrounding the Russian nuclear weapons appears to be satisfactory and, as far as is known, no nuclear arms are missing” (Leijonhielm, 14). It seems, superficially at least, that Russia is adhering to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. However, Russia’s “[extensive biological research programme] is not transparent enough to inspire confidence” (Leijonhielm, 13), and “the risk of intentional or unintentional dissemination to third parties of [WMD] material and know-how” remains (Leijonhielm, 14). Ultimately, the issues regarding nuclear disarmament, weapon security and arms policy underscore the challenges Russia still faces within its nuclear program.

## **ii. Guns and growth**

No matter the direction or intention of Russia’s nuclear weapons policy and capability, the state of the country’s conventional weaponry is an enduringly important issue. As previously mentioned, the geographic dispersal of Soviet industry and resources presents an immediate logistical challenge for the production and dissemination of conventional arms. Through everyday wear and tear a “significant portion of the existing weapons systems and equipment is likely to deteriorate” (Rumer, 41). With parts’ factories closed or located in other countries, Russia was lacking its established military-industrial support system immediately following the



fall of the Soviet Union. For example, according to data regarding the military-industrial complex (MIC) released in 2000, “the average age of machine tools was 25-30 years” (Miller, 161). The official limit for use should have been “no more than 10-15 years” (Miller, 161). Another post-Soviet challenge is the lack of “artificially low prices for military hardware” (Miller, 160). Today, however, conventional arms technology and availability seem to be improving. “The high technology [Russia] produces is of a reasonably high quality even by international standards” (Leijonhielm, 17). Some examples of technological aptitude include Russian “ships, rocket and missile systems and combat aircraft” (Leijonhielm, 17), all of which will most likely continue to be exported heavily. Demand for Russian weapons remains high, with weapons export acting as “an important source of income for the MIC” (Leijonhielm, 17).

However, structured military research and development remain points of uncertainty. As of 2005, “exact R&D policy... remains a state secret” (Leijonhielm, 17). The R&D sector of the military was affected in various ways by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The defense sector in general “has become highly unresponsive to demands to resume or accelerate the production of existing weapons systems” (Miller, 161). One major impediment is that “costs for R&D for modern weapons systems steadily increase” (Leijonhielm, 16). The future success and possibility of developing new, innovative technologies depends heavily on the defense budget and therefore Russia’s national economy. The following is a telling assessment of the dichotomy between technological and production capabilities:

The general idea is not to lose momentum in the military-technological development or end up too far behind primarily the USA and certain other countries such as China. When the state economy allows, the production of weapons and technology is set to increase. At a given time, Russian production is intended to match the generation of weapons and platforms that research and development has reached.

Leijonhielm, 16

As mentioned previously, decreased military spending and “low level state procurement” (Leijonhielm report, 16) cannot provide sufficient funds to counteract rising costs. Ultimately, Russia’s MIC has not yet developed to a point of economic sustainability and remains contingent on government funds. Yet despite the MIC’s financial dependency, “today’s Russia has little control over its military-industrial complex” (Podvig, 1).

### **Fixing a Century of Problems**

In an attempt to reconcile some of its technical and logistical challenges Russia has instituted a number of military reforms. In the Ministry of Defense policy document published in October 2003, “military reform was officially declared completed” (Leijonhielm, 15). Further developments were to be termed “modernization” and a “great emphasis was put on modernizing weapons and technology” (Leijonhielm, 15). This need for distinction of terms may be due in part to the previously widespread social difficulties within the military. During the break up of the Soviet Union, the military institution was described as experiencing “terrible problems of desertion, a large exodus from the officer corps, a breakdown of the conscription system, rampant corruption and widespread ineffectiveness of many units for any meaningful military purpose” (Miller, 9). Other problems included lack of “internal discipline”, “drunkenness, theft of weapons and military equipment by all ranks, and general demoralization” (Rumer, 42). In his 1994 study, Rumer even claimed that the military had become “dangerous to itself and society” (42). Such pervasive and widespread problems must be addressed if the Russian military intends to support its country with any credibility on the international scene. Indeed, it was “widely assumed, both within and outside Russia, that far-reaching reforms would be necessary if Russia were to create a military compatible with the interests and resources of the new Russian state” (Miller, 8). The effectiveness of these far-reaching reforms is, in some ways,

yet to be seen. Although they are officially declared complete, “when a military reform is started and finished is, of course, ultimately a question of definitions” (Leijonhielm, 15). When Vladimir Putin became president in 2000, “he was aware of the need to rebuild the armed forces into a reliable instrument of power” (Miller, 44). In pursuit of this goal Putin appointed Sergei Ivanov as minister of defense. Ivanov “achieved significant improvements in streamlining the flow of money within the military machine” (Miller, 61), but met with opposition within the career military bureaucracy. Ultimately “military reform and revitalization are probably the two areas where Putin has had the least success while encountering the greatest challenge to his leadership” (Miller, 44-45). Instead of preparing Russia’s military to defend against security threats, Putin has merely reshuffled top officials in order to neutralize “potential political challenges” (Miller, 62).

**i. Changing the view of a nation**

One of the most difficult aspects of military reform for the Ministry of Defense has been reversing the stigma of conscription. “Today, young men look on the draft as a form of state slavery, and with society’s support, seek ways to avoid it” (Miller, 74). Despite the historical significance of Russia’s strong military, mandatory service today is viewed with disdain rather than an issue of pride or honor. Indeed, the strength of the Red Army was one of the defining characteristics of the Soviet Union. However, “the question remains whether Russia in the future intends to remain a regional, conventionally strong military power” (Leijonhielm, 17). In order to restore an image of strength and credibility, as well as improve social conceptions of military service, the Ministry of Defense has recently set out a number of goals. One of the key issues regarding conscription is the shift toward a contract-based military. The emphasis on a professional rather than drafted army is already being executed. However it is unclear what the

established purpose and end goal of such an army would be. The FOIs ten-year military assessment claimed in 2005: “only by decreasing quantity could [Russia] raise the quality of its Armed Forces and develop a high level of mechanization combined with well-trained military units” (Leijonhielm, 17). Such a decrease in numbers would be “in stark contrast to the mass mobilization army, built by universal conscription, which is preferred by the Russian defense establishment” (Miller, 22). The Ministry of Defense is seeking “partial transition of the Armed Forces to the contract-based recruitment pattern” (RFMD Web site). However, according to their website, this transition “is not considered as the aim of their development and improvement but as a tool instrumental in enhancing the country’s defense potential as well as combat readiness” (RFMD Web site). This distinction in purpose shifts the focus toward pragmatism, rather than a correction of institutional ills. The Ministry of Defense website goes on to explain that the introduction of contract-based recruitment “is not a politically-motivated declaration” but rather an attempt to fulfill “the nation’s objective capabilities” (RFMD Website). It is important to note that the partial transition approach is in contrast with the more radical efforts of many military reformers, including Ivanov, who desired “a shift to a professional, all-volunteer force” (Miller, 22). Instead, it seems that the Ministry of Defense aims to correct a situation in which society’s views and “liberal legislation [allow] about 90 percent of eligible young men to avoid [the draft]” (RFMD Web site). In fact, one of the main goals of the army recruitment system is the “improvement of the social infrastructure of military service to attract contract personnel” (RFMD Web site). The underlying effort is to convey to the Russian public that the military is for the best and brightest, rather than the current majority of enlistees who “failed to fulfill themselves in civil life” (RFMD Web site). One of the Ministry of Defense’s attempts to improve the attractiveness of military service, as well as combat “high personnel turnover rates

among the contract” (RFMD Web site), is to offer more incentives for contract servicemen. Ultimately though, the fulfillment of these goals relies on “adequate and steady funding and availability of skilled contract personnel” (RFMD Web site). Unfortunately, both of these resources are in currently in short supply.

## **ii. Unrealistic expectations**

The population decline in Russia today is raising a number of questions about the future of Russia, and the availability of Armed Forces personnel is merely one aspect of a larger problem. The military’s efforts to reform the conscription and recruitment processes “are at odd with the realities of demography” (Giles, 1). Recent policy changes have canceled recruitment deferrals and decreased mandatory service from two years to one year. It is projected that these changes will provide an additional 90,000 recruits (Giles). The number of desired draftees in the future ranges from six hundred thousand to eight hundred thousand (Giles). However, the military’s aspirations do not coincide with the ever decreasing male population. In 1987, there were around 1.2 million males born who would be available for conscription in 2005. In 1999, there were only 626,000 male births (Giles). Even if the military is able to draft every male of age, supply will not meet demand. In addition, the military is having increasing difficulty providing for its financial needs. The same issue of reliance on government funds for weapons development applies to Armed Forces personnel. “Evidence suggests that even the Russian Armed Forces of today (about 1.2 million men) exceeds Russia’s economic capability” (Leijonhielm, 16). Thus the prospects for future strength and adequate implementation of military reform remain dubious.

## **III. IDENTITY & INTEREST**

According to Robert Legvold, “states act on the basis of their perceived interest, but conceptions of the kind of state, its historical purposes, and its operative belief systems... are all fundamental to construction of those interests” (Legvold, 35). This is certainly the case for Russia, although sources of identity and its resultant national interest are myriad. Several aspects of history, culture, politics and spirituality have consistently shaped the populace’s idea of what it means to be Russian. In addition, the idea of Russianness is directly connected with the culture’s values and ultimately the formation of a national interest upon which foreign policy may be developed. While it is debated how much these ideas affect policy and governance, the concept of national identity remains a dynamic force. The following is a brief overview of varying conceptions of Russian national identity ranging from geographic to literary to existential bases. Understanding the historical development of Russian identity and interest better enables us to determine their effects on the country’s hegemonic capabilities today.

Here is a country that has never had a friendly neighbor, that has always had shifting borders, that has never had a clearly defined security arrangement—a country, quite frankly, that has been either too weak or too strong for the peace of Europe, a country that at one and the same time has been a central element of the balance of power and a threat to it.

Kissinger, 3

Within the realm of Russian history, it is readily apparent that Russian experience has been markedly different from the American, Western or European. However, it is difficult to determine precisely how this experience has shaped Russian identity. Scholars of Russian culture have coined numerous phrases to attempt to encompass the country’s belief about itself. Some, like Andrei Tsygankov, place enormous emphasis on Russia’s reactionary interactions with the West. Leslie Chamberlain suggests that Russia “is its own place” and will always exist “on the edge of a Western culture” (Chamberlain, 284). Others consider Russia to be completely

unlike any other country or region and insist upon the independent development of its national identity.

### **Book Worms and High Souls**

In addition to the wide range of perspectives in the academic world today, Russian identity has been understood quite differently throughout history. In the nineteenth century, Vissarion Belinsky claimed that Russians “are defined not so much by blood or by class but by their allegiance to Russian literature” (Boym, 139). The societal, cultural and psychological themes prevalent in Russian literature create “an imagined community of readers” (Boym 139). Furthermore, these individuals are connected “not so much in what they read but how they read—by passionately transgressing the boundaries between life and fiction, by wishing to live out literature and, with its help, change the world” (Boym, 139). This conception of Russian identity encompasses a number of characteristics including exceptionalism, existentialism and civic duty. Around the same time, Tsar Nicholas I’s advisor Sergei Uvarov developed an official monarchist doctrine which claimed that “being Russian is not defined by ethnicity but by allegiance to the empire and by religion” (Boym, 140-141). This was in stark contrast to the Slavophile version, an identity which existed “above and beyond politics and often in opposition to the official Church” (Boym, 141). The rise of the Soviet Union brought with it a prescribed identity which was at the same time congruent and contrary to previous conceptions of Russianness. In theory, the Soviet citizen was to be an international, universal identity which emerged from Marxist-Leninist thought. As a concept meant to unite the workers of the world, the Soviet ideal was in opposition to the idea of Russian exceptionality. However, the ideal Soviet person was actually “structurally similar to the Russian personality: self-sacrificial, anti-individualist, antimaterialistic and ascetic, above and beyond the everyday” (Boym, 144). During the Soviet

era, “the expression ‘Russian soul’ might have been out of fashion in socialist realist jargon” (Boym, 145), but it was soon replaced. Instead, the term “‘high soulfulness’ (*vysokaia dvkhovnost*) or the high spirituality of the Russian people” was used to distinguish Russian identity. Even today, “the relationship between ‘Russian’ and ‘Soviet’ is highly contested” (Boym, 145), thus proving the difficulty of defining national identity within historical and political frameworks.

### **An Exact People**

One of the commonly recurring characteristics within these different perspectives is Russian exceptionalism. “Russia has had a great belief in its spiritual mission” (Kissinger, 3); there is a notion of divine tasking for one to carry out his or her part in society. This idea is often manifested on the national scale and has been displayed throughout history from Peter the Great and the expansive Tsarist Empire to the proposed universality of Marxism-Leninism. It has also been suggested that an examination of Russian literature will reveal “the peculiar suffering of the Russian people” (Kissinger). The depth and distinctiveness of Russians’ hardships have “produced a spirituality compared to which Europe is materialistic and small-minded” (Kissinger, 3). The idea of exceptionalism often serves to unite the Russian population on the basis of shared experiences. In comparison to similar ethnocentric tendencies, it can result in feelings of alienation from neighboring cultures. This is especially important when considering Russia’s cooperation, or lack thereof, in the international community. An ongoing, historical perspective of alienation hardly encourages Russian officials to seek common ground with others. In terms of its pursuit of global power, Russia’s exceptionalism and estrangement may be used as a rationale for securing and maintaining hegemony.

#### **i. Classification issues**



Another characteristic of Russian identity, which may have acted as a catalyst to exceptionalism, is difficulty defining it as Eastern or Western. Geographically speaking, “Europe and Russia are overlapping entities” (Baranovsky, 443); the case is the same for Russia and Asia. It is nearly impossible to draw a geographic boundary between Europe and the East without dividing Russia. In terms of culture, the same problem of distinction arises. One school of thought claims that “Russia and Europe belong to the same family”, and they are both “genetically descended from the Christian civilization” (Baranovsky, 444). Other views “underline Russia’s closeness to Asia, in opposition to Europe” or represent it as “a microcosm that follows its own destiny and develops its own rules” (Baranovsky, 444). If it were only a matter of academic terms, this difficulty in classification might only be an intriguing inconvenience. However, this lack of sense of belonging has definite practical repercussions. Following the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent expansion of NATO, Russia seems unwillingly met with an ultimatum: a part of Europe or apart from Europe? The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, served to further delineate between so-called rogue states and allies of the West. Ultimately, “Russia finds itself in the painful position of having lost all its old allies in Europe and being unable to attract any new ones” (Baranovsky, 450). That is not to say that Russia has not improved or initiated relations with other traditionally non-Western nation states, often much to the frustration of the United States and Europe. The result is a “‘no allies’ situation” (Baranovsky, 450) which may prove beneficial as well as detrimental. Freed from prescribed cultural and regional ties, Russia is currently able to pursue political and economic opportunities in numerous areas. However, Moscow is left without any long-term, committed supporters should it choose to pursue a more aggressive policy in the global community.

## **ii. Perspectives on prerogative**

Another important result of Russia's lack of clear designation is a purported sense of entitlement to neighboring countries. Although a deeply historical issue, the expansion and collapse of the USSR clearly highlights the belief that Russia should have ongoing influence in the region at large. It has been "a huge emotional adjustment" (Kissinger, 6) for Russia to view former republics and territories as foreign lands. The Russian concept of "near abroad" includes "areas of the world in which [Russia] functions as a multiregional Eurasian power" (Lukin, 109). However, a problem arises when one considers that central and northern Europe, the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East and the Pacific Rim region all fall under this concept. "In all these areas Russia has deep, historic interests that need to be protected not only to avoid regional imbalances, but also to prevent the disruption of the social and political balance inside Russia itself" (Lukin, 109). The common Western perception of Russia's sense of entitlement is that Kremlin, Inc. is merely seeking additional avenues through which to maximize its economic gain. However, Western officials would do well to consider the possibility that regional influence and protecting the rights of Russians outside Russia is "a legitimate and natural aspiration to the erasure of conflicts and the harmonization of relations on the territory of the former USSR..." (Fukuyama, 20). It is therefore possible that Russia's desire for regional involvement is a result of imagined cultural and ethnic ties, rather than a pragmatic maximization of power. This alternative perspective has considerable implications when evaluating Russia's recent aggression in the region, including energy control in Ukraine and the conflict in Georgia.

The West must maintain its objectivity and not allow memories of the past to cloud its interpretation of the actions of today's Russia. It should not see the 'resurrection of the evil empire' or a 're-centralization of the Union' in every energetic step that Russia takes to protect its interests or in attempts at cooperation in the area of security.

Lukin, 109

In fact, Russia's focus on regional involvement and control may actually prove to be a restraining force in its foreign policy. Economic, political and military involvement in Eastern Europe and Central Asia may place a strain on Russia's resources and stifle any further aspirations for expansion. Ultimately though, "it is not an American option to keep Russia weak and cannot be seriously discussed" (Kissinger, 8). Russia may not be ready to ascend as the next global hegemon, but it is far from out of the game.

### iii. **Identity today**

One may argue that today, more than ever, Russia does not have a defined ideology or national identity guiding its decision making process. Dmitri Trenin even suggests that "Russia stands among the least ideological countries around the world" (Trenin, 95). He claims that ideology has become obsolete in the face of economic and political interests. Prime Minister Putin's pragmatism and the practices of Russian elites suggest an attitude of "in capital we trust" (Trenin, 95). This begs the question: is national identity still a relevant factor when considering Russian national interest and aspirations for hegemonic power? One may argue that the prevalence of pragmatism is merely the latest manifestation of longstanding Russian characteristics. Pragmatic policy essentially seeks to ensure the stability and strength of the Russian state. Whether these goals are achieved through Statism, Westernism, Atlanticism or Asianism, they remain decisively Russian. The enduring desire to see Russia succeed and extend power over other countries suggests a national identity which shapes national interest.

## IV. **POLITICAL CULTURE**

Political culture is something more than an idea of national identity or sense of connection (or even disconnection) to other countries. It is the climate in which national identity is understood and applied to political processes. This climate develops as a result of national

identity, interests and values and is fundamentally connected to public opinion and political ideology. In terms of the study of Russia's political culture, it is an important distinction. Rosati and Scott define political culture as "how people see themselves and their country relative to the rest of the world" (Rosati and Scott, 377). This definition may be more applicable when considering the foreign policy of the United States where "the traditional wisdom is that the public plays a relatively significant role" (Rosati and Scott, 351). But suppose that the public is predominantly apathetic or uninvolved in political processes? Scholars of U.S. foreign policy have certainly confronted this question, but it is even more relevant in Russian political culture. Tsarist authoritarianism, the Soviet legacy of exclusion, and the outcomes of failed democracy have produced a distinctly Russian political environment. Of course, "if a new regime is to survive [a pursuit of global hegemony] it requires some form of support from its people" (Rose, 5). This support may be manifested as "a state of mind" or "compliant behavior" (Rose, 5) and not necessarily a politically active populace. It is precisely this state of mind which molds Russian political culture and produces a range of political behavior. By examining past and present developing factors in Russia, one is better equipped to determine the modern day driving force behind public support. Ultimately, an understanding of the public's grounds for support will confirm or deny Russians' willingness to support an attempt at global superpower status.

### **Another Point of View**

From the perspective of Western scholars, Russia's political culture is usually assessed in terms of whether it is fertile ground for democracy. The current form of quasi-democracy in Russia suggests that democratic convictions and ideals may not be the best standards for measuring political climate. When presenting a paper in 1997, Frederic Fleron was asked to comment on whether Russia is developing its own brand of democracy. He replied, "Other

countries have done that, and there is no reason for us to suspect that they are necessarily going to develop our form of democracy. I think we would be fools to suspect that they might” (Fleron, 24). This lack of predetermination regarding the value and form of democracy is essential when considering the evolution of Russian political culture. As will further be explained, democracy is a concept which retains little meaning in Russian political rhetoric today.

### **Unprecedented Change**

Public opinion is a key component of political culture and is often extremely volatile. Because of this, more recent political events must warrant the greater consideration in an assessment of a country’s political climate. For Russia, the Soviet Union and the decades after its fall resulted in a wide range of determining factors for Russian political culture today. On April 15, 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev said, “We are making such a large turn that it is beyond anyone’s dreams. No other people has experienced what has happened to us” (Rose, 1). The collapse of the Soviet regime was one of the greatest political shifts of all time and had significant implications for the Russian people. The enormous transformation took place within a society made up of primarily “middle-aged” and “settled” individuals (Rose, 6). The breakdown of the Soviet system “disrupted the collective norms and institutions by which individuals had learned to order their lives” (Rose, 6). Such dramatic changes in governance require considerable flexibility among the population and cause a fundamental shift in the political culture. The political elite in Russia were forced to “adapt to new political institutions or be consigned to the dust bin of history” (Rose, 2). The general population faced a basic transition in the way they viewed everyday politics. According to the New Russia Barometer (NRB), a nationwide survey of public opinion, eighty one percent of Russians surveyed in 2006

said they had adapted to changes in the country or would in the near future (Rose, 200).

However, “adaptation does not mean that Russians are satisfied with the political performance of the new regime” (Rose, 201). The important point is that they are adapting, and the political culture shifts correspondingly. In times of transition, the individual is confronted with a need to avoid “becoming marginalized in a post-transformation society” (Rose, 6). Oftentimes, the result is that political ideals become secondary to the procurement of basic physical needs. In the case of post-Soviet Russian political culture, the people’s desires became more pragmatic and less concerned with upholding the principles of democracy, personal freedom and governmental transparency.

i. **The trouble with “democracy”**

Western democracy’s interlude in Russia had several enduring results, the most significant being the distortion of democratic rhetoric. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, there have been several champions of democracy. The Westernist policies under President Boris Yeltsin were implemented during a short period commonly known as the honeymoon era. The failure of these policies is reflected in Yeltsin’s December 1999 retirement speech:

...What we thought would be easy turned out to be painfully difficult. I ask you to forgive me for not fulfilling some hopes of those people who believed that we would be able to jump from the grey, stagnating totalitarian past into a bright, rich, and civilized future in one go. I myself believed in this. But it could not be done all at once.

Rose, 3

Indeed, a sudden change to democracy and free market capitalism could not be accomplished, and in the attempt democratic ideas were rewritten, recycled and transformed into something entirely different from Western liberal democracy. As a result, in Russia today “there are no true democracies; there are only different state leaders calling their widely heterogeneous governments democracies” (Bruner, 63). Whether on the local or national level, there are few

true liberal democrats. Instead, the public must choose from “various ‘democratic’ discourses meaning radically different things and having radically different institutional consequences” (Bruner, 64). With such a loose definition of democracy, it is understandable why public opinion polls can show very different images of current Russian political culture and values.

## **ii. Evidentiary support**

For example, Frederic Fleron conducted surveys from 1989-1995; he found “strong support for most democratic norms” early on and “decline in more recent studies” (Fleron, 3). He claimed that the difference in response was “in part due to varying levels of commitment expressed for particular democratic norms” (Fleron, 4). In other words, public opinion had not yet settled upon the most desirable traits for a Russian democracy, and political culture remained volatile. Fleron also found a considerable correlation between notions of political and economic reform. There was a “tendency of Russian respondents to place a high priority on economic issues and to define democracy primarily in terms of personal economic outcome” (Fleron, 4). Again, this is an example of political culture and its values adapting to meet the temporary needs of the people. The result of associating democracy with economic gain is that individuals “have only an instrumental commitment to democracy” which “underscores the fragility of democratic commitments” (Fleron, 4). This picture of Russian political culture suggests that “economic reform, much more than political reform, was at the heart of Russia’s ‘democratic’ transition” (Bruner, 65).

Gordon Hahn’s research found that beyond a tendency to “equate democracy with economic prosperity”, Russian political culture demonstrates “widespread support for the importance of the state” (Fleron, 11). This view of political climate differs from the previous in that it focuses less on the needs and desires of the individual. In other words, the goal of a strong

and successful central government overrides the desire for civic freedoms and the ability to generate personal wealth. Such an emphasis on the power of the state raises the question of Russians' historical tendency to have authoritarian leaders rather than democratic, constituency-led systems. In reference to this, Hahn replied that it would be misleading to "[read] the wrong meanings into the particular words" (Fleron, 17). That is, autocracy and Tsarist rule are not necessarily models but rather the ideal is "an effective leader who would get something done" (Fleron, 16). William Reisinger noticed similar tendencies and suggested that Russian political culture lay somewhere between paternalism and outright liberal democracy: "a combined element of feeling that the public ought to have the right to be involved in politics... together with wanting things to work, wanting the streets to be maintained and cleared of snow and things like that" (Fleron, 18).

### iii. **Ideal versus real deal**

What then is the ideal government as defined by Russian political culture? And how resolutely will Russians oppose imitations of that ideal? NRB surveys consistently show "that people would like a government that lives up to democratic ideals, respects the freedom of individuals, and is not corrupt" (Rose, 198). However, the manifestation of this ideal does not seem to be of primary concern to the general population. In fact, "the current regime shows more respect for freedom than its predecessor, but it is corrupt and does not respect democratic ideals" (Rose, 198). Instead Russian political culture since the fall of the Soviet Union has displayed more acquiescence than resistance. It is possible that such widespread acceptance is learned behavior, or a legacy of "coexisting with despotism" (Rose, 56). Within the Soviet system there existed "the inability of any regime to achieve total control of society" which resulted in "a measure of freedom" for ordinary Russians to live as they pleased (Rose, 56). This



“uneasy coexistence” “provided a space in which people could lead lives free of the intrusive monitoring of the regime” (Rose, 57). In other words, Russians are accustomed to managing the interference of a strong government. They are more willing to live under an effective semi-autocratic regime rather than an ineffective semi-democratic one.

## **V. IS THE BEAR BACK?**

Russian military, national identity and political culture today all display the only static, enduring quality attributable to the country: change. Through geo-political upheaval, dramatic social transformation and mercurial state objectives Russians have sought to defend an identity and country which at times they themselves do not seem to understand. It is important to note however that for Russians, difficulty defining oneself does not equate with a lack of self-understanding. The rest of the world may not understand or properly label them, but each individual knows what it means to be Russian. Nevertheless, from a critical perspective the challenges yet to be overcome by post-Soviet Russia suggest a significant degree of instability within the country. Lack of clear military strength and objective is a major impediment to the implementation of expansive foreign policy. The temporary adoption of pragmatism as a new Russian identity does not conceal the underlying issues of alienation and sense of entitlement which can easily tie down the country. Finally, the adaptive and acquiescent nature of Russian political culture suggests grudging support which would prove ineffective and ultimately detrimental should the country achieve superpower status in the near future. Certainly there are aspects of Russian culture and practical capability which support the notion of a Russian-led global community. Ultimately though, significant remaining challenges prove that Russia has not yet reached the point of hegemonic capability.

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