

European security à la Russe

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It was no coincidence that Russian president Medvedev launched his idea of a new European Security Treaty in June 2008 during his first visit to Germany.² This country is generally known for its relatively forthcoming attitude towards Russia's security concerns, while the axis Moscow-Berlin is traditionally considered by Russian leaders as important for European security. Nor was it a coincidence that this initiative was aired two months after NATO's Bucharest Summit, where the Alliance decided that eventually Georgia and Ukraine will become members. Medvedev's proposals actually follow a long tradition of Russian attempts to forge collective security arrangements, and there are striking parallels with draft treaties on European Security forwarded by the Soviet leadership in 1954 and 1955, when Western Germany was about to join NATO.³ Medvedev further elaborated on his ideas in speeches at the Evian World Policy Forum (October 2008), at the London School of Economics and at the Helsinki University (both in April 2009). Along the way, and after the short Russo-Georgian war of August 2008 which drew a lot of Western criticism (but conspicuously less action), Medvedev's tone became increasingly conciliatory and inclusive, as he no longer tried to exclude North America or existing security organisations from a future arrangement. Western countries largely adopted a wait-and-see attitude in response, since the Russian ideas were pretty much devoid of specific substance. Just before the December 2009 OSCE Ministerial meeting in Athens, however, the Kremlin published the text of a draft European Security Treaty on its website. A few days later, Foreign Minister Lavrov submitted a non-paper on related security principles to the NATO-Russia Council.

For the time being, the debate on these proposals has been relegated to a broader dialogue on current and future security challenges in the OSCE-area, launched by the Greek OSCE chairmanship in June 2009 as the 'Corfu Process'. Russia reluctantly went along, making sure this Process is not the sole platform for discussing its proposals. After all, as Minister Lavrov asserted in his address to the Munich Security Conference of early February, the OSCE has flunked its potential as a full-fledged security organisation and has been affected with 'amorphousness' and 'atrophy'.⁴

Referring to Medvedev's then still unspecified security proposals, the Russian Institute of Contemporary Development (INSOR) published a report in April 2009 called 'The Architecture of Euro-Atlantic Security'.⁵ INSOR, led by Medvedev adviser Igor Yurgens, is known as a liberal think tank which regularly comes forward with recommendations for both the government and the president, who is chairing its Board of Trustees. Last January, the institute came out with a report called 'Russia in the 21st Century: Vision for the Future'. This image included membership of a 'substantially changed NATO'.⁶

Much of the thinking that went into the study under review is reflected in the ultimate draft Treaty tabled by Russia, although the scope of this report is more ambitious. As Russian security papers go, the tone of INSOR's report is refreshingly moderate and self-critical.

2 President Dimitry Medvedev's speech at a meeting with German political, parliamentary and civic leaders, Berlin, June 5, 2008 (http://www.in.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/C080DC2FF8D93629C3257460003496C4).

3 During the Four Powers Conference in Berlin in February 1954, Soviet Minister for Foreign Affairs Molotov submitted such a draft Treaty, while a similar draft was submitted by the Soviet delegation during the Geneva Conference of July 1955 in the same format (documents to be found on <http://www.ena.lu>).

4 http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/D39B2461D308890EC32576C40039F20E.

5 http://www.insor-russia.ru/files/euro_atlantic.pdf.

6 http://www.riocenter.ru/files/INSOR%20Russia%20in%20the%2021st%20century_ENG.pdf

The authors' point of departure is that events such as NATO's air campaign over Yugoslavia (1999), Russia's 'suspension' of the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty (2007) and the Russo-Georgian war (2008) prove that European security arrangements are obsolete. Critics will claim that the latter two constituted unilateral Russian breaches of these arrangements, but whoever is to blame, it indeed seems fair to conclude that the lofty principles about European security adopted after the end of the Cold War have not come to full fruition. Premising their judgments on Russia as an integral part of Europe,⁷ the authors formulate constructive positions that appear conducive to a truly reliable and stable Euro-Atlantic security architecture.

The report first gives a general overview of the myriad organizations that make up Europe's security architecture. The authors describe the Russian crux of the European security matter by stating that its problems 'stem not so much from an institutional deficit as from a lack of enthusiasm from the participating countries to seek compromise'.⁸ The same applies more or less to their description of the OSCE: on the one hand, as stipulated in the 1999 Charter for European Security, it is the 'primary organization for the peaceful settlement of disputes within its region'; on the other hand 'there does not seem to be any ground to believe that any decision is possible that would (...) differ from those which are now feasible within the OSCE'.⁹ In short, Russia wants to alter a security system that by and large seems to suit the interests of Europe and the US.

In line with Russia's professed wish for a multi-polar world, the report touts an autonomous security role for the EU, and sees ample opportunity for Russia-EU security cooperation. In order to facilitate this cooperation, the authors are prepared to cast Russia in the role of assisting partner, without demanding an equal footing in decision-making processes (something unthinkable in a Russia-NATO context).

Interesting is the inclusion of the human rights watch dog the Council of Europe in the enumeration of security organizations. This, too, is in line with efforts by Russian officials to de-emphasize the OSCE's humanitarian 'third basket', which Moscow believes has been exploited by Western countries to the detriment of the security and economic dimensions of the organization. If one has the Council of Europe, why would the OSCE bother with human rights, their argument runs. In this vein, Russia's draft Treaty dealt only with traditional 'hard' security, and so immediately provoked criticism from Western countries who favour a more comprehensive definition of security.

When it comes to Russia's 'own' organizations, the report is candid about the unfulfilled promises of the problematic Commonwealth of Independent States and pins more hope on the Collective Security Treaty Organization as an element of Europe's security system, albeit a CSTO that would be less Russia-dominated and more transparent, i.a. by interacting with non-governmental organizations.

In further chapters, the report examines the current status of the principles enshrined in the 1975 Final Act of the Helsinki Conference; the stagnating issue of arms control in Europe (where the authors plead for breaking the deadlock on the CFE Treaty and advocate a constructive Russian position on tactical nuclear weapons); the 'European' parameters for peace operations, including the exploration of conflict settlement mechanisms in a

7 The English translation of the report is not always accurate. In their foreword, the authors write about the 'assumption' that Russia is an integral part of Europe, whereas *izkhodyat iz togo* rather refers to 'premise'.

8 Report, page 11.

9 Report, page 15.

Russia-US-EU framework; ‘pan-European’ ways to counter unconventional security threats such as terrorism, bio-warfare and climate change; and, finally, security in the ‘post-Soviet space’ where Russia is advised to step up its efforts to resolve the ‘frozen conflicts’ in this region.

The INSOR study not only offers a useful, comprehensive overview of the current European security debate, but also provides much constructive thinking by discussing various alternative scenarios. As stated above, it generally does so in a nuanced and realistic way.¹⁰ It urges Russian security policy makers to reverse a trend of negativity and to produce constructive, forward-looking ideas instead of banking on Russia’s nuisance value.

The basic idea underlying this study, which could be summarized as a call for legally binding indivisibility of security in a multi-polar Europe, is in conformity with Russia’s official demarches. A cynical observer might claim that Russia’s proposals could be read as nothing more than a variation of NATO’s first Secretary-General Lord Ismay’s famous dictum that NATO was about keeping the Americans in, the Russians out and the Germans down. Russia, then, would rather keep the Americans in but far less prominently, bring themselves in for good and, to get there, team up with the Germans. This is probably true, but the fact that a liberal think tank such as INSOR subscribes to these basic security concerns says something about their sincerity, even if we don’t agree on remedies.

As long as Russia is not satisfied with European security, the West should not be complacent. Now that Russia has finally come forward with its own ideas, albeit by bluntly putting a draft treaty on the table, these deserve more than just a cynical reaction. Outside official circles there are an increasing number of pleas to engage Russia, either by offering NATO membership or by at least acknowledging the underlying concept of the Russian security proposals.¹¹ In the mean time, Western countries should try not to get overly distracted by heavy-handed documents such as Russia’s recently published new military doctrine, which labels NATO as a military danger, but at the same time calls for cooperation with the Alliance.¹² With regard to the broader security debate, INSOR admits there is more to this process than just a treaty, and it considers a ‘pan-European’ summit as a good starting point for upgrading Europe’s security architecture.¹³ Kazakhstan, supported by Moscow, will host a summit at the end of this year in its capital Astana to celebrate the closure of its OSCE chairmanship.


The opportunity must not be missed to engage in a meaningful debate on European security, even if it hasn’t been initiated by the West. Ideas expressed in INSOR’s security report may help to provide input for this debate.

10 Not always, though. For instance, a typical non-starter is the suggestion that Russia, in order to ‘thwart’ further NATO enlargement, becomes the main guarantor of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of neighboring CIS countries (Report, page 72).

11 See, for instance, the Spiegel article of 8 March 2010 by senior German security pundits ‘It’s Time to Invite Russia to Join NATO’ (<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,druck-682287,00.html>) and ‘Reforming the Euro-Atlantic Security Architecture: An Opportunity for US Leadership’ by Jeffrey Mankoff in The Washington Quarterly, April 2010 (http://www.twq.com/10april/docs/10apr_Mankoff.pdf).

12 http://news.kremlin.ru/ref_notes/461 (only in Russian). In this doctrine, NATO enlargement is considered to be the primary “fundamental external military danger”.

13 Report, page 75.



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Security and Human Rights (formerly Helsinki Monitor) is a journal devoted to issues inspired by the work and principles of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It looks at the challenge of building security through cooperation across the northern hemisphere, from Vancouver to Vladivostok, as well as how this experience can be applied to other parts of the world. It aims to stimulate thinking on the question of protecting and promoting human rights in a world faced with serious threats to security.

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