‘Parallels’ and ‘Verticals’ of Putin’s Foreign Policy

PONARS Policy Memo No. 263

Irina Kobrinskaya
Russian Academy of Sciences
October 2002

Analysts of Russian policy often highlight the apparent lack of congruity between Putin’s domestic and foreign policy motivations. Russian domestic political development is seen as increasingly authoritarian as Putin and his allies have sought to construct and then consolidate vertical presidential power in Russia. The power vertical assumes the unchallenged dominance of the Kremlin in managing domestic and foreign policy in Russia. While seeking to secure his own power base, Putin’s domestic and foreign policies have followed divergent trends; this is the so-called parallelism in Russian politics, whereby domestic developments are characterized by autocratic measures and foreign policy follows a much more liberal line. This memo asks whether the parallels and verticals of Putin’s policies will eventually have to be reconciled and concludes that the Russian foreign policy parallel will intersect with the Russian domestic policy parallel, as foreign policy is ultimately geared toward domestic concerns, and domestic liberal concerns at that.

The parallelism of Russian policy, that is, the seemingly incompatible trends of increasingly authoritarian domestic politics and a foreign policy decidedly more liberal in outlook, is probably one of the main reasons that so many in the West and Russia still question: “Who is Mr. Putin?” However, despite classic geometry, some parallels may cross.

The Power Vertical in Russia

The Kremlin has intentionally been concentrating political power in the hands of the president and has been aided in this quest by the personal, physical, and intellectual appeal of Vladimir Putin, his popularity, and the measures undertaken to remedy the accumulated imbalances in power between the office of the president and other power centers.

This concentration of power, which many see as having had positive results, is not without some risks. Putin’s high approval rating and the lack of viable political alternatives make the risks of an unanticipated, sudden exit by Putin from the political scene, or a decrease in his popularity, potentially serious destabilizing factors.

A more realistic threat to stability is the deepening gap between high and low levels of power. In spite of attempts to tame the regional barons, the regional powers are not controlled by the center. The federal districts, established to

effectively translate the policy of the federal center to the regional level and to control the implementation of federal policy, have not successfully fulfilled their mandate.

Additionally, the lack of a delegating mechanism and the resulting over-dependence on the Kremlin paralyzes the introduction of new initiatives and decreases incentives for lower-level administrators to take responsibility for policy. The deconsolidation of the ruling political elite, the degradation of the bureaucracy, and the weakness and corruption of state institutions and power ministries, including the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defense, make them even less reliable and more hated by the population. We are witnessing the reincarnation of the familiar Russian political tradition, whereby the boyars were hated while the tsar, remote from his people, was loved and trusted. That partly explains the phenomenon of Putin's unprecedented lasting popularity, but discredits the thesis of an effective power vertical in Russia. It is not the power vertical but presidential power that has been strengthened in Putin's Russia.

Further undermining the argument for a strengthened power vertical is that it is central control over resources that make the power vertical real—political institutions, mass media, and natural and financial-economic resources in general turn out to be more a creation of public relations (both by proponents and opponents of Putin) than a matter of reality.

The State Duma is a loyal instrument of the administration and, in this way, much more effective in adopting the laws needed for liberal economic reforms. The Kremlin's attempts to stabilize and structure the political scene by creating a strong political center—a party of power and a moderate opposition both to the Left and to the Right—has not yet been successful. The Duma's center lacks initiative and ideas. Instead, it waits for directives from the administration, while the opposition aims to become the party of power itself, instead of putting forward a consistent alternative agenda and ideas.

Control over the electronic mass media is now exercised through the state banks and companies with a significant state ownership share (e.g. Gazprom). "The newspapers are for sale, but the journalists—no," say the journalists. Even now, electronic media do criticize sharply the president and his policy. The hot debates in the aftermath of the *Nord-Ost* tragedy in Moscow serve as additional evidence. The Russian mass media is simultaneously going through a difficult process of *peredel* (financial reshuffling) and political and ideological re-identification, trying to elaborate a new long-term position in their relations with central authorities.

Finally, business demands different things from the central authorities than the political elite; the former needs conservatism and constant policy, while the latter, after years of Yeltsin's reshuffling, does not feel comfortable with a stable political system.

Thus, the following conclusions about the power vertical can be drawn:

- The power ministries, or power resources, are weak and ineffective, which makes the predictions of impending autocracy less valid.
- The president remains the strongest and most relevant political actor. Nevertheless, the over-concentration and super-personification of power in Putin possesses a high potential for instability, in the absence of institutionalization.
- The institutions of the state and political management have not been strengthened substantially. Their functions are not shared along the power vertical or fully on the horizontal level, where decisionmaking remains uncoordinated and demonstrates the ongoing struggle between political competitors—foreign policymaking included.

It is thus more accurate to say that there is strong presidential power in Russia but there is not a strong power vertical. If the power vertical was one step toward achieving stability in Russian political and economic development, the lack of a real power vertical should translate into increasing instability. The current stability in Russia was achieved partly by the delay of the most painstaking social-economic reforms and lagging administrative and federal reforms. It is unlikely, though, that as these unpopular measures are realized in the next year and one-half (the election period), Putin's continuing to follow the current liberal economic course will result in increasing instability as the economic and social-political stabilization in Russia has developed real roots.

The assumed logic of parallelism in domestic and foreign policy is that without a strong base (stability) and framework (presidential power vertical), it cannot last long. Will Putin have to reconcile these divergent trends in foreign and domestic policy? Will we know better who Mr. Putin is after 2004? Could it be the case, as some observers note, that there are more chances for a consistent pro-Western liberal foreign policy with an autocratic Putin, than in a democratic Russia that might unite under anti-American slogans? Or is this parallelism a new effective pattern of political development attractive to second-wave, transforming countries?

The Parallel in Putin's Foreign Policy?

Underlying the idea of parallelism in Russian foreign and domestic policy is the accepted wisdom that Putin's foreign policy is pro-Western. Foreign policy issues concern mainly whether this liberal course reveals Putin's true sympathies or if it is only a tactic, and whether Putin can stay the elite's opposition to this course.

Putin's overriding foreign policy objective seems to be building a stable international framework for a pragmatic Russian foreign policy: to provide maximum guarantees for trade and economic activity through the network of international institutions and agreements, and silence on internal Russian policy and its relations with the former Soviet Union. This would then provide for the compatibility of two horizontals of Russian foreign policy for the first time since 1991.

This makes sense of the dynamics of Putin's foreign policy activities in 2002. In the course of bilateral and multilateral summits with Western leaders, the Kremlin managed to establish a framework and define the main directions of cooperation with the West; it received confirmation of the active reengagement of Russia in international affairs, of Russia being accepted as a partner. After this, Russian foreign policy was able to focus on the concrete problems of its relations with its neighbors, Belarus and Ukraine, and the urgent problem of Kaliningrad.

In establishing a stable framework as the most effective instrument for realizing Russian foreign policy, Russia is increasingly turning to the European Union to assist Russia as its engages and adapts to the modern integration and globalization processes. Orientation to Europe is of great significance for Russian self-identification as a significant Euro-Asian regional power and for overcoming Russia's superpower syndrome. Relations with the EU seem of particular importance for Putin's plan to integrate Russia into the civilized Western world.

Nevertheless, these relations have hardly developed beyond the framework format; practice lags behind declarations and there is little concrete content to these relations. Paradoxically, the controversies over Kaliningrad and the urgent need to find compromise and practical solutions may encourage more practical cooperation with the EU.

The focal point of Russian foreign policy remains relations with the United States. Reengagement and integration with the West cannot be reached without cooperation with Washington. Relations with the United States vividly demonstrate the differences in the approaches to Russian foreign policy within its leadership. Although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs bases dialogue with the United States in the security sphere—in the interest of preserving the negotiation process on strategic arms, anti-ballistic missiles, and counter-terrorism—for the Kremlin, the United States is mainly the global economic, financial, and policy decisionmaker, without whose support the integration of Russia into the global economy would be much more problematic.

The United States' status as the sole superpower is perceived negatively by the majority of Russian (as well as European) politicians and experts—as a risk or challenge to their foreign policy goals. But an even more serious challenge to Russia is the U.S. shift to unilateralism because it undermines Putin's foreign policy aimed at integration with the Western community.

The delay in implementing reforms in Russia and integration with the Western community has led Russia to surrender to the U.S. definition of terms. Russia's relations with Europe are no substitute. Europe cannot develop a real military-political partnership with Russia if Moscow is not indulged by Washington, which is possible only through cooperation in the war against terrorism and nonproliferation efforts. Effective security structures cannot be established without the United States.

In practice, the Kremlin has chosen policy within the framework of what is possible, as reflected in the Moscow Treaty and Moscow's position on Iraq. The

new challenge for Russia may be the invitation for closer cooperation that some experts see in the new U.S. national security strategy.

Intersecting Parallels

Two meanings can be read into the oft-repeated definition of modern Russian foreign policy: "to create favorable outward conditions for inner development."

The first meaning is clear on priorities and new principles. The top priority—the well being and security of the Russian people—can be achieved only by economic prosperity and friendly partnership with foreign countries. Clearly, for both purposes, cooperation and partnership with the West are preferable. Although the values of the anti-terrorist crusade become more and more vague, the new principles of Russian foreign policy are pragmatism, economization, effectiveness, internationalization, and integration.

The majority of the expert community and mass media accepts economic interests, effectiveness, and expediency as the foundation of Russian foreign policy. Practically all mass media see in Moscow's position on Iraq no support for the regime, but a struggle for its economic interests. Many issues are transferred into dollar equivalents—support of Iraq is estimated in the $7- to $40-billion range. The most often used phrase in foreign policy analysis is "the price of the issue." The logic of foreign policy thinking in Russia is more and more pragmatic. The business community, with its practical concerns of its own business interests, may become one of the key domestic resources of the Kremlin in its foreign policy. Putin's pro-Western policy is supported by the more successful and wealthier parts of the economic and financial circles, especially those interested in the development of the announced energy partnership with the United States and the EU.

The similarity in style between the Kremlin and business strikes the eye. When asked to formulate Russian national interest, Putin answered, "competitiveness." Effectiveness is Putin's main criteria for gauging success or failure.

Foreign policy is increasingly becoming a tool for domestic development. With the help of this formula, Putin seeks to put an end to debate over the choice of foreign partners and thus to end debate on post-Soviet self-identification. The accent on national and societal development is meant to garner public support for Kremlin's pro-Western policy and thus keep Putin's popularity high, which is the key stabilizing factor in Russia. But the relevance of public opinion in the foreign policy sphere in dubious. For instance, although analysts argue that anti-Americanism is on the rise in Russia, the risk that Putin will be forced to change his foreign policy because of public pressure is low. What matters is strong pressure from the elite and the president's circle. Thus, the main audience of Putin's foreign policy PR remains the Russian political elite.

The second meaning of the above definition of foreign policy is more concealed or cryptic. It contains a trap for Russia's political and business elite and for society. This is to use cooperation with the West as the instrument to force

Russia to develop a market economy and state of law. It is in this aspect of Russian foreign policy that the apparent parallels of Putin's policy will actually converge, and converge in support of a liberal domestic and foreign policy agenda.