

Karol Kwietniewski

## **Omnipotence of the Russian Federation in the European part of the post-Soviet area**

### **Introduction**

The peaceful breakup of the Soviet Union was something unheard in the history of the great empires. Russia as the legal heir of the USSR, inherited most of the military, scientific and economic potential after the fallen empire. The huge territory on which the Russian Federation stretches has also important role. In the 21st century, thanks to high prices for energy resources and the taking over power by a charismatic leader Vladimir Putin, Russia quickly returned to aggressive foreign policy towards the post-Soviet states, which we can define as omnipotence in the region. In this post-Soviet area, the Russian Federation (FR) has spread its neo-imperial policy, which describes this area as a region of „close abroad”, considering this region as an exclusive sphere of influence<sup>1</sup>. The subregion of the European part of the post-Soviet area, which consists of the former republics of the USSR – Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, became a special direction of the new policy. The political instability of these countries and the attempts to emancipate from Russia influence and even direct politics towards democratic reforms and liberalization of the economy have met with a series of counter-measures taken by Russia. The economic and social slump in the 1990s in Russia caused social dissatisfaction with the Western model, which was improperly imputed under the rule of Boris Yeltsin and through Gaydar reforms<sup>2</sup>. After the transformation fiasco and the failed attempt to transition Russia into a „normal” state in the style of Western democracies, most of its inhabitants stopped believing that such a change is in their interest. In the 21st century, this put Russians into increased political ambitions, which found their way in the rhetoric of return to the international arena as a global power and the first step, was to subordinate the states of the European post-Soviet area that drifted

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<sup>1</sup> *Polityka zagraniczna i bezpieczeństwa na obszarze Wspólnoty Niepodległych Państw*, A. Legucka, K. Malak (eds.), Warszawa 2008.

<sup>2</sup> W. Marciniak, *Rozgrabione imperium*, Kraków 2001.

towards the democratic system, liberal politics and economic norms at the beginning of the 21st century. To overcome this tendency, Russia uses many impact vectors showing its omnipotence in the area under investigation. This subregion is particularly important for the Russian Federation, mainly due to its geopolitical location, access to technology, hydrocarbon transit opportunities, trade, military aspect and historical connections.

## The genesis of the Russian Federation

*Who is present Russian?* The foreign policy of the Russian Federation after the collapse of the USSR has changed drastically during last 30 years and moved the poles of action. Political authorities from the Kremlin have had to adapt several times to very fast changes in the international environment and, above all, changes in the perspective of Russia's perception of international relations. Now days activities in Ukraine show that the FR adopted a coherent and stable internal and foreign policy<sup>3</sup>. The process of its shaping can be divided into several phases. The first of them began in 1991. Then foreign policy was shaped by pro-Western liberals who believed that Russian interests would be met by establishing close cooperation and integration with Western countries. Historically, Russian politics was divided between supporters of the pro-western course Westernizers (*Zapadniki*) and Slavophiles, who believed that Russia is the center of the Slavic world and should dominate this region<sup>4</sup>. In the period of the independence of post-Soviet states, a wave of migration from these countries of Russian citizens to homeland was evident<sup>5</sup>. It was caused by several factors, eg. economic issues, the prestige of living in the Russian Federation, the uncertainty of fate in the newly created republics, avoiding outbreaks of conflicts or the desire to return to the homeland. During this period, the idea of a near-abroad which related to former republics was shaped and in the Russian perspective referred to post-Soviet countries as „not entirely” independent subjects of international relations. Despite the wave of remigration, some of those who remained in these countries felt their membership in Russia<sup>6</sup>. What in the later stages of the evolution of Russian foreign policy has become the *modus operandi* of pressure and policy in the region. The second stage of shaping Russian foreign policy is the period of Vladimir Putin's rule. From 1999 to 2008 when it managed to shape the foundations of today's

<sup>3</sup> C. Nitoiu, *Aspirations to great power status: Russia's Path to Assertiveness in the International Arena under Putin*, „Political Studies Review” 2017, vol. 15.

<sup>4</sup> M. Bierdiajew, *Rosyjska idea*, Warszawa 1999.

<sup>5</sup> C. Nitoiu, *op.cit.*

<sup>6</sup> *Polityka zagraniczna Federacji Rosyjskiej – wybrane aspekty stosunków z Polską, Białorusią i Ukrainą*, L. Zyblikiewicz, M. Czajkowski, P. Bajor (eds.), Kraków 2010.

neo-imperial policy<sup>7</sup>. During this period, the priority of foreign policy became countries close to abroad in which the so-called colorful revolutions. In the third stage after 2012 to the present moment, Russia begins to realize its ambitions to return to the international arena as a global power. Both periods are also characterized by a gradual infliction of relations with the West.

*Characteristics of the post-Soviet area.* For historical reasons, the authorities in Moscow assume that Russia needs a buffer zone to feel safe. This zone was to be composed of states formerly forming part of the USSR. Its purpose is to separate the FR from its adversaries. In the nineties, the idea of creating an organization that would become a skeleton for this type of activity arose. The effect of this idea was the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States. From the beginning, however, this organization did not fulfill its function due primarily to the fact that some of states did not want to become its members. Thus, the role of the CIS diminished over time. At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, other former Soviet bloc countries joined NATO, including Poland, Hungary, Romania and the Baltic republics. Russia's answer to this challenge was the establishment of the Collective Security Organization (Организация Договора о Коллективной Безопасности), composed of six former republics of the USSR. Interestingly, now in its composition in the European part are only two countries Armenia and Belarus, with which the Federation is additionally associated with the Union of Belarus and Russia, which is mainly military.

The Russian authorities, starting from the above-mentioned assumption about a safe buffer zone, could not allow for further „westernization” in the post-Soviet area. Hence, Russia has begun to press the republics harder to participate in the Collective Defense Organization (CSTO). According to analysts Carnegie think-tank, „if Moscow was not able to exert the appropriate pressure that would make it join the CSTO, it was necessary to block the possibility of joining this country to another military alliance”. Later, the same researcher comes to a conclusion in which NATO in Russian perspective, as in the Cold War, is an enemy, and despite the growth of the Pact's potential and the depreciation of Russia's position. The Federation should not seek to maintain absolute sphere of influence in the discussed region or, in the worst case, strive for Belarus's neutrality, Ukraine, Moldova and the three Caucasian republics – Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> J. Pena-Ramos, *The Impact of Russian Intervention in Post-Soviet Secessionist Conflict in the South Caucasus on Russian Geo-energy Interest*, „International Journal of Conflict and Violence” 2017, vol. 11, no. 3.

<sup>8</sup> A. Gabuev, *Russian-U.S flashpoints in the post-soviet space: The view from Moscow*, „U.S. – Russia Insights”, II 2018.

## Vectors of omnipotence of the Russian Federation

*Economic.* Russia as the largest country in the region, additionally rich in raw materials for most of the countries in the discussed area, is also the largest trading partner. After the natural gravity of trade towards the large Russian market, the countries surrounding Russia are importing a significant part of the necessary goods from the Russian Federation. The Federation is an exporter of many industrial and food products, but also raw materials. Intensification of the exchange is also ensured by the existing infrastructure built in the period of the USSR, connecting the then periphery and the center in Moscow.

**Table 1.** The three largest trading partners for the European part of the post-Soviet area

State	1 position	2 position	3 position
Armenia**	<b>Russian Federation</b>	China	Turkey
Azerbaijan*	<b>Russian Federation</b>	Turkey	USA
Belarus**	<b>Russian Federation</b>	China	Turkey
Georgia**	Turkey	<b>Russian Federation</b>	China
Moldova**	China	Ukraine	<b>Russian Federation</b>
Ukraine*	<b>Russian Federation</b>	Germany	Belarus

\* Data from 2015

\*\* Data from 2016

Source: Own study based on data from the World Bank: *Trade Statistic by Country*, <https://wits.worldbank.org/countrystats.aspx?lang=en> (1 VII 2018).

The above table shows the cross-section of the three largest trading partners (in terms of total trade), all six European countries which are part of the post-Soviet area. It shows that for the majority of them, Russian Federation is the largest partner. For Moldova and Georgia, respectively they are the second and third partner countries in terms of the volume of trade.

For each of the countries listed in the table, good trade relations with Russia are considerable importance. Therefore, Russia uses this fact using the tactics of incentives and threats. As exemplified we can use cases of Georgia and Belarus. Georgia lost much in economic terms after the rise of pro-European party United National Movement. Russia by imposing an embargo on agricultural products, including wine, which is the main export good of Georgia, negatively affected the economic situation. Belarus, on the other hand, receives huge subsidies through

reduced purchase prices of gas and oil, as well as loans, thanks to which the political line does not change in this country.

Russia is the main importer of their products and raw materials for the majority of the republics of the European part of the post-Soviet area. Its key role is associated with subsidies in the form of lower gas or oil prices, as was the case in Ukraine and Belarus, but also the possibility of breaking or suspending trade, as in the case of Georgia or Ukraine. The main vector of economic pressure are mine fuels, which Russia sells to the country at reduced prices, if their policies coincide with the goals of the FR or normal (comparable to the prices of supplies to Western Europe) when the republics are „against” the existing state of affairs and act against the interests of Russia.

*Russian minority.* One of the vectors of Russia destabilizing the region are actions on the canvas of the Russian minority living in the region's states. Russia often puts herself in the position of a defender of the Russian minority, which according to the Kremlin's rhetoric is stigmatized and its rights are violated. This is often combined with reference to the Second World War and the fight against nationalism / fascism in those countries.

From these actions it can be concluded that the goal of Russia is to create fragility centers which if desired to achieve a goal may be averted to destabilize and often due to the largest agglomerations in the provinces bordering the Russian Federation, also undermining the territorial integrity of the South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Lugansk or Donetsk. Currently, the Russian media in the east of Ukraine, including the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in the Lugansk and Donetsk regions, are not a fading topic in the media. Both actions were taken by Russia in the rhetoric on the defense of the Russian-speaking minority in Ukraine.

*Frozen conflicts.* The post-Soviet area, due to its complicated history, is characterized by ethnic diversity. In all countries of the region, there are ethnic mosaics, regardless of the state borders and often even eyebrows. Thus, there are many provinces claiming autonomy or pursuing secession. This is especially visible in the European part of the post-Soviet region, almost every one of those states is struggling with such problems. In addition, the region is „rich” in the so-called „frozen conflicts” at the root of which are ethnic or territorial conflicts, and which originate from the collapse of the USSR<sup>9</sup>. Currently, most of these conflicts are in the cold phase, however, they can be stimulated at any moment. What makes them a very useful tool in Russia's foreign policy. A good example is the war in Georgia in 2008, in which the immediate cause was Georgian intervention in South Ossetia, which defined its status as autonomous but was legally part of Georgia. Through close ties with Russia to counter-attack activities of Georgia, Russia asked for counter measures. Examples of such activities can be multiplied

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<sup>9</sup> J. Pena-Ramos, *op.cit.*

and adapted to the scenario of the implementation of foreign policy tasks by the Russian Federation.

In the mention area we can marked eight main conflicts which can be described as frozen. In the analyze two things should be noted. First, the conflicts in the east of Ukraine and the Crimean conflict are active and within them comes military activities often referred to as a hybrid war. Secondly, some of these conflicts are located in the North Caucasus (Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia), so the possibility of being infected by destabilization is also real within the FR borders. Each of the indicated conflicts may change its status from „frozen” to „hot” at any time, which may lead to the destabilization of a given country or subregion and thus change the policy. As it was during the Georgian-Russian war in August 2008. Through the Russian intervention to which the Russian Federation perceives legitimacy in defense of the Russian-speaking population, the entire accession process of Georgia to Western structures – the European Union and NATO – has been blocked<sup>10</sup>. According to many experts, the war in this respect was precisely aimed at stopping Georgia’s attempts to integrate Western structures.

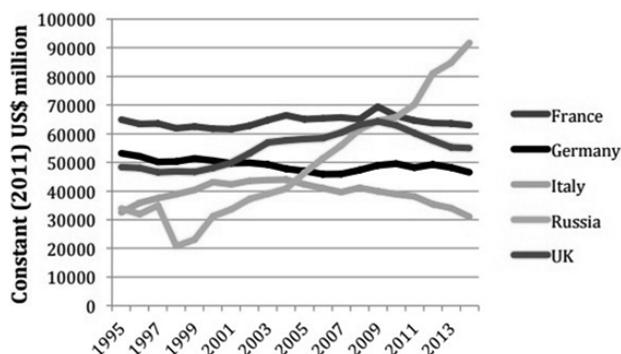
*Military domination.* Russia as the successor of the USSR from the beginning of the 1990s had a tremendous military potential in relation to all countries of the post-Soviet area but also for West European. Because of the economic slump, Russia lost much of the potential of a world power, but it was still a very important player in military matters. Accumulated equipment, outdated structures and low morale translated into defeat in the first Chechen war. Systematic reconstruction took place in the early 2000s when military expenses began to grow much faster. The first sign of the awakening power was the Second Chechen War, which sealed the fate of this republic as part of the Federation. Increasing expenditures and modernization made it possible to easily defeat Georgia in 2008, which stopped its attempts to integrate with the Western structures. The third step in rebuilding the potential is a new type of war – a hybrid war in the east of Ukraine in which Russia is officially not involved, however, there are many indications that the Federation is its main architect<sup>11</sup>. The newest indicator can be Russia engagement in Syria.

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<sup>10</sup> K. Kwietniewski, *Reform of Georgian Police – Mr. Saakashvili PR curtain*, [in:] *Badania i rozwój młodych naukowców – Nauki humanistyczne i społeczne*, vol. XI, J. Nyćkowiak (ed.), Poznań 2018.

<sup>11</sup> J. Hajduk, T. Stępniewski, *Wojna hybrydowa Rosji z Ukrainą: uwarunkowania i instrumenty*, „Studia Europejskie” 2015, nr 4.

**Chart 1.** Military expenditure of Russia in comparison to Western European countries from 1995 to 2014



Source: based on SIPRI data: E. Anderson, O. Gee, *France named Europe's top military spender*, IV 2015, <https://www.thelocal.fr/20150413/france-tops-military-spending-in-western-europebased> (1 VIII 2018).

Chart 1 shows Russia's military expenditure compared to Western European countries over the nineteen years from 1995 to 2014. On its basis, we can observe how the dynamic growth accompanies the military expenditure of the Russian Federation in comparison to one of the largest economies in the world (UK, France, Germany, Italy). After the collapse in the second half of the 90s; at the end of this decade, a continuing upward trend in Russia's spending on armaments is beginning. The remaining four powers of Western Europe until 2008 are certain, due to the financial crisis, they are reducing the military budget, while Russia a year later overtakes other countries in the ranking, spending the most – over 70 billion dollars in 2011. It illustrates the determination of the Russian Federation in the field of building military capabilities and the will to dominate the increasingly broader international arena.

## Conclusions

The Russian Federation after the 1990s and the destabilization associated with the attempt to introduce democratic and liberal reforms, entered the 21st century as a marginal player in the international arena and with a weakening influence in the zone of its vital interests, which is the post-Soviet area. The beginning of the 21st century brought a revival in economic and political terms. The new president, Vladimir Putin, and the prosperity of hydrocarbons allowed for gradual rebuilding of the country's potential. Currently, the FR aspires to be the global

superpower, constantly developing its potential. The problem on the way to the set goal, which is to return to the international arena as a global power, is the economic instability associated with the lability of energy commodity prices, which have the greatest impact on the budget. Russia began its restaurant as a neo-imperial state by designating a sphere of influence encompassing states described as „close abroad”. A particular course of events takes place in the European part of the post-Soviet area. It is a region that is particularly important for the development of Russia’s ambitions in the regional and international arena, hence the actions aimed at implementing Russia’s policy in this area are a priority. From the general instability in the mid 90’ of the entire post-Soviet area, Russia was the first to settle the internal situation. This translated into an intensification of actions aimed at subordinating the states from the post-Soviet area. There are many examples of Russian actions in this matter. The main distinguished in this region are: political instability of the countries of the area, Russia’s use of the Russian minority as a vector of influence, economic blackmail and/or economic subsidies, deepening instability by stirring „frozen conflicts” and Russia’s absolute military dominance recently strengthened by further modernization of the armed forces. Russia’s actions in the European part of the post-Soviet area are the best observation field of these activities. We can observe here the entire spectrum of FR activities (both pressure and incentives) related to the neo-imperial ambitions of Russia. Particular examples are Ukraine, Georgia and Belarus in the relations with which Russia has used or continues to use the indicated impact vectors. In the end, we may come to the conclusion that Russia, in fulfilling its neo-imperial ambitions, has begun its activities by using an extensive range of aggressive actions addressed to the states in European part of post-soviet area. On the one hand, it is the desire to cover the area with an exclusive sphere of influence on the other, in the long-term similar activities may be used in relation to other states to which Russia would like to influence, including of course European ones.

## **Abstract**

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### **Omnipotence of the Russian Federation in the European part of the post-Soviet area**

The following article deals with the issue of the influence of the Russian Federation on countries located in the European part of the post-Soviet area. Due to the diversity of vectors of Russia’s influence, from which article indicates the four most important: economic, military, related to the Russian minority and frozen

conflicts. The article answers the question about the omnipotence of the Russian Federation in the European part of the post-Soviet area, which subsequent stages of the evolution of internal and external policy led to the stabilization and in consequents rebirth of neo-imperial tendencies towards the so-called „Close abroad”. It draw the genesis of the argument from the historical premises of the USSR and the 1990s, as well as the existing links between the former republics of the USSR and Moscow as the center. The article was created using the research desk method on the basis of government documents, the latest studies of that topic, analyzes of leading think-thanks, as well as documents and press releases.

**Keywords:** omnipotence of the Russian Federation, post-Soviet area, Russia's foreign policy, neo-imperialism, political transformation

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