

The Russia of Vladimir Putin:  
The Heir of Eastern Despotism  
Turns Towards the West

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Daniel VERNET

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Ifri - 27, rue de la Procession - 75740 Paris Cedex 15 - France  
Tel: 33 (0)1 40 61 60 00 - Fax: 33 (0)1 40 61 60 60  
E-mail: [ifri@ifri.org](mailto:ifri@ifri.org) - Site Internet: [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org)

**Daniel VERNET** is the Director of International Relations of the French daily paper *Le Monde*. He was its correspondent in Bonn (1973), Moscow (1977) and London (1981), and was also its Chief Editor (1985-1990) and its Edition Director (1991).

He published: *Le Rêve sacrifié. Chronique des guerres yougoslaves* (Paris, Odile Jacob, 1994), *La Renaissance allemande* (Paris, Flammarion, 1992), *URSS* (Paris, Le Seuil, 1990).

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## Abstract

The 9/11 attacks accelerated the rapprochement between Russia and the West, particularly the United States, which was already under way. The “new strategic framework” sought by George W. Bush is emerging little by little. Vladimir Putin did not take long to commit himself, by immediately expressing his solidarity with the Americans following the Al Qaida attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. This solidarity has not remained merely verbal. It has taken concrete forms (for example, access to bases in Central Asia to combat the Taliban) and has led to broader agreements (drastic cuts in the Russian and American nuclear arsenals, creation of the NATO-Russia forum).

To date, however, this “westernisation” of Russian foreign policy has not been accompanied by a similar movement on the domestic policy side. On the contrary, the characteristics deriving from “Eastern despotism”, visible in the post-Communist, post-Yeltsin Russia, have tended to become more pronounced. This is how Vladimir Putin has reacted to the triple crisis –over identity, politics, economics– that his country was going through when he took over as President in 2000.

Inasmuch as the Americans have made the fight against terrorism the main discriminant for international relations, they hardly feel concerned by this situation and have even explicitly expressed their approval (along with the Europeans) for the continuation of the war in Chechnya. They are even prepared to make Putin's Russia the paragon of virtue it most certainly is not.

Putin himself does not seem to have chosen between the different options before him: the Chinese model (despotic capitalism), forceful reformism (imposition of liberal measures), fighting terrorism (leaving aside the internal situation) and “dual Westernisation” (external and internal), the only true guarantee that Russia will remain within a “civilised” system of international relations.

## Introduction

The 9/11 attacks changed the strategic order, transforming the way Westerners see Russia and the way Russia sees itself. The questions asked before Oussama Ben Laden's network attacked the United States (US) are still valid: how to deal with Russia? Should it be integrated into the Western system of political and economic relations, despite its inconsistent respect for the norms on which this system is based? Should Russia be included in the list of States where promotion of democracy remains a major objective –a sort of nation building for the identity of a former empire which has lost more than half of its internal possessions (former Soviet Republics) and all of its external dependencies (former People's Democracies)? Is it necessary to give Russia the seal of democratic respectability –notwithstanding all evidence to the contrary, such as the continuation of the war in Chechnya using intolerable brutal methods<sup>1</sup>)– as a condition for the development of a “strategic partnership” with Moscow?

These questions remain valid, just as the analysis of the political and economic system in Russia remains valid, yet the answers since 9/11 are different. Also different are the data of the “new strategic framework<sup>2</sup>” that the Bush Administration wishes to introduce into an international system still based on the Cold War, 10 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The situation has changed due to the choice made by Russia –no doubt one should say by Vladimir Putin personally<sup>3</sup>– to support the anti-terrorist coalition. Strategic or tactical choice? This alternative is perhaps pointless. On the other hand, another alternative is more meaningful over the long term: Will the “westernisation” of Russian democracy lead to a “westernisation” of domestic policy? In other words, will the choice of clinging to the US in the combat against Ben Laden and his networks, with all that this implies for Moscow in its relations with Islamic fundamentalism, result in a radical change in the

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Monde*, 24 April 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Speech delivered by George W. Bush on 1 May 2000 and declaration by C. Rice following meetings in Moscow, quoted by the *International Herald Tribune*, 23 July 2001.

<sup>3</sup> G. Iavlinski states that after the 9/11 attacks, V. Putin brought together the leaders of the parliamentary groups represented in the Duma and some provincial governors. During the meeting, two persons took a stand in favour of solidarity with the US, one for solidarity with Al Qaida and 18 for an attitude of neutrality. See *Obschaya Gazetta*, 16 May 2002.

Kremlin's domestic policy? There are no signs of this, especially since a positive answer to this question would lead to another question: what forces in Russian civil and military society would be in a position to support, if necessary, such a “Westernising” choice in relation to the Eurasian option, to take up the cleavages which –at least since Peter the Great– have marked the search for a Russian identity?

There are certain invariants in this search: Russia's place on the Eurasian continent, the integration into “civilisation”, which “westernisers” tend precisely to confuse with the West<sup>4</sup>, or the search for a sort of “third way”, sometimes purely Slavophile, sometimes Eurasian. This “third way”, when it has actually been implemented, has led to a form of “Asian despotism”. Stalinism is the most remarkable example of this, but “Putinism”, as it has been taking shape over the past two years, could provide another illustration. Viewing Russia (or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics [USSR]) as a great continental or world power is also part of these invariants. The method may change –integration or objection–, but the objective remains the same. The words of a researcher at the Moscow Centre for Strategic Studies, Andrei Piontkowski, are significant in this respect, even though they are closer to a formula than an analysis: “If America and Russia come closer together”, he declared to the German newspaper *Die Zeit*, “Europe's clout will diminish. We will revert to the model of the three great powers, when Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill decided everything. Now we have Putin, Bush and Blair”<sup>5</sup>.

Over the past 15 years, from the *perestroika* of Mikhaïl Gorbachev onwards, the dominant trend in Russia has been marked by the will of the “westernisers” to assert themselves, with however setbacks; attempts to turn back the clock; and anti-establishment activity by conservative forces that has been both theoretical –questioning the alliance with the Westerners as such– and practical –based on the absence of concrete advantages for Russia of a policy viewed as “follow my leader”.

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<sup>4</sup> It would be interesting to compare this approach with the report on the Germans between the democratic path and firm roots to the West. See on this subject the book of H.A. Winkler, *Deutsche Geschichte, der lange Weg nach Westen (German History, the long road to the West)*, Munich, C.H. Beck, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> *Die Zeit*, October 2001.

A few dates stand out. 1987, the speech that Mr. Gorbachev delivered before the United Nations General Assembly: the General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party exalted the “common values” for all humanity, turning his back on the theory of class struggle at the international level. 1991, the Gulf War: the USSR approved the intervention against Iraq. 1991 again, the end of the Soviet Union: under Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Andrei Kozyrev, diplomatic policy was “glued” to the West –what he called rejoining the ranks of “civilised peoples<sup>6</sup>”. 1992, Stockholm: during a meeting of the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the same A. Kozyrev delivered two speeches a few minutes apart, astonishing his peers by his attitude. In the first, he depicted a foreign policy reminiscent of the USSR under Breznev, with Russia asserting itself while challenging Western positions virtually constantly; seeking allies among the adversaries of the West; opposing the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), etc. In the second, he reverted to the policy of post-Communist Russia, warning however that a return to the past would be inescapable if Westerners continued to take Russia's support for granted, i.e. if they stubbornly insisted on not taking Russia's interests into account in order to win its support. In reality, Kozyrev was announcing the end of one period of post-Communist diplomacy.

In the summer of the same year (1992), President Boris Yeltsin scheduled a visit to Japan during which he offered to sign a declaration on the normalisation of Japanese-Russian relations, a move pointing towards a settlement of the issues of the Kuriles islands, claimed by Tokyo. At the last minute, however, this text was taken off the agenda under pressure from conservative elements within the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs, who had regained their strength despite their involvement in the putsch of August 1991 and the ensuing purge. Yuri Kunadze, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, who was behind Boris Yeltsin's trip to Japan, was sacked shortly thereafter. The team of “liberals” around Kozyrev was dismantled little by little<sup>7</sup>. The crowning point of this shift came in 1996, when Kozyrev was replaced by Soviet policy veteran Yevgeny Primakov. To a large extent, it symbolises the victory of the first line of

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<sup>6</sup> *Komosomlskaya Pravda*, 9 June 1992.

reasoning over the second. Moreover, it coincides with the first war in Chechnya.

Parallel to these foreign policy shifts, a debate on the nature of Russian identity sprang up in Russia. This debate is not new, either in terms of its very existence or in terms of the language in which it is couched. Whereas during the last years of M. Gorbachev and the first years of post-Communism, the dominant tendency (one could say the “hegemonic” tendency, as defined by Gramsci, was to stress Russia's membership of a greater whole ranging from Vancouver to Vladivostok, the tone changed in the mid-1990s. Russia was officially seeking a national ideology in a mixture of religious orthodoxy, Eurasian tradition, attachment to the land and nostalgia for Communism. Foreign policy embraced variations of the ideological debate of which it was itself one of the components.

With Primakov, Yeltsin's Russia did not opt for systematic hostility towards the West. In 1997, they even sponsored the Founding Act on Russia-NATO relations, which set up the Joint Russia-NATO Council in exchange for the admission of Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland (three former members of the Warsaw Pact) to the Atlantic Alliance. But Primakov, who had learned the ropes during the Cold War and under several General Secretaries of the Soviet Communist Party, used Russia's weak points as negotiating strengths, and its power to cause harm as a way of asserting itself, always with the same aim: seeing to it that Moscow had the right to a say in world affairs –or better still, a veto–, particularly as far as Europe was concerned. With the Joint Russia-NATO Council, this policy was a limited success in 1997 before turning into a setback two years later.

The war in Kosovo, launched despite Russian opposition, showed in fact that Russia had failed to obtain this famous veto right it sought and that Westerners could take decisions in Europe, without it or even against it. The Joint Council was not a genuine substitute for the “directory” of powers which B. Yeltsin was pushing within the OSCE. The Kosovo mishap explains why the hypothesis of a mere “revitalisation” of the Joint Council, as suggested at one point by NATO,

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<sup>7</sup> The episode is recalled by I. Fedorov, of the Moscow Centre for Political Studies in an article entitled “Sizable Russian Military, Foreign Ministry Opposition to Putin Noted”, in *Moskovskiye Novosti*, 16 October 2001.

was not enough to compensate Moscow for the prospect of an enlarged Atlantic Alliance in the near future. It did not give the Kremlin the right of “co-management” in European affairs it was seeking. First Primakov, then his worthy pupil, Igor Ivanov, a graduate of the MID school, pursued the most traditional Russian policy, based on minimal, case-by-case cooperation with Westerners and backed by developing ties with countries viewed as hostile by the US (Iran, North Korea, Libya, etc.) and by flaunting the theory of balance of power (rapprochement with China, which led to the Treaty of July 2001).

It would be erroneous to speak of a “double game” because this policy is conducted in broad daylight and does not openly contradict agreements signed with the other party (apart from one very important reservation: encouraging the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction). Rather, it features a two-pronged approach which Moscow hopes will pay off twice. An almost caricatural illustration of this two-pronged approach was provided once again in early October 2001: while Putin was meeting for the first time with NATO Secretary General George Robertson in Brussels and assuring him of his total support in the anti-terrorist fight, Russian Defence Minister Serguei Ivanov was signing an arms deal worth US\$ 300 million dollars per year<sup>8</sup> in Moscow with his Iranian counterpart. One could also ascribe to this two-pronged approach Russia's refusal to participate in the security-building force in Afghanistan, as well as the quasi simultaneous sending of troops to Kabul, even if they were from the “Ministry for Emergency Situations”.

When the present Russian President came to power in early 2000 as the heir apparent to B. Yeltsin, the question many asked was: what does Putin want? There is no final answer as yet. On the contrary. The beginnings of a possible answer might well be called into question by the watershed of 9/11, without however resolving the issue. In 2000, Putin inherited a country going through a triple crisis: an identity crisis –Russia no longer knew who it was or where it was going; a political crisis– the State, undermined by corruption, had disintegrated to the benefit of mafias and/or oligarchies, and institutions had been instrumentalised in favour of presidential power; an economic crisis –in

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<sup>8</sup> *Le Monde*, 3 October 2001

ten years, Russia's Gross National Product (GNP) had been halved<sup>9</sup>, and neither the breathing space offered by the devaluation of the rouble in 1998 nor the oil price hike solved the problem. Let us give Putin credit for having sought to resolve this triple crisis. By rehabilitating possibly contradictory historical references (Andropov and Sakharov –a return to the music of the Soviet national anthem with words by Serguei Mikhailov, already the author of the Stalinian national anthem), without however encouraging any “rethinking” of modern-day history; by reconstructing the State based on two slogans: “the dictatorship of the law” and “the vertical of power”; by putting public finances back on an even keel and by taking on the oligarchies (or at least some of them) while concentrating economic power in companies controlled by “friends”.

Yet an assessment of Putin's performance after two years in office is somewhat mixed and must take into account not only intentions but also criteria for evaluation (Russia in transition towards... democracy?) and the social forces set in motion. This study cannot be exhaustive. Rather, it will proceed by a series of soundings on points likely to shed light on the first question: what policy with regard to Russia? This question cannot be answered until other questions have been if not resolved at least outlined: What state is Russia in? What policy does this Russia intend to implement?

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<sup>9</sup> A. Lynch, "Manger son capital, subir sa géographie: jusqu'à quand ?" ("Eating up one's capital and enduring one's geography: for how long?"), *Critique internationale*, no. 12, July 2001.

## Part I

### **“Democratically Legitimised Autocracy”**

For many observers of Russian political life, the main characteristic of Putin's presidency has been a return to stability, for the first time after 15 years of jolts and changes. Everything began shortly after Gorbachev's election to the head of the Soviet Communist Party. *Perestroika* (“restructuring”) replaced *zastoi* (“stagnation”). By launching the movement of economic and political reforms which were to modernise and to a certain extent democratise the Soviet Union, Gorbachev unwittingly signed the latter's death sentence. He announced the end of the “Socialist camp” and the transformation of the “People's Democracies” of Central and Eastern Europe into plain democracies, based on the model of the Western countries from which these States were artificially separated immediately following the Second World War. The transformation was successful for the majority of countries. This was not as true for Russia, for various reasons which go beyond the purview of this paper<sup>10</sup>. Let us briefly mention the history, tradition and central position of the USSR within the Communist system as opposed to the people's democracies which represented the periphery, as well as the absence of institutions not subject to the totalitarian hold of the Party and its organs for ideological or police repression (unlike the Catholic church, for example, in Poland).

Transplanting democratic institutions has only worked to a certain extent in Russia, even though electoral timetables have more or less been respected since 1991. Yeltsin's great merit was that, in 1996, whereas the presidential battle seemed inexorably lost, he did not give in to the advisers urging him to postpone the elections or even cancel them between the two rounds (the war in Chechnya would have provided a pretext for declaring a state of emergency), even if it meant that he had to avail himself of all possibilities offered by the State to ensure his re-election. One should not forget, however, that this Constitution, thus respected to the letter, came into being after the Russian

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<sup>10</sup> In his biography of M. Gorbachev, *Le Mystère Gorbatchev. La Terre et le destin (The Gorbachev Mystery: The Land and the Destiny)*, Paris, Editions du Rocher, 2001, A. Gratchev remarks ironically in an allusion to Putin's KGB past: “After the fall of the 'Iron Curtain', former dissidents came to power in several countries. In Russia, the reverse was true”, p. 375.

“democrats” around Yeltsin had abolished Parliament from the barrel of a gun in 1993.

An operation similar to the 1996 presidential election was conducted in 2000, when Putin came to power after Yeltsin's sudden resignation in late 1999. The letter of the Constitution was respected, but in conditions which allowed Lilia Shevtsova, one of the best analysts of Russian policy, to speak of an “elected monarchy” under Yeltsin and of “democratically legitimised autocracy” when describing Putin's regime<sup>11</sup>. One could call it the “democracy of the *vojd*”, *i.e.* of the “guide”, whether he be boyar, Czar, General Secretary of the only party or the heir, and all the good people had to do was approve the appointment –in the case at hand, by universal suffrage<sup>12</sup>.

The difference between Putin's regime and Yeltsin's regime is that the former is based on bureaucratic control and on what the Russians call “structures” or “Ministries of Strength” (police, army, secret services), rather than on the old parental or organised crime-based networks operating behind the scenes and prospering at the time of Yeltsin and the “family”. “There was a stated intention to train a regime in bureaucratic and authoritarian power within the framework of an elected monarchy”, writes L. Shevtsova<sup>13</sup>.

The strengthening of the “vertical of power” took several forms, without it being necessary to reform the Constitution. The implementation of mechanisms which emptied principles of their meaning, hindered the development of pluralism and restricted freedom of expression was enough. On the one hand, the country was divided up into seven large entities placed under the leadership of “Governor Generals”, appointed by the President and responsible for supervising elected leaders. Away from the capital, former members of the Soviet *nomenklatura* often got the Constitutional Court to let them remain in power indefinitely. The carving-out of “Governor-Generalships” was completely arbitrary and took place in total disregard of both geographical ties and historical grounds. At the most, one might note that the new entities practically

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<sup>11</sup> L. Shevtsova, *Elective monarchy under Putin. Perspectives on the Evolution of the Political Regime and its Problems*, Moscow Carnegie Center, Briefing Issue 1, January 2001.

<sup>12</sup> “La démocratie du vojđ” (« The democracy of the 'vojđ' »), *Le Monde*, 4 January 2000. It will be noted that one of the objectives of Gorbachev's reform was to break with this tradition. The reform succeeded to a certain extent and Mr. Gorbachev himself was in a way, its first victim.

<sup>13</sup> L. Shevtsova, *op. cit.*

coincide with military districts, albeit not as a general rule<sup>14</sup>. On the other hand, Putin had limited the powers of institutions which did not depend directly on the presidency and which would have been in a position to challenge his authority. The Duma went from an uncontrollable assembly to a rubber-stamp body thanks to the creation *ex nihilo* of a presidential party (“Unity”) and to the resultant weakening of the Communists, whom Putin could now threaten purely and simply to ban. Another example was the Committee on Pardons, set up by Yeltsin and chaired by a former anti-establishment writer, Anatoli Pristavkin, which was abolished outright by the President after several months of forced inactivity<sup>15</sup>.

As noted by another Polish researcher who has first-hand knowledge of the functioning of the Russian political system without fostering the naive attitudes of some unconditional admirers of Russia, Putin prefers “positive incentives” (persuasion, encouragement, bribes, corruption, guarantees of all kinds) to negative pressure (fear, blackmail “administrative” methods), “but we used both<sup>16</sup>”, as could be seen from the action taken against the media group owned by Vladimir Guzinski and, in general, action taken by the authorities to curb freedom of the press. To leave nothing to chance, Putin appointed a KGB General, a former spokesman for the FSB (the political police that replaced the KGB), as Vice-President of the State television, placing him in charge of “security”. However, as General Alexander Zdanovitch said himself: “We all know that there are no former Chekists<sup>17</sup>”. In other words, once a Chekist, always a Chekist, and Zdanovitch intentionally employs the historical term used to designate members of the political police at the time of the Bolshevik Revolution.

Grigory Iavlinski, leader of the opposition party Labloko (“the Apple”), which represents the only truly “liberal” group (in the Western sense of the term), aptly explains the difference between the Soviet regime and the Putin system: first, the authorities try to persuade the opposition, to get around it, to rely on corrupt practices, and only then turn to repression as a last resort if the other means

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<sup>14</sup> B. Cichocki, Poland Institute, 17 May 2001.

<sup>15</sup> A. Pristavkine tells his story in a book entitled *La Vallée de l'ombre de la mort. La Commission des grâces, Russie 1992-2001* (The Valley of the Shadow of Death. The Committee on Pardons, Russia, 1992-2001), Paris, Pauvert (publication scheduled for autumn 2002).

<sup>16</sup> M. Menkiszak, *Putin: The First Year*, Warsaw, 10 May 2001.

have failed. One example is non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which were not authorised in the USSR. Putin did not ban them, he simply created State NGOs... However, observers noted that strengthening centralised power is not necessarily synonymous with consolidating the role of the State. This benefits a fraction - presidential power –more than the whole of public power.

When he arrived at the Kremlin, in order to build up his own power base, Putin was obliged to throw off the yoke of the “family” and the oligarchs who had put him on the throne. He therefore had to rely on other forces, and this process is nowhere near complete. It is not even certain that the problem has changed radically due to the turning point taken following the 9/11 attacks. In any event, Putin first relied on the “Petersburg Group”, *i.e.* on friends he encountered during his stint in St. Petersburg, in the KGB or in the “democratic” City Hall team, and on colleagues he met at the time. One of them, who might be called to play a critical role in a near future, is S. Ivanov, first Secretary of the National Security Council, then Minister for Defence. Ivanov is close to Putin. It is all the more astonishing that Ivanov has found himself out of sync with the President at least twice since 9/11: Once when he declared that there could be no question of Russia letting Americans use bases in Central Asia two days before Putin gave the green light, and once when he signed an arms deal with Iran precisely when Putin was celebrating Russia-NATO cooperation. One explanation is that the President changed his mind too quickly for his Minister and friend to anticipate; another is that they share tasks between themselves, while a third is that they weeca thie tues d id1dt.ticipTh thredsfsf w th5.9(i)3.1( th)9.3(5.9(iar)69

the country is the other side of our elective autocracy”, writes Alexander Tsipko, a political analyst who was one of the first, at the time of the USSR, to put his finger on the “anomalies” of the Soviet system<sup>20</sup>. This is not really new with Putin; it was already the case with Yeltsin, he adds. But, “encouraged by the political success of KGB Colonel Putin, the *siloviki* are showing more of a taste for politics”. Without them, “Yeltsin would never have been able to make Putin his successor (...). All the rest was simply a matter of electoral manoeuvring”. Tsipko explains that in 1996, the clash between non-Communists and Communists was a decoy which enabled Yeltsin to gain the upper hand over Ziuganov, for “it is now clear that the letdown triggered by liberal reform and the democrats did not so much broaden the social base of the Communists as it underscored the need to bring the *siloviki* into politics<sup>21</sup>”.

Yet the *siloviki* do not, by tradition, have any spontaneous sympathy for reforms, particularly liberal reforms, or for a policy of *entente* with the West. This has two consequences: first, Putin may well have difficulty in imposing his “new course” (see below) on his supporters and allies, and second, the pace of the reforms could well be slowed to the point where it is no longer fast enough to modernise the Russian production apparatus or reverse its decline. Marek Menkiszak notes that “fundamental structural economic reforms, key social reforms and significant changes in the security field have yet to be implemented<sup>22</sup>”. For him, this is due to objective difficulties, to dissension within the apparatus and above all to “the lack of political will among the main leaders (first and foremost Putin) and to the absence of specific presidential techniques for exercising authority”.

As L. Shevtsova points out, the President needs to maintain a high popularity rating (70% of the population trust him, according to opinion polls), and to do so he must decide as little as possible, avoid shaking anyone up and try to maintain the status quo while pretending to reform: “The optimum form of the existence of such power [the elective monarchy] is stagnation”, she writes. “Incapable of obtaining the desired results and refusing to admit its setbacks,

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<sup>20</sup> A. Tsipko, “The Generals Have Taken Power in Russia: What Can We Expect from Them?”, *Prism*, a monthly publication on the post-Soviet States brought out by the Jamestown Foundation, December 200, vol. 6, N° 12, part 2. Tsipko is an associate member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the Institute of International Economics and Political Science Research.

<sup>21</sup> A. Tsipko, *ibid.*

the team of leaders *mimics an action already imitated*. [It] is increasingly tending to *pretend* that it is putting in place the rule of law, that it is developing uniform rules of the game, that it is winning the war in Chechnya, and that it understands the logic of the overall process under way<sup>23</sup>. Imitation is capable of creating the impression that the goal pursued can be reached easily, thereby creating an illusion of success. [...] Clearly, it was by pretending to achieve successes that the authorities turned 2000 into a lost year for economic reforms<sup>24</sup>.”

In other words, Putin's policy is to reform what the Potemkin villages were to the development of Russia under Catherine the Great. Yet the picture is a bit more complex insofar as Putin's government managed to get a Duma at its beck and call to accept reforms which his predecessor could not get passed. One such example is tax reform, which resulted in both a simplification of the system and a lowering of tax rates, making tax evasion less attractive for households and companies. One could also mention the adoption, in late 2001, of a Labour Code, as well as a new land ownership instrument, which had been in the pipeline for years and which is vital to the future of Russian agriculture. In some respects, Putin's policy, a mixture of reformism and authoritarianism, could indicate that the Russian President has chosen, *mutatis mutandis*, the “Chinese way”, often mentioned in Russia in the 1980s (one also spoke, in reference to the same thing, of the “Chilean way” insofar as the Pinochet regime combined economic liberalism with political dictatorship).

Nevertheless, far from moving ahead since 1991, Russia has tended to regress over the past few years from many points of view as far as democratic principles are concerned. This is not necessarily a handicap when it comes to dealing with the country, but it is best not to delude oneself<sup>25</sup>. Moreover, this is the main idea of the Bush Administration, which is not tempted by nation building, any more in Russia than elsewhere. Condoleezza Rice explained that US foreign policy must henceforth be guided by national interests, not

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<sup>22</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> Italics inserted by author.

<sup>24</sup> L. Shevtsova, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> A. Tsipko feels that on the contrary, Presidents Bush and Putin are linked by a certain social and moral conservatism and that the 9/11 attacks tipped the scales in both the US and Russia in favour of security at the expense of liberty, a development which he welcomes, in *Prism, op. cit.*, October 2001, Vol. 7, N° 10, part 3.

“humanist interests” or “the interests of the international community”, as in Clinton's time<sup>26</sup>. This attitude has been a welcome change for the Russians, whose feelings run high when they recall US-Soviet-Russian relations at the time of George Bush, Sr. Even before the election of George W. Bush was officially confirmed, Sergui Karaganov, Director of the Council for Foreign Policy and Security and Deputy Director of the Institute of Europe, expressed satisfaction that George W. Bush would “devote more attention to Russia as a major geopolitical actor and that, on the other hand, [he] was more indifferent to internal Russian affairs, and that attempts to influence Russian domestic policy would diminish<sup>27</sup>”. Moreover, in this context, he specifically referred to Chechnya and human rights.

Is this attitude of indifference with regard to the domestic Russian situation tenable over the long run? The East-West Institute, a Washington-based bipartisan think tank, noted recently: “The US and the West in general cannot hope to pursue the type of relations we are envisaging with any country whatsoever that fails to adhere to the basic principles accepted internationally: principles of democracy, human rights, market economy and transparency<sup>28</sup>.” In other words, the Bush Administration is up against the same choice as previous ones: either close its eyes to a situation that flies in the face of democratic principles and embark on a strategic partnership with Russia, prompted entirely by *Realpolitik*, or insist that the Russians comply with commitments they have often signed without respecting, before considering Russia's full and complete integration into international (democratic) institutions.

That was before 9/11. Since then, the discriminant being the attitude towards terrorism, the problem has changed somewhat, as the other criteria have given way to this one. Here, it should be added that George W. Bush did not wait for the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon to express his understanding of Putin's policy in Chechnya: Putin “is extremely concerned by manifestations of extremism and by all that extremism can represent for Russia

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<sup>26</sup> C. Rice, *Foreign Affairs*, January-February 2000.

<sup>27</sup> 14 December 2000.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in the *International Herald Tribune*, 2 August 2001.

[...]. As you know, so am I”, he declared in July in Genoa, at a joint press conference with the Russian President<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Quoted in the *International Herald Tribune*, 23 July 2001.

## Part II

### An Economy in Ruins

Should we help the Russian economy? Some observers reproach Westerners for not having invested enough in Russia, for having doled out subventions and, above all, for having encouraged the Russians to apply a “shock therapy” that was totally unsuited to an economy which needed (re)building, not reforming after 70 years of rigid planning, negation of the elementary laws of good sense, and the absence of any market other than the black market. Another manifestation of the black market was the barter system between Soviet firms, which relied on the services of *tolkatchiki* (from *tolkatch*, literally “string-pulling”) to locate the raw materials they needed for their activities. It was not by chance that this form of the black market and barter prospered after 1991; it was the only one with which the Russians were familiar. The way in which privatisation took place further heightened the illegal or even organised-crime nature of the post-Communist economic system. “Privatisation consisted of legalising this stranglehold [on the assets of the Soviet State that could be converted into cash] which occurred outside any legal framework”, writes Allen Lynch<sup>30</sup>. “The old Soviet elite, but not necessarily those highest up in the hierarchy, turned their former bureaucratic power into private appropriation, thereby protected themselves against the consequences of the fall of the Soviet regime, which was moreover one of the reasons for the peaceful nature of this collapse<sup>31</sup>.”

In the meantime, Russia's GNP is half that of the Netherlands, and its foreign trade volume is on a par with Denmark's. Exports are dominated by the sale of petroleum and natural gas, and are more or less in-existent in value-added sectors. Lynch writes that China, which more than doubled its GNP over the past decade, is starting to catch up with and even pass Russia according to several indicators that are characteristic of economic development not reflected by raw GNP figures. The capital flight which seems however to have tapered

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<sup>30</sup> A. Lynch, *op. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> A. Lynch mentions several books on the collapse of Soviet institutions and its consequences, in particular D. Lane and C. Ross, *The Transition from Communism to Capitalism. Ruling Elites from Gorbachev to Yeltsin*, New York, St Martin's Press, 1999; and S. Brucan, *Social Change in Russia and Eastern Europe: From Party Hacks to Nouveaux Riches*, Westport, Praeger, 1998.

off, the obsolescence of the production apparatus, the accumulation of a foreign debt of US\$ 148 billion “which places Russia in a position of imminent default in relation to the private and public creditors of the G7 countries” have not been tackled by the government, which could have taken advantage of the breathing space provided by the crisis of 1998 and the oil price hike to try to correct the *disequilibria*<sup>32</sup>. Growth is expected to run at around 5 to 6% this year, while Putin himself has admitted that Russia would need to grow at an average annual rate of 8% for 15 years to catch up with Portugal's current level of per capita income. Moreover, the pauperisation of a growing share of the population gives the average figures a tinge of the unreal. At the beginning of 2002, Putin, acting in the best Soviet tradition, asked his economic experts to forecast higher growth rates, as the effects of the rouble's devaluation were starting to wear off.

It is clear that under these conditions, it is totally artificial to admit Russia to the G8 while shutting out other industrial or commercial powers. Some Russian commentators feared moreover at the beginning of the year that Russia would lose its seat, but their concerns were unfounded: Russia has been admitted to the G7-G8 for political reasons that have nothing to do with the economy, and will remain there for those same reasons. In 2006, it will even be responsible for organising the G8 summit. Yet this in turn raises the fundamental question of why the Westerners pay special attention and give preferential treatment to a country which is by no means in the lead today in terms of its human rights record, its economic results, or even its regional influence. Not to mention the deterioration of its military apparatus, even though, according to *The Russia Journal*, defence spending continues to eat up one-fourth of the State's budget<sup>33</sup>. The energy, petroleum and natural gas reserves are too easy an explanation to be accepted at face value. Likewise, on 29 May 2002, at the annual Russia-European Union (EU) summit, the EU admitted Russia to the ranks of the market economy countries on the basis of criteria that make one wonder.

Granted, Russia's economic condition has improved somewhat over the past two years, following the financial crisis of 1998 which brought the rouble back

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> 23-29 December 2000.

down to a more realistic level and the oil price rise. This improvement has had a contradictory effect, by initially acting as a disincentive to the pursuit of structural reform efforts. Nevertheless, domestic investment currently accounts for 22% of GNP as compared with 17% in 1998. The government has put its finances back in order and the budget shows a surplus estimated at 3% for the second year running –a positive trend not entirely due to the back pay owed to civil servants and pension benefits in arrears. However, some US\$ 13 billion continues to flow out of the country every year in search of tax havens, *i.e.* four times the volume of total foreign investment. Putin's economic advisors claim that Russia needs domestic investment more than foreign investment, particularly in the small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which are often the victims of a defective banking system. Notwithstanding, in 2001 foreign investment in China totalled US\$ 48 billion, as against a paltry US\$ 3.1 billion for Russia.

However, capital flight must be seen in perspective. The fact that Cyprus is one of the top five countries investing in Russia would tend to indicate that “national” capital, after being exported and laundered abroad, returns to the country. As for foreign investment as such, a quote from Witte, Russian Prime Minister at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, quite appropriately recalled by Alena Ledeneva and reproduced in a little book called *Unwritten rules: How Russia really works*<sup>34</sup>, reveals the Russians' atavistic distrust: “I am not afraid of foreign capital [...]. I am afraid of exactly the contrary: that our way of doing things has such special characteristics, so different from the way things are done in civilised countries, that few foreigners will want to do business with us.” One of these specificities still in existence today is the affirmation that “the imperfection of our laws is offset by their non-application”. It would not be in the interests of any Russian authorities to change this reality despite all of Putin's calls for the “dictatorship of the law”, for “it is in the interests of the Russian State to maintain a degree of non-transparency insofar as this opaqueness strengthens the position of the apparatus<sup>35</sup>”. Experts consider that Russia, in the best of

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<sup>34</sup> Centre for European Reform, Essays, May 2001.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

cases, is currently at the same level as countries like Poland or Hungary were in the mid-90s, at the beginning of the transition phase<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> *Wall Street Journal*, 9 November 2001.

### Part III

#### **A Plethoric yet Ageing Arsenal**

The German expert Lothar Rühl, former Defence Secretary, recently compiled an inventory of the Russian nuclear arsenal (as at 1<sup>st</sup> January 2001): 324 missiles on board submarines (SLBMs), including 19 nuclear submarines, in addition to 180 missiles on 11 submarines which are not operational but are included in the START negotiations: 776 ICBMs which, according to START II, may carry only a single warhead (these are the ICBMs that Putin at one point threatened to “mirv”, *i.e.* to equip with multiple warheads if the *US unilaterally denounced the ABM treaty*); 74 heavy bombers carrying cruise missiles and nuclear payloads (up to ten per plane). Russia is in the process of building the *Topol-M2* intercontinental missile (SS27, in the NATO nomenclature). 10 were delivered in 1999 and four in 2000. Production should continue at the rate of about 6 per year until 2006. Construction of SSNX-28 missiles was halted after three failed tests, and work on a giant submarine designed for the launching of SLBMs was stopped in August 2000. However, Russia purchased 11 heavy *Tupolov* bombers from Ukraine<sup>37</sup>.

Yet the figures in themselves mean little. According to Bruce Blair from the Center for Defense Information (CDI), “the Russian Army cannot perform properly the traditional missions that are essential for the country [...]. The only exception is nuclear deterrence, and even this mission is becoming increasingly difficult to perform [...]. The nuclear forces are rusting away, they break down and are not repaired [...]. The Russian Navy is endeavouring to send out one or two submarines equipped with ballistic missiles, and at times cannot keep a single one at sea<sup>38</sup>”. And equipment is not the only problem. Troops lack food and lodging and wages are paid late. “The strategic missile commander recently revealed that 80% of his men’s families lived below the poverty threshold<sup>39</sup>.”

In addition to the dangers linked to inadequate maintenance, the decrepit state of the nuclear arsenal poses two types of problems for Moscow. First, it places

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<sup>37</sup> *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 24 July 2001.

<sup>38</sup> CDI.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

Moscow in a position of weakness in negotiations with the US, indeed, some Republicans ask themselves why Washington should make concessions because, in any event, Russia cannot maintain its arsenal as it stands and will have to reduce it, with or without an agreement. Second, reducing the number of warheads could enhance Russia's vulnerability, as the excess ICBMs on the other side increase the likelihood that one of them will reach its target. This idea reflects the traditional fear of the Soviet military establishment, which has always counted on redundancy and the saturation of offensive systems.

In November 2000, however, Putin accepted the principle of drastic cuts in the nuclear arsenals of Russia and the US, provided that, as the Russian President said at the time, the Americans continued to respect the ABM treaty. The process of reductions in strategic weapons came through the Cold War and survived it, as Aleksander Pikaev of the Moscow Carnegie Center writes<sup>40</sup>: "Abandoning this process without appropriate compensation would be tantamount to creating a dangerous rupture in relations between Washington and Moscow." Yet this is the path chosen by George W. Bush, who prefers unilateral or coordinated decisions, in any event "informal" ones, to the major agreements negotiated for months or even years, as was the case between Washington and Moscow during the Cold War. Putin is not in a position to reject this new approach, despite his moderate reaction when the US pulled out of the ABM treaty. More or less official Russian commentators continue to sing the praises of treaties like SALT (*Strategic Armament Limitation Talks*) or START (*Strategic Arms Reduction Talks*). Washington and Moscow met halfway: the text on arms reductions which Putin and Bush signed on 24 May 2002, during the American President's first visit to Russia, is "binding, whether it be a treaty or a simple agreement", according to the US Ambassador in Moscow, Alexander Vershbow. It is a general, 3-page text, in contradistinction to the some 500 pages of the SALT and START treaties which made provision for all possible hypotheses and violations, but will nevertheless be submitted to the respective parliaments for ratification.

What does Russia expect in return and what could it obtain? The Kremlin's insistence on the ABM treaty was first of all a question of principle. The

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<sup>40</sup> Moscow Carnegie Center, Briefing, February 2001, N° 2.

Russians did not want to give up a sure thing for an uncertain alternative and scrap the system of international agreements on which Soviet diplomacy had worked for decades. There was also a tactical aspect. In recent months, any foreign visitor passing through Moscow was practically obliged to invoke the ABM treaty. "France and Russia deem it essential to guarantee international strategic balances in the new context stemming from the Cold War", explained the joint Franco-Russian declaration published at the close of Jacques Chirac's visit to Moscow on 2 July 2001<sup>41</sup>. The ABM treaty is not specifically mentioned<sup>42</sup>, but the declaration alludes to "existing instruments of this balance". The Russians managed to obtain the support of the Europeans, at the risk that the latter could find themselves isolated if the US were to withdraw from the ABM treaty without bringing the Russians' wrath down on them as initially promised. This is indeed what happened, but no one mentions it any more.

As far as Putin is concerned, the stakes are far bigger than the text of the ABM treaty, which is nearly 30 years old and has already been amended at least once. The Russian President is prepared to follow his American colleague when the latter hopes to write "some extraordinary history"<sup>43</sup>. The Russian President was afraid of letting himself get locked into a discussion on a treaty that was effectively "obsolete", as the members of the Bush Administration put it, while the danger came from elsewhere, less from the National Missile Defense (NMD), as the Russian believed and as the Americans let them believe –but Putin recognised that "Russia's security will not be endangered by the US plans [deployment of the anti-missile shield] for at least a decade to

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<sup>41</sup> The text goes on to say: "To take fuller account of the new strategic context and in particular the emergence of multipolarity, care should be taken to ensure that they are not replaced by a non-binding system that would pave the way for new forms of competition. They [France and Russia] consider that, when it comes to defining the conditions of strategic stability, nuclear deterrence based on the principle of abundance remains as relevant as ever."

<sup>42</sup> Fortunately, for France would have looked foolish indeed if it had appeared to be out-Heroding Herod, by defending a treaty to which it was not a party whereas Russia was clearly not as interested as its propaganda indicated. It must be said in the defence of the French diplomats that the Quai d'Orsay was not enthusiastic about the very idea of a joint Franco-Russian declaration, which was finally imposed by the Elysée.

<sup>43</sup> Statement by George W. Bush to the *Wall Street Journal*, quoted in the *International Herald Tribune*, 21-22 July 2001.

come [...]. It is not ballistic missiles that represent the essential threat” but weapons of mass destruction, biological, chemical or other<sup>44</sup>.

The future of nuclear deterrence poses a bigger headache for Russian experts, and not only for the above-mentioned partisans of “redundancy”. “As it enjoys unprecedented superiority in the field of conventional weapons, the US could afford to make deep cuts in its nuclear forces on its own initiative while maintaining breakout potential”, writes A. Pikaev<sup>45</sup>. “This would make it possible, in case of need, to return rapidly to significantly higher levels.” This is why Moscow is interested in genuine reductions in America's nuclear forces, not just the separation of a few nuclear warheads from their delivery vehicles – a totally reversible process, as Pikaev puts it, that Washington is trying to pass off as genuine disarmament.

This is also why a report by a group of experts, drafted *inter alia* by Vladimir Baranovski, Deputy Director of the Institute of Global Economics and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences, advocates reducing the number of warheads ready for launching in a few minutes and lengthening the reaction time between authorisation to fire nuclear weapons and actual firing (at present, 15 minutes for submarines)<sup>46</sup>. This is a sort of sequel to the Detargeting Act signed by B. Clinton and B. Yeltsin in 1994. This is also the view of Bruce Blair, of the Washington-based Center for Defense Information, who advocates, in addition to reducing arsenals, de-alerting all US weapons in silos: “By de-alerting most or all the current 2200 US weapons on high alert, a US NMD would appear far less threatening to Russia –Russia would in fact be able to de-alert its own strategic missiles and thereby greatly reduce the risk of a mistaken or unauthorised Russian missile attack<sup>47</sup>.” It is important for the US to show that, contrary to the fears displayed by other countries –and backed by the analysis of certain experts from across the Atlantic–, the NMD is a defensive system, not a shield allowing offensive manoeuvres by protecting the national territory from retaliation. The Nuclear

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<sup>44</sup> Interview with Putin published by the Greek media on the eve of a visit to Athens. Quoted by AFP, 5 December 2001.

<sup>45</sup> Moscow Carnegie Center, Briefing, February 2001, N° 2.

<sup>46</sup> Report quoted by *Russian AVN Military News Agency*, 31 October 2001. The aim is to reduce activated Russian and American warheads to a number equivalent to that of the warheads in the hands of France, Great Britain or China, according to another expert, quoted by the same agency.

<sup>47</sup> CDI.

Policy Review which the Pentagon has just submitted to Congress does not provide for the separation of warheads and delivery vehicles. And the text of the Moscow agreement signed on 24 May 2002 is ambiguous in this connection, to say the least.

Nevertheless, as Pikaev notes, Russia's fears are heightened by US superiority in the field of highly sophisticated conventional weapons, which it is not able to produce and for which there is no limitation agreement at present. A Russian TV commentator, Aleksander Beloglazov, adds that the debate on the ABM treaty could even be a trap designed to distract Russians' attention from the real stakes: "The US enjoys a considerable lead as far as the development of high-precision [conventional] weapons is concerned [...]. It is considering deploying nearly 100,000 high-precision weapons over the next decade, which will provide a genuine substitute for its nuclear arsenal [...]. Russia has been caught in a trap set by the Americans. All our diplomatic efforts have focused on the problem of the ABM treaty. During this time, America, with its high-precision [conventional] weapons, was preparing to live in a non-nuclear world, with all its power<sup>48</sup>."

This is the main challenge facing Russia. As Nicolas Petrakov, one of Gorbachev's economic advisors, puts it amusingly, "we have lost the Third World War precisely because we began to prepare in earnest, by sacrificing 75 to 80% of the combined efforts of the national economy for 'defence' and by supporting our foreign clients in Eastern Europe and in the Third World<sup>49</sup>". Putin surely does not wish to start all over again with the same adventure as the Soviet Union of the Cold War era, even though the reasons for the collapse of the system go beyond the technological and military race imposed by Ronald Reagan with the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), the forerunner of the NMD. On the contrary, Putin needs peace and quiet on the foreign front in order to see the modernisation and development of the Russian production apparatus through to a logical conclusion, without letting himself get caught up in a nuclear or conventional weapons arms race with the US. Consequently, it is not in his interests to pick the wrong front or tilt at windmills, even if they might yield

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<sup>48</sup> Russian TV broadcast, recorded and translated by *BBC Monitoring*: "Russian TV sees far-reaching design behind American ABM plan", 26 December 2000.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted by A. Gratchev, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

a few artificial laurels for him. He has understood that ten years after the end of the Cold War, he no longer needs to maintain at great expense a radar station in Cuba, “the jewel in the crown for Russian intelligence services<sup>50</sup>”, or a naval base in Vietnam.

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<sup>50</sup> P. Felgenhauer, in *Moscow Times*, 1 November 2001.

## **Part IV**

### **From the “Near Abroad” to the Anti-Terrorist Coalition**

When Putin became Prime Minister, in autumn 1999, a few months before being designated as Yeltsin's heir apparent, foreign policy advisors and commentators, including Serguei Karaganov, were urging Russian leaders to refocus on internal affairs and give priority to economic recovery before throwing themselves back into the great game of international politics where they felt that Russia, given its (passing) weakness, had nothing to gain, as the past decade had shown. To back up their position, they based themselves on the Kosovo experience, where the Westerners had acted not only without taking the Kremlin's views into consideration but also clearly against its will.

This temptation to withdraw echoed another temptation, which surfaced in 1996 when Primakov replaced Kozyrev at the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: concentrating on the “near abroad”, at least in the narrow definition to mean the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the former Soviet republics. Putin did not give in to the temptation to withdraw, no more than Primakov was able to limit his diplomatic activity to the former USSR. Between immediately laying claim to the lost status of great power and putting off such a demand, there is a middle path which Putin appears to have chosen in relation to world affairs, without activism but also without abstentionism. First of all, by using the means which Russia still has at its disposal –relations with the CIS, rapprochement with China, cooperation with the “rogue states”– and subsequently, after 9/11, by immediately demanding a “natural” place in the anti-terrorist coalition. Yet the three preceding levers were not abandoned, especially in view of the fact that various schools of thought coexist within the presidential administration and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and of Defence as to the line to follow.

#### *The Commonwealth of Independent States*

The policy followed by Moscow with regard to the former Soviet republics differs from one country to another, depending on Russia's degree of commitment and presence. Moldavia seems to be on the verge of following the example set by Belarus in moving towards a union with Moscow at the urging of

its new Communist leadership. In the Caucasus, Azerbaijan has closer ties with Russia than with Georgia. The little republic presided over by Edward Shevardnadze is making eyes at the West but remains under Russian pressure, particularly as a result of secessionist demands in Abkhazia, which are all the more effective given Georgia's chaotic political situation and disastrous economic state. In other words, Russia still has means of influence which it most often wields through the organisations which have replaced the KGB or via a direct military presence, as in Tajikistan, to keep watch over the Afghan border and combat an Islamic rebellion inside the country.

This influence is not always brought to bear against the will of the newly independent States in question. Shrin Akiner, Professor of Asian Studies at the London School of Oriental and African Studies, notes that there is a demand for Russia in Central Asia because the former home country remains an important market for goods exported from these countries. "With regard to the threats posed by Islamic terrorists or drug traffickers", Akiner adds, "the Central Asian States do not have the means to cope with these problems on their own<sup>51</sup>." Uzbekistan being perhaps the only exception, *i.e.* a State with the means to defend itself. And he concludes: "Help [from Russia] is viewed as irreplaceable." Ever since the Afghanistan campaign, the question has been precisely whether Russian aid is "irreplaceable" or whether it is likely to be replaced by American aid.

The first negative reaction of the Russia diplomatic/military apparatus to America's intention to use bases in Central Asia to combat Ben Laden and his networks is perfectly understandable and totally consistent with the traditional line. Moscow views Central Asia as the "near abroad" but also as a "backyard" where the arrival of great power America can only be highly suspect. Why did Putin buck his own establishment and authorise use of these bases? There can be several answers to this question. The first and most simple is that he was hardly able to oppose it and preferred to give the impression that he was making a concession rather than being forced to accept a *fait accompli*. The second is that he paid a sort of entrance ticket for admission to the anti-terrorist coalition by endorsing a decision which, formally speaking, fell to the leaders of

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<sup>51</sup> Quoted by *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 21 February 2001.

the States concerned. A third answer, also related to the prevailing climate, pertains to the situation in Afghanistan: it was by no means in Putin's interest to hamper US action against the Taliban, which dovetailed with his own interests. "It is a unique situation where the Americans are fighting for the Russians' interests as they fight for their own", states Karaganov, who adds the following in relation to the Islamic threat to Russia (or in any event in relation to Russia's perception of such a threat): "It is highly likely that, in around two years, Russian soldiers would have had to do what the Americans are doing now [in Afghanistan]<sup>52</sup>." The Russians reportedly intended, several months before the 9/11 attacks, to bomb Afghanistan in order to cut off Taliban aid to the Islamicists of Tajikistan or even Chechnya. However, plans can exist without being implemented, and it is not very likely, regardless of what Karaganov says, that the Russians were prepared to repeat the disastrous experience of the 1980s in Afghanistan.

Notwithstanding, the fact that the Northern Alliance has returned to power in Kabul with the help of the US dovetails with Russian interests. Has the price paid with the arrivals of the Americans in former Soviet Central Asia been too high? Probably not, provides that one reasons not in terms carried over from the Monroe Doctrine but over the long run, in terms of the development of the region and the sharing of work and benefits. This is the fourth reason that explains the stand Putin has taken: Central Asia is not a zone set aside for Russia, too weak to bear the burden of its defence and its economic revival on its own. The Russian President may hope that Central Asia will be included in the wedding present of Russo-American cooperation, all the more so as certain leaders in Central Asia are in any event ogling Washington, and that in return, US leaders will not be too particular about respect for human rights in these countries.

### *Russo-Chinese relations*

Before 9/11, Moscow had put another iron on the fire, which could always come in handy if the hopes placed in cooperation with the US did not pay off. In 1996, Russia, China and three States of former Soviet Central Asia (Kirghizstan,

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<sup>52</sup> Interview with the newspaper *Troud*, 20 October 2001.

Kazakhstan, Tajikistan) founded the Shanghai Five, an organisation which could one day have represented a “modest geopolitical counterbalance” to Western alliances<sup>53</sup>. In 2001, Uzbekistan joined the “Gang of Five”. The body's main objective was to combat “separatism and terrorism” but also to show the US that neither Russia nor China was isolated, in the event that the US decided to pursue its NMD programme, “a factor which would have made an alliance between Russia and China very likely<sup>54</sup>”. Things are not that simple, either before or after 9/11. No doubt Washington, Beijing and Moscow were engaging in traditional triangular diplomacy, with each attempting to apply on its own behalf the principle defined in his time by Henry Kissinger: Washington had to be closer to both Beijing and Moscow than the two were to each other. At the time of the Cold War, the US and China had a common interest in countering the USSR's aggressive foreign policy. Today, Moscow and Beijing can embark on the same rapprochement against American hegemony, but they do not have the same means as Washington in the 1970s and 1980s. In the three-player game, they can be tempted by an alliance of two weak parties against one strong one.

Yet when he received President Jiang Zemin and signed with him a 20-year treaty of friendship and cooperation, Putin explained that “each State decides what to do and how to do it. It is possible [for China and Russia to work out a common position with regard to the anti-missile shield]. In practice, however, Russia is not preparing joint action in this field with other States, including China<sup>55</sup>”. The Russo-Chinese commitment is both strong and limited. Russia is China's main arms supplier, both for conventional arms and for high-precision weapons, including the destroyers deployed in the Straits of Taiwan. The *Sovremennyyi* class destroyers are equipped with *Moskit* cruise missiles intended for aircraft carriers<sup>56</sup>.

In 2000, the Chinese market absorbed 60% of Russian arms exports. These sales are supported in Russia by the military-industrial lobby, which benefits directly from transfers of equipment and technology, not only to China but also

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<sup>53</sup> R. Marquard, in *Christian Science Monitor*, 15 June 2001.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Press conference given by V. Putin, quoted in the *International Herald Tribune*, 18 July 2001. The treaty indicates however that “should a threat of aggression emerge, the two parties must immediately enter into contact and conduct consultations with a view to eliminating the threat that has emerged”.

to the “rogue states”. From 1992 to date, China has purchased 1 billion dollars' worth of arms per year. According to Pavel Felgenauer, a generally well-informed Russian military commentator, China also leases *Oscar II* type attack submarines (the same type as the *Kursk* which sank in August 2000): “China could equip its submarines with anti-submarine missiles, with its own nuclear warheads and thus keep US aircraft carriers at arm's length during a possible crisis in the area (Taiwan)”, adds P. Felgenhauer<sup>57</sup>. Russian experts have worked with the Chinese to upgrade their nuclear arsenal and their space industry. Trade, however, has stagnated at some US\$ 6-8 billion per year. As for the border dispute which was in the news during the 1960s and even gave rise to armed confrontations, it has given way to “peaceful cooperation, sometimes disturbed by drug traffickers, but not by soldiers<sup>58</sup>”.

Yet Russian-Chinese relations are no longer what they were in the first years of the post-Second World War era, up to the split between Khrushchev and Mao; the same holds true for the power struggle between the two countries, which explains the limits to cooperation. “Ever since the first Russo-Chinese contacts in 1680, Russia has always been the most powerful partner, the most advanced and the best connected to the rest of the world”, writes Dmitri Trenin, in a study entitled *China Concentrates the Mind*<sup>59</sup>. In the 1960s, when the relationship soured, the Soviet Union was still far ahead of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in terms of both conventional and nuclear weapons. Today, China's GNP is four to five times that of Russia's. “China is rapidly closing the technological gap which, in terms of per capita GNP, gave the Russians a feeling of superiority over their neighbours.” China's reserves are equal to Russia's foreign debt. “For the first time in over 50 years”, pursues Trenin, “the raw military balance no longer favours Russia, in either Europe or North-East Asia.” This situation is fraught with concerns for the future, for although the Chinese treat Russia with tact at present, “tact doesn't change realities”.

Yet some Russian observers are wondering whether the 1991-1994 agreements on the border with China will no be called into question by the

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<sup>56</sup> D. Trenin, Moscow Carnegie Center, Briefing, N° 5, May 2001.

<sup>57</sup> *Moscow Times*, 30 May 2001.

<sup>58</sup> D. Tretin, *op. cit.*

leaders in Beijing once the latter have settled the Taiwan question. In other words, after Hong-Kong and Macao, and possibly Taiwan, the Siberian territories given to Russia by unequal treaties could be the future victims of Chinese irredentism. Although Trenin does not agree completely with these dark hypotheses, he fears that Russia may be in the process of overstepping the bounds of good sense in its relations with Beijing. Granted, arms sales enable Russia to maintain the level of technological research and keep up its “vast and quasi moribund military-industrial complex”. “However, the exercise requires a keen sense of the limits with regard to military technology, between what is good to share and what is not wise to share<sup>60</sup>.” The “Chinese card” is a difficult card to play.

#### *Relations with the “rogue states”*

This card is also marked. Putin wanted to show the Americans that Russia was capable of establishing cooperation ties or even partnerships with States which are sources of concern for the US, such as North Korea, Iran, Libya, etc. But he cannot go too far without the risk that this cooperation may backfire and harm Russia's interests. On the one hand, because some of these countries were (and perhaps still are) hotbeds of Islamicist agitation and recruitment; on the other hand, because arms sales and technology transfers, however useful they may be when it comes to fulfilling geopolitical objectives and satisfying the appetites of the military-industrial complex (see relations with China above), can contravene Russia's undertakings in favour of the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and its interests in the field.

A presentation delivered in June 2001 before the Carnegie Foundation by Vladimir A. Orlov, of the Center for Political Studies highlighted the contradictions of Russian non-proliferation policy. On the one hand, he explained, Russia seems to be tightening export controls and tracking down “sensitive” contracts which could undermine its security; on the other hand, Putin appears to be on the verge of renegeing on the commitments undertaken *inter alia* within the framework of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, “if current restrictions placed on cooperation in the field of the peaceful use of nuclear

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

energy are not modified<sup>61</sup>”, that is, eased. “To sum up Russian non-proliferation policy between 1991 and 2001, one is obliged to admit that, despite some inconsistencies (which continue to exist), the Russian authorities had no intention of backing the military nuclear programmes of States of concern and took no steps in this direction.” As Orlov adds, this did not rule out the possibility that Putin's “pragmatism” has pushed him to overstep the bounds authorized by international agreements. “However this may be, Moscow should pursue this policy with its long-term strategic partners rather than focusing on possible killjoys.” This conclusion is intended to be reassuring, but this is not necessarily the case. The change in the concept of “rogue States” brought by the 9/11 attacks and the formation of the anti-terrorist coalition are perhaps capable of resolving Putin's dilemma without forcing him to choose between the trouble-makers and his long-term partners, who may turn out to be one and the same.

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<sup>61</sup> Moscow Carnegie Center, 18 June 2001.

## Part V

### What about Europe?

In the “three-player game” sometimes described by Russian commentators, Europe, in any case under its avatar, the EU (EU), is practically never mentioned. One should therefore avoid taking at face value the speeches that Putin delivers before the Bundestag or elsewhere, on Russia's European vocation and the fact that the EU and Russia are predestined for cooperation. Rather, the EU is one element among others in the Russian President's hand (in the sense of a card game). Even the most “westernised” observers do not miss a chance to recall that the Fifteen (and this will be even more true after enlargement) depend on Russia to a large extent for their energy supplies, in other words: Moscow has a means to bring pressure to bear on them.

Granted, Russia has never officially expressed its opposition to EU enlargement, including the integration of former Soviet republics like the Baltic States, contrary to what it has done for NATO enlargement. However, it has underscored on several occasions that its interests were affected by EU enlargement and that it therefore intended to keep abreast of progress made in negotiations. It has even retained a potential threat with the postponement of the signature or ratification of the border agreements with the three Baltic States. The message to the Fifteen could not have been any clearer: “Careful, you are getting ready to welcome into your midst countries which have always had a territorial dispute with Russia.” Likewise, Russia has legitimate concerns with regard to free circulation to and from Kaliningrad once Poland and Lithuania become EU members, but it also uses this dispute to obtain a maximum amount of compensation from the Fifteen.

Moscow has the same ambiguous attitude towards the EU's desire to develop a common defence policy. This policy has been approved, but only “under certain conditions”, write Andrew Wilson and Nina Bachkatov in *Moscow Times*<sup>62</sup>: if the rapid reaction force is designed to maintain peace in Europe, if Russia is kept fully informed of its development and its possible missions, and if Russia can contribute forces: “With this in mind, Brussels must set up a mechanism similar

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<sup>62</sup> 14 December 2000.

to the Standing Russia-NATO Joint Council.” What Russia does not want is something that looks like “an arm of NATO by proxy<sup>63</sup>”.

The third element in relations with Europe: Russia has not yet completely adjusted to viewing the EU as an entity that is an interlocutor on the same basis as the US, China or India. Granted, it is not the only power in this situation, but its diplomats are having difficulty breaking a habit developed during the time of the USSR, namely, neglecting the construction of Europe and giving priority to bilateral relations with Member States. In this connection, relations with Germany –the fact that Putin knows Germany better than other European countries and has mastered the German language is surely an important factor but not the only one– appear “decisive” because Germany is called to play a major role in the construction of Europe, and thus to “encourage growing interest in Russia inside the EU<sup>64</sup>”. During his visit to Berlin, Putin struck this chord without great subtlety in the speech he delivered before the Bundestag<sup>65</sup>. The 9/11 attacks and the new order in Russian-US relations can but reinforce the tendency, clearly visible in the latest draft of the “Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation”, to refer to the EU as one “priority among others” of Russian diplomacy<sup>66</sup>.

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> T. Bordachev, *Russia and the “Expanded Europe”: New Risks and New Opportunities*, Moscow Carnegie Center, Briefing, N° 12, December 2000.

<sup>65</sup> *Le Monde*, 25 September 2001.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

## Part VI

### **Converging Interests: Up to what Point?**

Putin's priority is to exploit this "unique situation"<sup>67</sup> where American and Russian interests are, if not identical, at least convergent, in order to score points on fronts of utmost importance to him. He has been clever enough not to haggle over his support for the US, asking nothing in return, which does not mean that he expects nothing from his new allies. On the contrary. He is probably in a less awkward position than his predecessor, or even Mikhail Gorbachev in the delicate phases of *perestroika*, for he does not expect everything from the West. Owing to his training, which makes it second nature for him to distrust the West, and due to the more favourable economic climate, which gives him more manoeuvring room, he can do without its help, at least temporarily. But if such help does come, it will be all the more welcome.

Today, there are five fields where Russia's interests may coincide with those of the West in general and those of the US in particular: Afghanistan, Central Asia, arms reduction, relations with NATO, and admission to the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

*Afghanistan:* As we have seen, the Russians feel that the Americans, by eliminating the Talibans, have done their work for them, in any case the work that they would have had to do themselves in the more or less short run. With an Afghan government where the representatives of the Northern Alliance are in a position of strength, Moscow can hope to regain the influence it lost in the area after 1992.

*Central Asia:* Evaluating the situation is more ambiguous, but Russian-American cooperation with a view to developing and marketing the natural resources in the area is not unrealistic.

*Arms reductions:* Russia would not have to wear itself out seeking parity at the highest level with the US, above all with an arsenal in poor condition, if reductions affected not only the nuclear arsenal but also conventional weapons. Russia cannot follow the US in the revolution in military affairs (RMA). Will the agreements be formal, as the Russians have always wanted, or informal, as the new Republican Administration is seeking? The question, which is not a fundamental issue, is being negotiated by the two countries. Arms cuts strengthen Putin's resolve to see through

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<sup>67</sup> S. Karaganov, *Troud*, *op. cit.*

a military reform that is dragging on owing to a lack of cooperation by the Ministry of Defence.

*Relations with NATO:* Russia will have to cope with a new wave of enlargements which will in all likelihood be announced at the Atlantic summit in Prague, in November 2002. The traditional attitude consists of denouncing this new expansion as an unfriendly or even hostile gesture, especially if the Baltic States are among the candidates chosen. On the other hand, Moscow can adopt another approach, relying on the need –also felt by NATO– to redefine the purpose of the Alliance. This is the aim of the British initiative launched before the meetings of the NATO Foreign Affairs and Defence Ministers, in December 2001. It did not succeed immediately but gained ground after the different components of the US Administration came to an agreement between themselves. Opinion is also divided on the Russian side, and Putin himself did not help to make things clear when he stated that “Russia does not intend to queue up to join NATO” –a sentence which could be interpreted as a rejection of admission or a refusal to wait like just any “little” candidate country. For Karaganov, the matter is settled: “The advantages of Russia's joining NATO outweigh the disadvantages<sup>68</sup>.” Turning the “19+1” meetings, which have not satisfied Russia, into a forum of 20 will inevitably lead to doubt, or even opposition, among the new NATO members and candidates which view the Atlantic Alliance as a guarantee against any covetous designs of the great neighbour to the east, master of the Communist empire for 40 years. The first new members admitted in 1999 are already disconcerted: convinced that they were taking out an insurance policy, they found themselves signed up in a fire-fighting brigade that was to put out the fire in Kosovo. Yet they were not and are not always asked for their advice, and they are surely prepared to accept the transformation of NATO if it is the price to pay for their admission. The change in the Atlantic Alliance poses the question of the entire security architecture in Europe. It became inevitable as a result of Washington's choices after 9/11: By opting for *ad hoc* coalitions where they lay down the rules and select the participants themselves, at the expense of a permanent alliance where assertive leadership would not entirely spare them the need to make compromises, the Americans served notice on NATO that it should look for another *raison d'être* than the collective defence of its members. The new NATO can find one by forming

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

the base of a pan-European security architecture which has, moreover, always been one of the primary goals of Soviet Russian diplomacy.

*Lastly, Russia may hope that its entry into the WTO will be hastened by its participation in the anti-terrorist coalition, even though Russian entrepreneurs welcome the fact that this admission is dragging on, allowing them to keep on circumventing the rules of international trade a bit longer.*

Even though all these interests are not by any means determined by economic conditions, Russian commentators, who are generally hostile to Putin's "westward shift", are already predicting that the Russian-American community of interests will not survive much longer than the anti-Nazi coalition of the Second World War. The most orthodox want to take advantage of this "unique situation" to define "new zones of natural influence and spheres of influence" which should be legitimated by a new Yalta conference: "The world needs these spheres of influence to be mapped out and dividing lines to be drawn<sup>69</sup>."

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<sup>69</sup> Y. Verlin, "The US Will Lose This War Unless it Takes Others' Interests Into Account", *Ekspert*, October 2001.

## Part VII

### **Which Alliances, and for which Policy?**

Briefly, one can distinguish three types of attitudes in relation to Putin's policy, a policy that the 9/11 attacks have accentuated rather than encouraged: support, open opposition (some army officers even speak of “serious mistakes<sup>70</sup>”), and warning (“yes, if... “), which seems to be the majority position in the Foreign Affairs Ministry, whose directors are still largely influenced by the Soviet training and school of thought. What conclusion will Putin reach? The answer is not clear at present, for no irreversible steps have been taken. In any event, four options have opened up for the Russian President: the Chinese model, reformism, anti-terrorist priority, and “dual westernisation”.

The “Chinese model” would consist in establishing an authoritarian political structure (as it cannot be totalitarian) to serve an economic reform that embraces all of the characteristics of capitalism. The moment when the Russian leaders (and before them the Soviet leaders) could have made this choice seems to have passed and it would be difficult to go back on the (admittedly imperfect) progress made towards the beginnings of democratic practice in Russia.

The second way, reformism, but anti-Gorbachevian reformism, could tempt Putin to rely on strong-arm methods to impose liberal solutions on a society that is struggling to throw off totalitarianism or even obscurantism. Yet this hypothesis contains in its very exposition a contradiction to which Michael Gorbachev succumbed politically by refusing to make virtually absolute power serve a liberal reform. The opposite is also true: use of force would torpedo any prospect of “civilising” political and economic life in Russia.

A third option could be simply giving priority to the anti-terrorist coalition, with the danger of dispersion if members' interests diverge (for example on the occasion of a punitive expedition against Saddam Hussein).

The last path remains “dual westernisation”, like what happened in West Germany after the Second World War, when firm ties to the West had two inseparable meanings: a foreign policy integrated into the West and the development of a

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<sup>70</sup> P. Felgenhauer, *Moscow Times*, 1 November 2001.

democratic regime, in other words the rejection of a hypothetical “third path” both inside and outside the country.

Putin has not made his choice. Moreover, one cannot rule out the possibility that he is trying to pick and choose from each of the four above-mentioned hypotheses. There are “two Putins”, writes an editorialist for *Gazeta Russia*, Natalya Gevorkian: the one who closes the military bases in Cuba and Vietnam, and the one who tries to get the media under his thumb. “Putin is walking a tightrope between his own past and his possible future. If it has been decided that Russia has opted [...] for adopting the rules in force throughout the civilised world, then the decision cannot apply to foreign policy alone<sup>71</sup>.” Gevorkian concludes by stressing that the Russian President is in a difficult position “because those who supported him yesterday do not like his *rapprochement* with the US, and those who could support him tomorrow are put off by both his rehabilitation of the Soviet national anthem and his selective approach to democracy”.

The types of support which Putin can line up for his policy vary depending on his choices –and vice versa. Those who put him in power would tend to carry him along towards the authoritarian path. Felgenhauer thinks that the Russian President cannot impose a westward shift without replacing the bulk of the elite in power, which is surely true, and he adds –expressing both a fear and an observation which seems obvious, albeit in the tradition of Russian intellectuals– that he must “intimidate the rest to subject it totally. Rigged trials, arrests and the sacking of senior officials are inevitable, as has happened several times in Russia when the country has made U-turns and the elite in power has been dismissed<sup>72</sup>”.

Yet Aleksander Tsipko does not share this view. On the contrary, he feels that Putin's *rapprochement* with the West gives him a free rein to break off ties inside the country with “democrats” and other “liberals”, insofar as he no longer needs their backing on the outside. The variety of these comments reflects not only the difficulty of the choice made by the Russian President but also the contradictions with which he struggles. It underscores the fact that all options are still open.

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<sup>71</sup> “The Growing Divide between the Two Putins”, *Gazeta Ru*.

<sup>72</sup> P. Felgenhauer, *op. cit.*

## Conclusion

### Should we Help Putin?

A similar question has already been asked at least twice in the past, for Gorbachev and for Yeltsin. It is clear that the West should prefer “dual westernisation”. It does not erase the differences of interests between Russia which subsist with a fully democratic Russia, but it guarantees that Russians will defend their legitimate interests while respecting the rules of the common game. This is not the most probable hypothesis; what is more, the West's influence on Russian internal affairs is extremely limited.

Over the past few years, the West's attitude towards post-Communist Russia may be summed up in three words: *realpolitik*, wilsonism, illusionism. *Realpolitik* consists in letting oneself be guided by economic or strategic interests without paying any heed to the form of regime or the government in power. The line followed by Henry Kissinger at the height of Brezhnevian sovietism is a good example of this. It is the approach that George W. Bush and his team seem to want to adopt, at least until the American President and his Russian counterpart succumb to each other's charms. The Clinton Administration sometimes engaged in wilsonism. This consists of preaching democracy to the Russians (and others), of promoting nation- and democracy-building in deserving countries, and of tying aid and support to progress made with regard to the rule of law. Illusionism is a combination of the first two policies: it consists of engaging in *realpolitik* while crediting the partner with democratic good intentions that he does not always share –far from it. It is the policy that was followed during the last years of the Yeltsin presidency and, to a certain extent, in the first years of Putin's presidency by the Americans and the Europeans who, for perfectly understandable geo-strategic reasons, adopted a policy of cooperation that was probably preferable to dangerous isolation but who felt obliged at the same time to give Russia a seal of democratic respectability that it did not deserve.

*Realpolitik* no doubt corresponds to the clearly understood immediate interests of the US and the EU. Nation-building can be more satisfying, morally speaking, but collides with the immensity of the task. Russia is not Macedonia. The experience of the past ten years has shown that outside influence on the internal situation is limited

and that Russia will either change by itself or not change at all. That having been said, realism does not necessarily imply blindness or indulgence, as has often been the case in the past. For even though the foreign policy change has not yet impacted on Putin's domestic policy, it is not clear whether this new foreign policy can endure without an accompanying "westernisation" of domestic policy, *i.e.* genuine democratisation.

If it is true that Putin finds himself on the narrow ridge separating his own past from his possible future, to take up Gorkan's image, the West should help him to fall on the side of the future. The problem is to figure out how. Here, several approaches are possible:

- By seizing all opportunities for cooperation. This is what the West has been doing since 9/11, sometimes indulging in wishful thinking, as when it grants Russia market economy status;
- By not letting itself get carried further than it wants to go. For example, why not turn the Russian-NATO "19+1" into a group of 20? Provided that it does not give the Russians a veto right over their own affairs, which would imply that they would give Russia a power that the Europeans (or at least some of them) quite rightly refuse to give the US;
- By constantly reminding Putin of the need to respect a few elementary principles (freedom of the press, human rights, right of war in Chechnya), or in other words: by urging him to observe the rules of the club to which he claims to belong, in the name of the "common values of humanity". Iavlin uses a good image to characterise Russia's rallying round these "common values": "We finally have the same multiplication table. Yet Putin and those close to him still think that two and two make five." It is a good thing that Putin views the war in Chechnya as a tragedy, but it is not enough. He must also be encouraged to put an end to the massacres and to seek a political solution in earnest. Otherwise, this will reinforce the widespread feeling in Russia that the West professes "tailor-made" values that it only imposes on the weakest, and discourage the Russian partisans of democracy, who feel isolated inside the country and betrayed by those whom they take as a model.