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Politics Without Strategy? Decision-making in Russia

Immediate Report

by Dr Andrew Monaghan

Research Division
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These are the key findings from a discussion of a high level group of Russian experts in Rome.

Politics Without Strategy? Decision-making in Russia

Russia's prominence on the world stage this year, reflected in the Presidential elections in March, the publication of a new foreign policy concept combined with proposals for a reconsideration of the European security architecture in July and the conflict with Georgia in August, demands increasingly sophisticated analysis.

Indeed, as Russia becomes increasingly active internationally, including in its dealings with (and in) its neighbours and also member states of NATO and the EU, Russia has to be understood on its own terms and by its own logic: essentially Russia will not become "like us", adhering to values as espoused by NATO and the EU, but develop in its own way. Western-style "democrats" and "liberals" are not a strong political force in Russia and do not appear ready to mount any form of challenge for the foreseeable future.

For all its apparent strength, Russia faces significant political and economic problems that dominate the short, medium and long term outlooks. How the system being established will react to the stress of these problems is a key question, as is the extent to which the rather narrow group at the top of the political hierarchy can remain successfully on the defensive. A document "Challenges 2020: The View from Russian Business" published by the Russian Ministry of Economic Development notes, for instance, that while the business community is relatively optimistic about domestic and global economic challenges, it is concerned about political trends within Russia.

In this context, a seminar was held at the NATO Defense College to discuss decision-making in Russia and, consequently, to what extent it is possible to talk of a coherent Russian "Grand Strategy". This wide-ranging discussion addressed the roles of the key formal structures in Russia and also the more informal nature of decision-making. Specific points of focus were the roles of the security services and big business.

External influences

To an important degree, Russia is reacting to external influences and developments, developments which they view with apprehension.

- Moscow is concerned about the EU and NATO as models for development in Europe and the shared neighbourhood – a "destiny choice model" which Russia cannot offer. NATO particularly should not underestimate the seriousness of the opposition, indeed hostility, it faces in Russian policy making circles.
 - This lies at the root of Moscow's opposition to the enlargement of these organisations, particularly the possibility of Ukrainian and Georgian membership of NATO.
 - Moscow's dissatisfaction with the roles of these organisations and their relationships with Russia has undoubtedly played a role in influencing the

themes of Moscow's new foreign policy concept and proposals to discuss remodelling the European security architecture and seems to be playing a role in the formulation of the new Military Doctrine.

- It also may inform Moscow's attempts to formulate the concept of "Sovereign Democracy" and propose Russia as a different type of role model.

Domestic influences

There is a considerable degree of continuity in domestic Russian politics over the last decade, both in broad processes (the strengthening of the FSB, for instance, which began under President Yeltsin) and in personnel (the great majority of the key figures have been prominent for many years, often enjoying long tenure of their official positions). President Medvedev fits in to this continuum.

Decision-making is geared to the stability of this continuum, not its reform. Yet even with this strengthening of key organs and "state power" and continuity of personnel, the extent to which Russia has a clear sense of strategic direction remains unclear.

- The blurring of roles and responsibilities between state organs on one hand and the state and the private sector on the other erodes the authority of government institutions.
 - Quarrelling between senior members of Russia's security services has perhaps been overplayed, but there appears to be a tendency for senior figures throughout the Russian élite, in both government and business circles to think in the short term, more like rivals than partners.
 - A number of tensions exist between the authorities: for instance the creation of the Federal Investigation Service was opposed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs.
 - The creation of State Corporations may suggest a countervailing tendency towards the privatisation of the state, and that the state may begin to contract again. Certainly, it further blurs roles and responsibilities.
- Beyond general consensus on broad principles, there appear to be a number of tensions under the surface in the formulation of strategies and concepts.
 - The agencies involved in drafting processes often do not agree, resulting in considerable delay and the necessary subsequent intervention of senior executive authorities.
 - There is ongoing disagreement over the development strategy to 2020, particularly between the Ministry of Economic Development and the Ministry of Finance.
 - Russian analysts note a shortage of new people in the system to develop new ideas.
 - The growth of the Russian bureaucracy – a phenomenon which has not yet been sufficiently clearly mapped out and understood in the west – is a major factor in the decision making process, particularly as an important engine of growing corruption.
 - The Russian leadership often appears to be obliged to react to events, rather than implementing a strategic plan to define them.

Conclusions

Decision-making processes in Russia remain opaque. In many ways, despite efforts to enhance the authority of the “power vertical”, and the growing strength of specific entities, they also appear to be essentially passive in that there is no clear overall idea of where the Russian leadership wants to be and to take Russia in the medium to long term. This gives Russian policy inherently short-term and reactive qualities.

Combined with the blurring of responsibilities and the erosion of institutional authority, this lends a certain fragility to political stability in Russia. While the top leadership of Dmitri Medvedev and Vladimir Putin remain in authority, internal quarrels and rivalry amongst the élite are likely to continue to be limited and contained. The government and presidential administration contain senior figures whose views on Russia’s future development appear to differ quite widely. Medvedev and Putin ordain and contain this balance of forces. Without their authority – for whatever reason that may be – the potential for quarrels to emerge more forcefully and to lead to major political change is considerably higher.

Nevertheless, this lack of an overall strategy gives latitude to the different organs to take independent action which can be both dextrous and effective. Russia, with considerable resources at its disposal, will become an increasingly challenging partner for the states and organisations of the Transatlantic Community.