

## From the Soviet Union to Russia, the Fall and the Rise of an Empire

Vjollca Muaj

Pranvera Dibra

Prof .Asoc. Dr Doctoral Program in Social Sciences

### Abstract

The fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War incited the beginning of a new World order of international relations and the creation of new actor roles in this new stage. In the last 25 years Russia's role as a great power had a different context, from an empire in free fall to the revitalization of its international role. The main question this work asks is: Which is Russia's position in the international arena after the disintegration of the Soviet Union? The answer to this question is given by researching under the prism of the creation of a new vision, around what Russia represents in two and a half decades and how its role is represented in a different context of international relations. It will be also researched on the perspective of Europe as an instrument to balance and obstruct the Russian expansion. The work will be based on the analysis of the archival information of the period of time. The methods of historical, logical and comparative analysis have been used, together with various literatures from different researchers and politician. This study aims to explain the forms and weaknesses of the regime and the causes which brought to the disintegration of the Soviet Union, in other words the causes of the fall of the communist bloc: Yeltsin's presidency (1991-1999); Russia's new context in the international arena and the role of the new actors will be explained: Putin's presidency (1999-2008); and the explanation of the revival of Russia's international role as a great power (2009-2014). This work also highlights the foreign policy, the alterations and the contradictory character of the leadership, the change of presidency between Putin and Medvedev and the problems with Ukraine and Crimea. With the fall of the communism, which incited the divide of the balances from the bipolarity of the Cold War, the changing economic world, in the midst of other alterations, presented a new equilibrium of power. As a descendent of the communist empire, Russia is fully convinced that it has the right of rebuilding of the empire through expansion. It also knows that the main part is not the will, but the ability. If it can, Russia will rebuild the destroyed empire through a constant expansionist policy. And if they can, the USA and the west will hinder the building of this empire.

**Keywords:** geopolitics, international relations, Soviet Union (USSR), contemporary history, European Economic Community (EEC).

### Introduction

The fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War made the entry into the new world order of international relations as well as new roles of actors in this new scene.

In the last two decades, Russia's role as a great power gained another meaning from a falling empire to the resurgence of its international role.

And this should be done by focusing on "Russia" as a rational state of nuclear power, and not on Vladimir Putin as an irrational and aggressive person.

It is Russia that dictates Putin's actions and not vice versa. It was the military power of the Soviet empire that dictated the aggressive policies of its leadership during the Cold War, was the Russian inability that dictated Yeltsin's humiliating policies against the West, and it is the economic and military power that dictates the policies of the new Russian leadership.

As a successor to the communist empire, Russia is convinced that it "owns" the right to rebuild the empire through expansion. It also knows that the most important thing is not "if it wants" but "if it can."

If it can, Russia will rebuild the destroyed empire through a constant expansionist policy. And if they can, the US and the West will restrain the building of this empire.

For the US it is very important to stop the rise of Russia, and any other state, as a world power. In this context, the US can use two strategies;

**The first strategy** is to use neighbor countries and Europe as instruments to balance and stop Russian expansion. After all, Russia should be the first Europe's concern, then the concern of the United States. The US has many regions around the world to control, and it should be very cautious in using its economical as well as military resources and potentials.

**The second alternative strategy** to stop global Russian expansion would be the use of American power and tactics pursued during the Cold War. This strategy would be much more expensive than the first, but anyhow necessary. Given that Russia is a nuclear power, the only option is the destruction of the Russian economy. The Soviet empire is economically unstable not due to weak military power, but because of the economic powerlessness to keep itself and the army operational. It should be understood that Russia is willing to suffer economically for some strategic gains. The West must do the same and temporarily disconnect from neoliberalism. But the US must make Russia's suffering as big as possible, to the extent that Russia's strategic benefits become its disaster, as in the late 1980s. And that will only happen when the US, as in 1947, have understood, and there is no doubt about the sources of Russian conduct (The Sources of Russian Conduct).

Former United States ambassador to Russia, Thomas Pickering says that after 1991, the world developed in some ways in line with Russia's expectations and dislikes of the United States. He says:

***"The Russians at first spoke of multiple polarities, a term disliked in the United States. But in the end, Russia, China and India, and to a certain extent both Europe and Japan, are all players on the world stage, maybe here can be included also Brazil. We will have to work with them and find new ways of cooperation."***

**Geopolitics of Russian return** – Undoubtedly Russia's geopolitical power is rooted in its inherent geographical weaknesses. There are some natural barriers that protect the heart of Russia and this requires Russia to expand and consolidate in the territories around its center to provide a cover zone as protection from outside powers. When Russia devoured people and resources, it grew from a small Eastern European principality in the 13th century to the Great Duchy of Moscow, which became the Russian Empire and then grew to become the Soviet Union, one from the largest states in the world's recent history.

However, this enlargement has accompanied every Russian state with two fundamental problems: it has led Moscow to conflict with a number of foreign powers and has given the difficult task of ruling the occupied people (who were not necessarily happy for being ruled by Russia). Russia's geography asks her to expand to stay strong, but paradoxically, the more it expands, the more difficult and costly becomes the governance of its great territory. Meanwhile, Russia's lack of access to the oceans has cemented its position as a land force, but it has condemned it economically and has weakened its position compared to other powers that have direct access to the oceans of the world. These factors have created a cycle in which Russia's power grows and falls. When Russia is growing, it becomes a major regional power if not a global player, and when it falls, it's just a matter of time before it gets up again. So, when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 at the end of the Cold War and Moscow lost control over its constituent republics and fell into internal chaos, these circumstances did not guarantee that Russia was forever removed from the international scene and that a one-polar world dominated by the United States would last forever. Certainly by the end of 1990, Russia was severely weakened as a geopolitical power; her economy was in chaos and it faced a military defeat in Chechnya, which gained de facto independence and was threatened with similar moves within Russia.

But things began to change with the beginning of the new millennium. Starting with Vladimir Putin's presidency in 2000, Russia was able to turn its losses into another more successful war in Chechnya and Russia's position on the suburbs of the former Soviet Union began to grow steadily. A number of factors influenced this, including Putin's internal consolidation to overcome the chaos of the 1990s, high global energy prices, and American involvement in the Islamic world.

**Overview about Russia's return** – In the context of the factor's return, Russia's imperative has been to prevent external influence and reconstruct it. Of course, Russia's plans for realizing this imperative differ from one region to another in the former Soviet Union countries, in every state in Eastern Europe, the Baltic, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Russia's revival was not without problems. Since independence, every former Soviet state has developed its imperatives: Consolidating power within the country and maintaining a kind of sovereignty. Also, various foreign powers are competing with Russia for influence in any former Soviet country. Therefore, the imperative of Russia and other former Soviet states often crashes

and sometimes leads to ever-volatile relations, even with some of Moscow's most loyal allies. But power is a relative concept, and now most states in the former Soviet Union are too weak to remain independent of Russia and the outside powers in the suburbs can not reach Russia's power. With Putin's arrival in the presidency begins a new chapter for the Russian state and it is important to appreciate the progress that Moscow has made in its reestablishment in the former Soviet Union countries, and what does the projection of power mean in it's future.

### ***Russia's foreign relations.***

Here is an overview of the economic crisis in Russia and possible political and diplomatic implications. "Russia will never be as strong as it will be, but will never be as low as it would to others." Baron Otto Eduard Leopold von Bismarck (1815-1898). [1] During the first years of the twenty-first century, Russia had a longer and more prominent expansion cycle since the end of the Soviet Union in 1991.

According to the Lord of Kremlin, "Russia has a history of over a thousand years, and it has almost always used the privilege of conducting an independent foreign policy. We still do not know yet, if it now intends to change this tradition.

### ***Russian foreign policy in today's world order***

The collapse of communism as a political, economic and social system and the breakthrough almost the close of the eyes of the Soviet Union marked the beginning of a broad political and academic debate on the country and the role of post-Soviet Russia in the world and on the consequences it would produce great transformation in the domestic and foreign politics of this country. Many of the pessimistic predictions made two decades ago remain so pessimistic today, if not to say more. Russia continues to remain outside the main institutions that manage today's Europe. However, it is vigorously engaged in issues of regional and global security, mostly through a diplomatic and political dimension with significant normative dimension that clearly fit the national interests of Russia in the international arena: preservation of its status as a great power and as a "sovereign democracy" in an "international pluralistic system of political regimes".

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Moscow's foreign policy has followed a trajectory in which two major periods are distinguished: the period when the Kremlin Head was Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999) and that when, after Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin came to power (from 2000 to today). However, anyone who followed the developments in post-Soviet Russia after 1991 must have noticed that each of these two periods has had two phases, each of which has its own characteristics and features of a political philosophy, where Moscow was led for its strategy and foreign policy. These stages are analyzed below more or less in details.

**Russia's Foreign Policy Under President Boris Yeltsin** Russia's first post-Soviet foreign policy began with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1992 and with the introduction of Russia as an independent entity in the international arena.

### ***Liberal internationalism***

Russia's foreign policy at this **first stage** could be termed a "liberal internationalism" policy. It was largely managed by *Andrei Kozyrev*, Russia's first post-Soviet foreign minister (October 1991-January 1996), under President Boris Yeltsin. This policy was mainly characterized by aspirations *for Russia's integration into the international community, but continuing to maintain the status of a great power*. Kozyrev tried to combine two seemingly contradictory principles: on the one hand, "guaranteeing the rights of Russian citizens and the socio-economic development of Russian society" and, on the other hand, Russia's behavior as "a great normal power in its relations with other countries, realizing its interests not through confrontation, but through co-operation. "Efforts to turn Russia into a democratic country, remaining a great force, characterized the Kremlin's foreign policy essence since the beginning of 1993, although these two objectives were not in harmony with each other. However, the main tendency of this policy was to favor rapprochement with the West and could be regarded as a continuation of the efforts of the late Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. The stated ambition of Russia at that time to join the "civilized" world was, in fact, evidence that for Moscow it was already clear that the Soviet experiment had disconnected Russia from the "standards of civilization" and from that part of international society that apply these standards.

### **Competitive Pragmatism**

The **second phase** of the first period can be said to have started in January 1996 when Yevgeni Primakov, a renowned international relations expert, was appointed as Foreign Minister and (in 1998-1999) became Prime Minister of Russia.

Primakov's arrival at these posts was conditioned - and provoked - by two important factors: the success of communists and populist parties in the 1995 parliamentary elections and the Kremlin's concern that Russia was losing its role and influence on the international arena, which was evident, particularly, with President Bill Clinton's policy of NATO expansion with Central and Eastern European countries. In such circumstances, Russia's foreign policy became more pragmatic, focusing more on "competition" with other major powers than co-operation with them. Such a "competitive pragmatism" can be said to resemble the Khrushchevian politics of "peaceful coexistence", which meant a continual struggle with the West, but that, in the nuclear weapons era, would not necessarily go to a military clash. Such a policy Primakov added a series of post-communist and "Eurasian" ideas, which had to do with the power of continental blocs. The basic principle of his foreign policy was therefore the idea of a continuous competitive dynamic in Russia's relations with the West in the framework of promoting a *multipolar global system*. This was, in fact, a reductionist vision of international society, limited to realistic notions regarding status and power. Although this vision did not exclude co-operation with other major powers, he took into consideration, first and foremost, Russian interests.

In short, Primakov's foreign policy, on the one hand, looked back in the Soviet period and, on the other hand, aimed to make Russia a place in the competition between the great powers in the new world order created after the end of the Cold War. What Primakov will be remembered mainly in the records of relations between Russia and the West was his return to Moscow in mid-flight as he was going to visit Washington on March 24, 1999, the day NATO began bombing Serbia, and only 12 days after Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic had been admitted as NATO members. These two events witnessed not only the endemic crisis in relations between the Kremlin on the one hand, and Washington of the North Atlantic Alliance on the other, but also the limitations of Primakov's approach to the conditions where Russia's role and influence on the global scale had fallen.

### ***Russia's foreign policy under President (and Prime Minister) Vladimir Putin***

These were the circumstances in which Russia was found by Vladimir Putin in May 2000, where he was elected president of the country. His arrival at the head of the Kremlin marked a new era in Russia's foreign policy, especially in its relations with the West. This policy aimed - and managed - to overcome the contradictions in Moscow's foreign policy management, inherited from the time of Kozirev, as well as the competitive logic of Primakov's pragmatic approach. Considering the collapse of the Soviet Union as the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century," Putin has tried -not without success- to accommodate Russia in the new global order created after the Cold War.

By his relatively young age (48) when he became president of Russia, the great popularity, especially among young people, nationalistic rhetoric (based on the idea of Russian national identity and national dignity) and his authoritarian methods, should be added another important circumstance that could help explain the success of Putin's longevity at the head of the Kremlin. Historically, all Kremlin leaders have taken the reins of power without the consent of their predecessors. Lenin did not want his ruling successor to become Stalin; Stalin would never have chosen to be replaced by Khrushchev; the latter, downed by coup, would not have chosen Brezhnev as his successor; Brezhnev would hardly have chosen to be replaced by Andropov; Andropov would not have chosen Chernenko, neither Chernenko Gorbachev nor the latter Jel'tsin. Only Vladimir Putin was the choice of his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, and only Putin, after two mandates as president, put in Kremlin with his own hands for four years (2008-2012), Medvedev, to later remove him again from the post of president and to become the president of Russia himself again. With the extension of the president's mandate from 4 to 6 years (in 2008), if Putin is re-elected president even after his current mandate, in 2018, he will be in charge of Kremlin until 2024 (at that time just 72 years old), so a quarter of a century-longer than any Soviet leader, except Stalin. Putin's longevity and relative stability in Russian politics have had their influence on domestic politics and, especially, in Russia's foreign policy.

Putin's arrival at the head of the Kremlin, ten years after the end of the Cold War, can be said to mark the beginning of a period of "hot peace", which continues to characterize it even today, even more than a decade ago, Moscow's relations with both Washington and Brussels.

But in its foreign policy, Moscow follows two standards. In its relations with the former Soviet republics, namely those countries that are Russia's immediate neighbors, or its "outer closer world" (*blizhnoe zarubezhe'e*), Russia pursues other principles than those that seek to regulate relations with the United States and with the European Union. It seems to be following a new version of the Brezhnev Doctrine on the "limited sovereignty" of the former Soviet republics in Central Asia, considering them as its natural sphere of influence, or as the "area of Russia's interests". The war in Georgia, military intervention and the annexation of Crimea, and Russian engagement in violent developments in eastern and southern

Ukraine are vivid evidence of this policy. On the other hand, in its relations with the West, Russia maintains a formally normative attitude, seeking respect of international norms.

### **Conclusion**

It can not be denied that after Putin's arrival as head of Kremlin, Russia's foreign policy has taken on a truly global dimension. During this period, Moscow has become again interested and economically engaged in Latin America and Africa, while hydrocarbon prices in global markets have revitalized its traditional interests in the Middle East. However, once a great empire and, as part of the Soviet Union, one of the two superpowers of the world for nearly half a century, Russia can not be - today and in the future - more than a *proxy* empire, hence a power, the influence of which can only extend to those regions and in those countries, mainly of Central Asia, where it has "vital interests". In a world like this one today, there is no place for other neo-imperial ambitions by Russia, a country whose economy produces only 2 percent of the world's GDP.

### **Putin returns Russia**

It was logical that a man like Vladimir Putin would emerge from the 1990s chaos. Putin was deeply embedded in the KGB and the old security mechanism. During his time in St. Petersburg, he was integrated with the oligarchs, as well as with the new generation of economic reformers. Putin realized that in order to revive Russia, two things had to happen. First, the oligarchs had to be afraid of listing their activities with the Russian government. He owed much to those who he was trying to defeat - in fact he did an example or two - but he did not owe them so much as to allow them to continue to rob Russia until the end.

He also realized that he had to bring some sort of order into the economy for reasons of domestic and foreign politics. Russia had huge energy reserves, but it was incapable of competing in world markets in industry and services. Putin focused on the only advantages Russia had: energy and other primary goods. To do this he had to take a degree of control of the economy - not enough to turn Russia into a Soviet model, but enough to leave behind the liberal model that Russia thought it had. Or else, to leave behind the chaos. His instrument was Gazprom, a dominant government company whose mission was to use Russian energy in order to stabilize the country and create a framework for development. At the same time, overthrowing economic liberalism, Putin imposed controls on political liberalism, limiting political rights. This process did not happen overnight. This was something that has evolved over more than a decade, but its end result was a Russia that not only was economically stabilized, but also had an impact on the world. For Putin, the consequences of political and personal freedom were not a high price to pay. From his point of view, 1990's freedoms had greatly damaged Russia. Putin sought to create a viable platform for Russia to defend itself in the World. The dismemberment consternation, supported by Western powers in his mind, had to be overthrown. And Russia simply could not be ignored in the international system if Russia was prepared to continue its position as a victim.