

How NATO's War in Yugoslavia is Making Foreign Policy in Moscow

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Summary

It might appear that NATO's war against Yugoslavia would produce obvious effects on Russian foreign policy. NATO's actions against Belgrade should heighten Moscow's suspicion of the West, NATO and the United States, in particular. Some might even argue that it has convinced Moscow that its worst fears about NATO expansion were true: it is a military alliance directed by the United States against Russia and its allies. Such conclusions, while not obviously misplaced, do obscure a more subtle and more profound set of effects NATO's actions have had on Russian foreign policy. Events in and around Kosovo did more than influence Russian policy; they have influenced Russian understanding of itself, its national identity, and of the West, NATO, the United States. In this way, the effects of Kosovo are far more fundamental and enduring than merely producing a change in Russia's policy; it has contributed to the development of Russia's very political identity. But this change is not necessarily captured by a scale of hostility and danger; instead, the change is one of difference and distance. Kosovo is associated with a continuing Russian drift toward an identity that more Russian, and less Western, more unique and less homogenous, more traditional, and less modern.

Such a development is profound because identity undergirds Russia's calculation of interest in the world. To the extent Kosovo helped Russians regard the West as a set of values and realities repugnant to them, let alone as a potential target of Western aggression, it changed Russia's interest in cooperating with the United States on arms control, policing the missile technology control regime, adhering to IMF strictures, selling arms to China, India, and other states, and in joining with the West on other issues formerly considered to be of common value. If all this were true, the effects of Kosovo would be truly grave, and perhaps, dangerous.

But while Kosovo did have foundational effects; it did influence developments in Russia's ongoing identity crisis, these effects were more subtle than either the direct effect on policy supposed by conventional wisdom or the wholesale identity shift toward anti-Westernism, rather than simply a-Westernism. Instead, what AmeriNATO's actions in Kosovo did was further drive Russia away from an identification with the West, but not necessarily in an anti-Western direction, as is so frequently assumed by the binary thinkers among us. No, given the state of play in Russian identity dynamics at this time, Russia's move away from the West does not mean a move **against** the West, as much as a move toward a new, post-Cold War, post-modern, post-imperial Russian identity. While the behavior might look the same, say, selling nuclear technology to Iran, it will not be the product of anti-Western animus produced by Kosovo, but rather the product of a new understanding of a new Russia, neither hostile nor particularly friendly toward the West, or anyone else for that matter. But it is not a kind of surly isolationism, or a gathering of Russian lands, or still less, former Soviet lands. It rather is a search for a place somewhere in a world politics, an international community, where Russian self-understanding can operate freely. The point is that Kosovo produced repugnance, revulsion, and scorn in Russian society for the U.S. and the West, not fear or insecurity. NATO's war against Yugoslavia did not produce the possibility of new danger from Russia, but instead, new difference.

The Russian Identity Crisis

Revolutionary situations beget the collapse of old identities and the subsequent search for new ones. The dissolution of the Soviet Union ushered in just such an identity crisis in Russia. The central problem is how to replace the Soviet identity which has been largely discredited, the persistence of the Communist Party notwithstanding. The initial reflex was to reach back to

Russian history and resurrect imperial glory as the present to which the New Russia should aspire. By the late 1990s, however, this imperial past had received reflection sufficient to ensure its unsuitability as a viable present, let alone future. That is not to say that the entire Russian past was discarded, or the Soviet past, for that matter, but only that as a comprehensive idea it had been found wanting.

While assessing its Russian past, post-Soviet society seized upon Western civilization, Europe, the United States, the liberal democratic market, as a possible identity. But this identity, too, upon sustained scrutiny, turned out to be incompatible with Russian understandings of themselves. While it is both popular and easy to pose these two identities—The West and Russia—as if they were the two possible routes for Russia to take, in fact, almost all of the identity politics that has taken place in Russia over the last decade has occurred betwixt and between these two polar ideals. And it is precisely because these politics are situated in this contested space that NATO's actions against Yugoslavia have had the foundational effects they have had.

To put it tersely, Russian is evolving a hybrid identity, one that is at one and the same time the West and the not-West, modern and pre-modern, modern and post-modern, uniquely Russian and normally Russian, individualistic and collectivist, core and periphery. One can discern several different axes of tension in contemporaneous Russian identity politics along which NATO's war against Yugoslavia operated:

- **Modernity and the Soviet Past**

Russians today are struggling with their place in modernity. It must be understood that the Soviet project was perhaps the most modern of twentieth century endeavours: industrial, rational, secular, scientific, and totalizing. There is an intense revulsion toward this past, and, to certain aspects of it at least, even from today's communists. To Russians, the antithesis of modernity takes several forms. On the one hand, it is the traditional understanding of Russian character as collectivist, and hence not obedient to the workings of modern market capitalism. On the other hand, there is a renewed celebration of the individual, her private sphere vis-a-vis society and the state. Americans generally assume that these two concepts, individualism and collectivism, are binary oppositions. Russians are pondering how to make them work together, for example, acknowledging the need for individualism to prevail within economic and professional pursuits, but collectivism within the domain of personal and social relations.

The effect of Kosovo is to demonstrate to Russians just how terrible is the individualistic pole represented by the United States, hence pushing the sought after synthesis farther toward the left (unique and collectivist) in the graph below. There is a dread of becoming subject to the homogenizing power of Western, U.S. liberal democratic capitalism, which is paradoxically, for Americans at least, understood by Russians as having features common to their rejected Soviet past. Russians are loathe to submit to Western values that pose as universals, just as in Soviet times, the values trumpeted by the communist party were advanced as universal. Kosovo, in its way, has pushed Russians to understand the United States, and its dominant position in the world, as a kind of modern Soviet threat to their emergent post-modern identity. To the extent that the United States and its Western allies claim to be asserting universally held truths all over the globe, Russians perceive the kind of ideological oppression just recently, and painfully, experienced during Soviet times.

- **Becoming Normal**

The Russian commitment to become a normal country began under Gorbachev. But the meaning of normalcy has never been settled. Is it the West, the Russian past, or some kind of hybrid? Kosovo told Russians that the Western idea of normalcy is obscene and dangerous. To the extent that Kosovo is understood as constituting the West and its values,

Russian understanding of what is normal in the world has been fundamentally altered. They do not want to consider normal the bombing of innocent civilians whenever the Great Power in the United States speaks. Becoming normal has meant among Russians (re)joining world civilization, but the latter is not imagined as a global society governed by Washington's unilateral preferences.

At home, Russians often think of normalcy as the development of a middle class embedded in a civil society. What is not included in this picture are the nomenklatura, crooks, and losers. The nomenklatura demanded obedience from its subordinates, was unassailable, arrogant, and exorbitant in the dissipation of the lives and treasures of others. Kosovo made the United States appear as the chief of a kind of worldwide nomenklatura, able to arbitrarily decide the fate of all the world's lesser countries (the losers), while employing enforcers/NATO (the crooks) whenever necessary. Needless to say, normal Russians want no part of any nomenklatura, at home or abroad.

- **The West as the Future**

It is clear that very many Russians understand the West as their future, even if only inevitable, and not desirable. But even those who fit into the reluctant Westerners category acknowledge the achievements of material prosperity, a law-governed state, personal freedom, and a civil middle class. But Russians perceive that these desired features have come in a package that includes less savory accomplishments, such as a population homogenized and subjugated by the market, the triumph of the individual over the community, and poshlost in cultural life, or the death of mass high culture. The answer, once again, is hybridity. Russians note that East Asians have accomplished all that the West has, and yet does not suffer from the tyranny of individuals, markets, and poor taste. The effect of Kosovo is to move Russians farther along in the direction of globalizing their understanding of the West, diluting it with features from elsewhere around the world.

The West as the future entails an understanding of the West in the past, in particular, in the Cold War past. While in the West it is thought the Cold War was made inevitable by Soviet perfidy and danger, in Russia, there is a far more balanced account, attributing blame to both sides. But what Kosovo has done is push more Russians to understand the Cold War as made inevitable by American globalism and hegemonic aspirations. After all, since the Soviet Union is dead, the question is posed, why does the United States continue to intervene in places around the globe? Again, Kosovo pushes Russian understanding in a particular direction, in this case toward a re-evaluation of Soviet foreign policy during the Cold War.

- **The Russian Past**

The meaning of Russian history has divided Russians into those who infer from it that Russia is a unique society and culture fated to differentiate itself from both West and East, and those who infer from the same history that Russia's unique features should be combined with the great feats of the rest of world history, resulting in a global version of Russia's future. What Kosovo has done is push toward a more unique understanding of Russian identity, one that implies separation and difference over engagement and integration.

A summary of the identity terrain in Russia today appears in the graph.

Distribution of Russian Identity

Social

Identification

(Please imagine a two-peaked curve, with peaks over Uniqueness and Normalcy, and the West half as high as Soviet. The Kosovo Effect pushes the middle to the left, toward Collectivist, Russian Uniqueness)

Soviet Past

Collectivist
Russian
Uniqueness

Individualistic
Russian
Normalcy

Western
Future

Policy Implications

The U.S./Western policy that follows from this analysis is really one of avoiding erroneous inferences about Russian conduct, rather than positive U.S./Western actions with respect to Russia. The latter is already so far alienated from the West, its identity and associated political and social practices, that there is no realistic chance that the U.S./West would ever accept the kinds of comprehensive changes necessary to affect these Russian identity dynamics. Instead, the critical policy recommendation is a warning against reading hostile intentions into Russian behavior. Given the grip of Cold War thinking on U.S. foreign policy elites, the real danger is that Russia gets branded an enemy for actions it is taking only to establish its own independent self in the world, completely oblivious to U.S./Western concerns. The best the U.S./West can hope for is Russian indifference to U.S./Western Kosovos, certainly not support. The worst outcome is if the U.S./West reads its own insecurity about its identity onto the already crisis-stricken Russians.

One possible future is a repetition of the distant past. In 1812, with Napoleon on the march to Moscow, Russian elites cursed Bonaparte, in perfect French. Today, Russian elites would like to curse the West, but in perfect Russian, thank you very much, even if while watching a Baywatch rerun.