

Old or New Cold War?

Is the New Cold War a Continuation of the Old?

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The launch of perestroika and in particular the collapse of the Soviet Union, which, shortly before, was still characterized by US President Ronald Reagan as the “Evil Empire”, gave the public in the West the impression that the Cold War had definitively ended¹.

After Russia’s occupation of the Crimea and its subsequent annexation, Washington and Brussels imposed certain economic sanctions on Russia. Later, when Russia started supporting the separatists in south-eastern Ukraine through unofficial paramilitary groups and weapons - and especially after the Malaysian Airlines Boeing was downed on the territory of Ukraine - the West introduced harsher sanctions, in response to which Moscow in its turn also introduced retaliatory economic sanctions. NATO is to deploy its forces at new bases in Eastern Europe, in response to the situation in Ukraine.

Given these events, we now frequently can hear opinions about the start of “a new Cold War,” although US President Barack Obama considers that “It's not a new Cold War”². Obama’s position can be explained as follows: as a politician he does not want relations with Russia to deteriorate further and he still hopes that the situation might improve. Therefore he avoids using the term ‘Cold

¹ See, for example, T. W. Simons, Jr., *The End of the Cold War?* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990).

² See, for example, S. Holland and A. Yukhanov, “Obama says strains over Ukraine not leading to new Cold War with Russia”, *Reuters*, July 29, 2014, online at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/07/29/us-ukraine-crisis-sanctions-obama-idUSKBN0FY27Q20140729>.

War'. But analysts have to confront the reality and they will recognize that, obviously, a Cold War is going on between the West and Russia. The question is whether this is really "a New Cold War"³ or that it is a continuation of the *Old Cold War*.⁴

The Cold War: A Suspended Process?

In my opinion the Cold War has never ended.⁵ It was rather suspended, as, during a certain period, one of the parties in this war had not the capacities to continue. To test the correctness of this thesis, we have to go back to history.

When Mikhail Gorbachev launched the perestroika he did not intend to dissolve the USSR. He wanted to give communism a more "human face" by introducing elements of democracy, freedom of speech, and the market economy into Soviet socialism. In reality the Soviet state and its economy were so weak that the introduction of these elements facilitated the growth of national liberation movements in some of the Soviet Republics, as a result of which the USSR collapsed.

The economy of post-Soviet Russia was too weak to continue the Cold War. This led to the West's misconception that Yeltsin's Russia was democratic and that the Cold War was over. In reality, a weakened Russia needed the economic support from the West. Therefore Moscow was ready to accept the West's recommendations about carrying out economic reforms and it received significant financial assistance after realizing the recommendations. As a result, the West convinced itself that it had gained the upper hand in the Cold War and that the Cold War had become history. However, this victory was not final at all: Russia only temporarily stopped its resistance until it recovered its economic strength.

As concerns Moscow's imperial ambitions, it has never given these up, which is proved by the active role Russia played in the conflicts that emerged in the post-Soviet space (Nagorno-

³ See, for example, E. Lucas, *The New Cold War. How the Kremlin Menaces both Russia and the West*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2008); M. MacKinnon, *The New Cold War. Revolutions, Rigged Elections, and Pipeline Politics in the Former Soviet Union*, (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2007).

⁴ V. Papava. "The End of the Frozen Cold War?" *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 3 (1) – Winter, 2009, http://www.cria-online.org/Journal/6/Done_%20End%20of%20the%20Frozen%20Cold%20War_Vladimer%20Papava.pdf.

⁵ V. Papava. "The New Threats of the Old Cold War," *e-politik.de*, February 18, 2009, <http://e-politik.de/artikel/2009/the-new-threats-of-the-old-cold-war/>.

Karabakh, Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia). Moscow was and is not interested in solving these conflicts peacefully, as it would lose effective leverage to influence the parties involved in these conflicts.

It is noteworthy that Moscow demonstrates the use of double standards: if separatism emerges in Russia proper, Moscow fights the separatists “with fire and sword” - a clear example of this is Chechnya, while in the cases of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and now Ukraine, Moscow backs the separatists.

The Georgian and Ukrainian Lessons

Only after Russia’s economic recovery, it presented itself to the West as its main enemy. In 1999, when NATO conducted its military operation against Yugoslavia to support the Albanian population in Kosovo, Moscow openly confronted the West. However, the West was so convinced that the Cold War was over that it did not pay serious attention to this confrontation.

From the end of 2003, when prices of crude oil and petroleum products started to increase, Russia obtained a steady source of income, the inflow of which no longer depended on implementing the West’s recommendations and on reforming the economic system in the country. In fact, from now on Moscow suspended the implementation of economic reforms and started strengthening the ‘power vertical’ of the state by using its petrodollars.

In the light of the decreased economic dependence on the West Moscow easily heightened its confrontational rhetoric and started actions characteristic of the Cold War. This confrontation between Russia and the West became obvious when on February 17, 2008, Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence. Kosovo’s independence was recognized in the shortest period by the leading nations of the West, and not only by these. Russia declared that such a precedent could not be accepted and threatened that the recognition of Kosovo’s independence would be followed by reciprocal action by Russia. Russia carried out the threat a half year later, when, in August 2008, it unilaterally recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

It can, therefore, be said that with the collapse of the Soviet Union the first phase of the Cold War ended and that its second phase started in 2008. In August 2008, after the five-day war with

Georgia, Russia openly occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Having recognized their independence, Russia is carrying out a “creeping annexation”. Back in 2008 one could hear that, if necessary, Moscow would conduct in both regions referendums on joining Russia. In these referendums Georgians, evicted from these regions, would not participate. After the August war ended a survey conducted in Russia showed that most respondents were convinced that Russia defeated the US military forces, not Georgia’s, on the territory of Georgia. Unfortunately, “the Georgian Lesson” was not enough for the West to recognize that Russia had resumed the Cold War with the West.

As a result, “the Georgian Lesson” was followed by “the Ukrainian Lesson”: because there were no negative consequences for Moscow in the case of Georgia, it repeated the same actions in Ukraine and annexed the Crimea without any serious steps being taken by the West against Moscow. Although the situation is exacerbated in the south-eastern region of Ukraine, Moscow is still convinced today that it will be able to keep the Crimea regardless of the outcome of the rest of the conflict. It is a fact that only after “the Ukrainian Lesson” experts started to speak intensively about the Cold War. The circumstance that this Cold War is not a new Cold War is proved first and foremost by the fact that it has the same opposing parties and that there is no significant difference in the confrontational methods applied.

The Cold War “scenario” means that there must be a bipolar system in the world. This was the case when the USA was the leader of the West, while the USSR used force or bribery to keep the countries with so called socialist-communist authoritarian regimes under its control. Even though Moscow was economically weak during the post-Soviet period, it tried to support authoritarian and totalitarian regimes to oppose the West. Moscow has done and is doing its best to support such political figures, such as Slobodan Milosevic, Hugo Chavez, Bashar al-Assad, etc. Although during the Yeltsin period Moscow took its distance from Pyongyang, this changed after Putin came to power. The relations between the two countries were activated and on May 5, 2014, Moscow wrote off the North Korean debt. It is also noteworthy that Moscow does not consider it appropriate that serious measures be taken against the nuclear program of Pyongyang. Moscow does not hesitate to support corrupt leaders of various countries, among them leaders who have been exiled from their home countries and whom Moscow promptly granted political asylum (for instance, Aslan Abashidze from Georgia, Askar Akaev from Kyrgyzstan, and Viktor Yanukovich from Ukraine).

In the process of establishing itself as the opposing pole to Washington it was important for Moscow that at least a few UN member countries recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It was not difficult for Moscow to find such countries whose regimes are supported by Russia (namely, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru - as for Vanuatu and Tuvalu, they first recognized independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but later withdrew it). To be fair, it will not require much effort for Moscow to increase the number of countries supporting the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but Moscow is not in a hurry, because, as was said before, it does not exclude the possibility of annexing them to Russia. It is obvious that Moscow has created the opposing political pole to Washington, protecting a number of undemocratic regimes (including those which openly oppose democracy).

At the Beginnings of a New Empire

Recently many politicians and experts have frequently recalled the phrase of Vladimir Putin that the break-up of the USSR was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of 20th century. It is, therefore, no surprise if we say that establishing the Eurasian Union is now a crucial project for Moscow. The theoretical and ideological basis for founding a Eurasian Union is the geopolitical doctrine of Eurasianism, which was created in 1920s and 1930s. The doctrine is clearly imperialist⁶ since its key belief is that Russia can exist only as an Empire and that Russia's historical function is to extend its protection to all neighboring states on the Eurasian continent⁷.

The project of a "Eurasian Union" is an expression of Moscow's imperialist ambitions. The project envisages that Russia not only integrates with the former Soviet Republics, it envisions a wider integration with China, India, Iran, Serbia, Macedonia, and other European or Asian countries. At the moment the project of the Eurasian Union includes Belarus and Kazakhstan along with Russia (it is planned that Armenia and Kyrgyzstan will soon join this Union). It is noteworthy that the Customs

⁶ M. Laruelle. *Russian Eurasianism. An Ideology of Empire*, (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008).

⁷ V. Papava. "Eurasia Versus Central Caucaso-Asia: On the Geopolitics of Central Caucaso-Asia." *CICERO Foundation Great Debate Paper*, No. 09/8, December, 2009, http://www.cicerofoundation.org/lectures/Vladimer_Papava_On_the_Geopolitics_of_Central_Caucaso_Asia.pdf; V. Papava. "The Eurasianism of Russian Anti-Westernism and the Concept of 'Central Caucaso-Asia'," *Russian Politics & Law*, Vol. 51, No. 6, 2013.

Union of these three countries will come into force as of January 1, 2015, according to the Agreement signed on May 29, 2014.

Like the European Union, the Eurasian Union envisages to establish supranational structures and the introduction of a single currency (the Eurasian Ruble) in the future. However, the similarity between the European Union and the Eurasian Union is only superficial, because they are essentially different. The European Union was not founded in order to realize the imperialist ambitions of any of its member countries. The two regional blocs also differ as concerns the values on which the Unions are based. The European Union is based on the principles of democracy and equal rights of its member states. The Eurasian Union, on the contrary, is based on the necessity of recognizing Russia's hegemony.

The Effect of Globalization

A peculiarity of the resumed Cold War is that it takes place in a globalized world. Because of the globalization the economies of the West (especially Europe's economy, not so much that of the USA) and Russia are intertwined. Russia is the main exporter of oil and natural gas to many European countries, for which Moscow receives important revenues. On the other hand is Russia's large market very attractive for Western investors. In retaliation to the economic sanctions, imposed by the Western countries against Russia after the events in Ukraine, Moscow introduced in its turn sanctions and closed the Russian market for agricultural products produced in the EU member states.

At this stage both poles of the Cold War - Washington and Moscow - have their specific weaknesses. The weakness of the former is that European Union greatly depends economically on Russia and the weakness of the latter is its economic backwardness. In this second phase of the Cold War that pole will gain an advantage which will be the first to overcome its weakness.