



The Russia of Yeltsin Looks to Europe

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1. Introduction

As never before since the days of the October Revolution, Russia underwent radical and profound transformations between 1991 and the beginning of the second decade of the 2000s, both from the point of view of domestic politics and that of its international projection (Benvenuti 2013: 47-74; Giusti 2012: 33-40; Giannotti 2016: 1-10). The dissolution of the Soviet Union definitively freed its 15 component republics from federal constraints and which, starting with the Baltic states in 1987, had clearly and repeatedly expressed their desire for independence, including RSFSR, later the Russian Federation. The latter was the official heir of all the long, tormented but also exhilarating Soviet experience that had characterised the history of the former Russian Empire for many decades: an experience that had marked the lives of millions of men with moments of revolutionary illusions and phases of profound political involution, economic modernisation and totalitarian rigour, dramatic defeats and military triumphs, *Pax Sovietica* and economic growth, nuclear successes and global role, socio-political crisis and stagnation (Graziosi 2011: 13-20).

The new Russia maintained its federal appearance in the name of the 190 or so nationalities that lived there and lost almost 25 million Russians, who were now living outside its borders. From the USSR it inherited a powerful nuclear arsenal, the seat on the UN Security Council and a large part of the great Soviet heritage, taking on almost all its debt in exchange. Wisdom would have wanted the process of transition from a planned economy and one-party regime to a liberal economy and democratic institutional model to take place through a period of slow and adequate transition. But this was not Yeltsin's intention: together with his closest collaborators, from Ygor Gajdar to Gennady Burbulis, from Anatolij Chiubais to Viktor Chernomyrdin, he opted for a rapid conversion to the free market that imposed immense sacrifices on a population already stressed by years of profound economic crisis and favoured the formation of a new powerful and corrupt elite, thus opening up large pockets of organised crime on a vast scale (Gajdar 2017).

Backed by a markedly presidentialist Constitution, approved without the convocation of a regular Constituent Assembly and which cost him an attempted coup by his opponents in October 1993, Yeltsin won the first political elections of post-soviet Russia in December of that year under the illusion that proceeding successfully on the

road of accelerated privatisation of buildings, shops, industrial plants, monopolistic giants and technological enterprises would have allowed him to avoid a real democratic transition and thus limit popular discontent which instead, from year to year, was becoming increasingly strong, undermining his personal power.

However, he lacked the strength to keep the federal structure steady, so much so that the very possibility of Russia's survival as a unitary state entity seemed to be called into question several times. In order to gain the support – or, at least, non-hostility – of part of the population and the political class of the regions and the republics, he promoted a “segmented federalism” characterised by dozens of bilateral treaties between the centre and the peripheries, each in its own way intent on obtaining maximum independence from the Kremlin. The result was a chaotic and, in the long run, ungovernable situation, as demonstrated by Chechnya's attempt at secession, followed by a failed intervention of federal troops.

With Chechnya proclaiming itself independent from 1991, without clear reactions from Moscow, then unable to bring its small republic into line, Yeltsin decided to attack it in 1994, opting for a military solution that he imagined would be quick and painless in the hope of thus increasing that popular consensus which, instead, began to falter. The war lasted much longer than expected and, ending two years later without a real victory, exposed all the limits of a President now worn out not only by the bad use he had made of power but also by alcohol abuse (Bensi 2005; Buttino 2008).

With popularity rates in free fall but supported by the close circle of oligarchs he himself had favoured, Yeltsin managed to stay in power until 1999. Resurgence of economic crisis following the collapse of the Asian Tigers in 1998, and the humiliation of having to helplessly watch NATO bombings of Serbian brothers over the Kosovo question – which he had repeatedly said he was against – marked the end of his political era. His successor was Vladimir Putin, chosen as prime minister in August 1999 and then elected with 52% of the votes in the presidential elections of March 2000.

2. An Eye to the West

With specific regard to foreign policy, in this same decade Yeltsin decided to continue the “new course” inaugurated by Gorbachev aimed at improving relations with the USA and Europe. In doing so, a major role was played by the will of the oligarchs who wanted to have close relations with the West in order to obtain financing and new opportunities for profit. Thus the relationship was immediately characterised by a huge influx of foreign capital, mainly through the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Gould-Davies, Woods 1999: 1-21)¹.

It was certainly during the first part of the decade, and in particular with the stay of Andrey Kozyrev as Minister of Foreign Affairs between 1991 and 1996, that the pro-

¹ The total amount of funds disbursed to the Russian Federation between 1992 and 1999 exceeded twenty billion dollars.

Western policy of the Federation expressed itself with greater conviction along three different lines: relations with the United States, strongly encouraged by the benevolent attitude of Clinton, considered by the Kremlin as the main interlocutor; relations with NATO, characterised by a mutual desire for collaboration as demonstrated by renegotiation of the “Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe” (CFE)², conclusion of the Treaty on “Open Skies” (both in 1992) and creation of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) in 1994; and finally those with the European Union, penalised in the long run by the inability of its members to draw up a common position despite the “Charter of Paris for a New Europe” approved by the CSCE in 1990 to try to manage the world scenario after the fall of communism and by which, in theory, it should have been inspired.

The history of relations between the Russian Federation and the newly formed European Union was, like that with NATO, completely new and initially marked by prudent steps, not without uncertainties, but at the same time on the whole positive. The first question that Brussels asked itself was whether and how much Russia could be considered a truly European country and consequently give it a role without this constituting a threat to European security in the future. The second was the extent to which Moscow was ready to accept radical changes both in domestic and international politics in order to transform itself into a real liberal democracy and consequently into a reliable partner both commercially and in the international context. However, even for the Russians themselves, it was not easy in the early 1990s to answer these and the many other questions they faced: how to better manage the internal transition? How to deal with European institutions? How to do so while respecting its role as a great power?

Therefore, since in the short term it did not seem easy to find a shared answer, the European Community, shortly to become Union, decided to focus on economic programmes and actions, also considering Moscow’s need for external financing. Already in December 1991, and thus on the imminent eve of the collapse of the USSR, the TACIS programme was launched³, designed to offer technical assistance to the former Soviet countries engaged in the process of transition to democracy and a market economy. Demonstrating its importance were not only the substantial sums allocated, but the fact that it was not even suspended during the Russian-Chechen conflict, despite the many criticisms raised by European governments.

² Originally the treaty was signed in Paris in November 1990, immediately after German reunification, by the then 22 NATO member countries and by those of the Warsaw Pact, actually dissolved a few months later, in July 1991. The agreement imposed limits on conventional weapons necessary for surprise attacks or large-scale offensive operations throughout the area from the Atlantic to the Urals. But even before its entry into force in 1992, the disappearance of the Soviet Union and its bloc had created a radically new geopolitical situation in Europe. Just as the ratification process was in progress, special negotiations were conducted in parallel to allow the Russian Federation, along with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Moldova and Ukraine, to succeed the USSR. In this way, on this albeit shaky basis, it was possible to start implementing the Treaty, which produced very positive results and led to the destruction, over the next three years, of over 50,000 pieces of heavy weapons (tanks, armoured combat vehicles, pieces of artillery with a calibre greater than 100 mm, attack helicopters and combat aircraft).

³ The TACIS programme was divided into two sub-projects: the first, between 1991 and 1994, financed emergency measures and pure economic assistance; with the second, between 1995 and 1998, minor initiatives were launched which saw civil society involved, also in social terms, in fields such as education and all those sectors that could be useful for conveying respect for European values.

The following year, the Federation asked to join the Council of Europe, a long and troubled path that was to conclude only four years later. The Council carried out constant monitoring and evaluation of the progress made by the candidate country in the field of legal and institutional rapprochement to the principles established by its own Statute and which were considered indispensable requirements: democratic pluralism, respect for human rights and the rules of international law in this sphere, and realisation of the rule of law. To this end, three commissions were set up respectively for political issues, relations with non-member countries and legal and human rights issues. Although the dialogue within these bodies was not always simple, it was above all Yeltsin's decision to attack Chechnya that caused a suspension of work in January 1995. The issue returned to the agenda only in early January 1996 and the following month Russia became a member of the Council of Europe.

Before the war in Chechnya began, in 1994 in Corfu the new Russia signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the Heads of State and Government of the European Community which came into effect in 1997 because of the tensions caused by the war in northern Caucasus starting in 1994 (Timmins 2005: 3): according to this agreement, for the first time Russia and the European Union recognised themselves as strategic partners in the political, economic and cultural fields, formalising the will of both sides to undertake a common path whose cornerstones were recognition of the most favoured nation clause, progressive limitation of any reduction in the import-export sector, legislative harmonisation, the possibility of creating and opening companies, progressive liberalisation of services, free circulation of payments and movement of capital, regulation of intellectual property and, finally, the start of negotiations that were to lead to creation of a free trade area between the two signatories. In addition, particular forms of collaboration were to be developed in the field of justice and domestic affairs, especially in the fields of the fight against organised crime, energy, environment, science, technology and transport (Timmermann 1996: 219)⁴. It was further envisaged that the regional cooperation process also be developed and strengthened among the countries of the Community of Independent States in order to promote stability, commitment to the promotion of peace and international security through greater collaboration with the United Nations, OSCE and other international bodies. Although this agreement did not contemplate any suggestion of integration, contrary to what was instead emerging with the countries of Central-Eastern Europe, it was equally very important because, for the first time, relations between the European Community and Russia were not limited to economic support from the former to the latter but to definition of common objectives also at the political level and to strengthening of the European security system.

In the wake of the optimism of these early years, again in 1994, Yeltsin agreed to start a dialogue for potential collaboration with the Western European Union in

⁴ The body guaranteeing and monitoring this cooperation would have been the two annual summits (one to be held in Moscow, the other in the country of the rotating EU presidency) envisaged by the agreement itself and in which the EU President, the President of the Commission and the President of the Russian Federal Republic would participate.

certain areas of common interest. The formation of a group of experts of the two parties was suggested with the task of identifying the main problems concerning European security and envisaging the start of regular consultations between Russia and Brussels, in order to activate stable cooperation in peacekeeping operations in the former Yugoslavia, where in the meantime war between Croatia and Serbia had broken out, and then between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bowker 1998: 1245-1261). In 1999, on the eve of the Cologne European Council meeting of June 3-4, where dissolution of the WEU was decided within the EU, the WEU Assembly institutionalised the presence within it of a permanent Russian delegation in order to intensify Moscow's participation in European military and defence projects.

In those same years, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the European Community had launched a policy towards Central Eastern European countries, a choice which the Federation did not show itself hostile to in the hope of reaching a strategy of common security extended also to Eastern Europe in which Moscow had a clear interest. Everything started as early as 1989, at the G7 summit first in Paris and then in Brussels, when the PHARE project was launched, which provided for the granting of economic aid in particular to Poland and Hungary, which had been the first to break the Iron Curtain. In 1990 the project had been extended to Bulgaria, Romania and Czechoslovakia and then, between 1991 and 1992, to Albania, the Baltics and Slovenia⁵. In the same year the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development had begun to operate and in April, at the meeting in Dublin of the European Council, "Second Generation Agreements" had been signed which opened discussion about the possible association of these countries with the Union. Negotiations had begun with Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary to reach "European Agreements" in December 1991, considered the starting point for gradual integration of these countries into the Community framework. In 1993, the Copenhagen meeting of the European Council established the three fundamental criteria that had to be met to enter the Union, and in 1994, at the Essen meeting of the European Council, the actual pre-accession strategy was drawn up. Faced with all these initiatives, the Kremlin maintained its favourable position from year to year, interested in participating in the redefinition of European geopolitical balances. After the collapse of socialism, the hope was that, by creating a strong European political space, a new role for the United States, the old rival, and NATO could somehow be contained in this area. Moscow remained faithful to this orientation even when there was talk of real enlargement.

3. NATO Enlarges

The first phase of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation, the most pro-Western phase, did not, therefore, cease either because of the criticisms from European countries about the way in which Yeltsin had led the first Chechen war, the consequences of which were eventually overcome, nor by the start of the process of

⁵ Created as an instrument of aid for those countries in the transition towards a market economy, it would then become the financial instrument of the pre-accession strategy.

enlargement of the Community area towards the east, but fundamentally due to the decision to enlarge NATO in that direction, a choice that aroused harsh criticism in a large part of the Russian public opinion. The first tangible sign of change was the replacement of Kozyrev with new foreign minister Yevgeny Primakov.

As regards more specifically the first contacts that had taken place between the Atlantic Alliance and Moscow, these had led, in December 1991, a few days before the dissolution of the USSR, to the creation of the North-Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC). In addition, of course, to the members of NATO and Russia, soon to be no longer Soviet, the negotiating table was also joined by countries that had become independent after the fall of the Berlin Wall, countries which had been given a political voice for the first time. This body was to have dealt with some aspects of defence and security on the European continent but, given the radical changes taking place in the Soviet world, its activity remained in fact a dead letter. It is undeniable that this first attempt at dialogue failed, but it constituted the beginnings of future Russia-NATO relations and showed that an agreement for cooperation was possible, even if at that time it may have seemed difficult to implement.

A new opportunity for dialogue was re-proposed in 1994 with the aforementioned Partnership for Peace (PfP), which Russia decided to join in order to launch broad and strengthened dialogue and cooperation with NATO. The meetings, which took place at the level of ministers, ambassadors and experts, allowed for a considerable exchange of information and studies on important topics of common interest such as peacekeeping, environmental security and scientific research. The first opportunity to capitalise on the work done was implementation of the military clauses of the Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995. Russian and NATO soldiers worked together first in the forces for implementing the plan, IFOR (Implementation Force), and then in the force for stabilising peace, SFOR (Stabilisation Force), which followed the implementation plan. Russia participated in SFOR with 1,200 men out of a total of 20,000⁶.

Thus, in the mid-1990s, relations between the Atlantic Alliance and the Russian Federation seemed ripe for a further step forward. So, in December 1996, NATO foreign ministers gave Secretary-General Javier Solana the task of exploring the possibility of reaching a real agreement. The negotiations led to the signing, on May 27, 1997 in Paris, of the "Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation"⁷. This was a document, that propitiously allowed

⁶ The following year a significant initiative was launched on a Russian proposal in a sector different from the strictly military one: a *Memorandum of Understanding* was signed on civil emergency planning and state of preparedness in the event of disasters, which led to creation of the "Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre".

⁷ The treaty comprised four sections: Section I set out the principles on which the NATO-Russia relationship is based; Section II, and this was the real novelty, provided for the creation of a *Permanent Joint Council* which allowed for consultation, cooperation, decision-making and action mechanisms between the parties; Section III indicates the areas of consultation and cooperation; Section IV was devoted to military political issues, including the renewed political commitment of NATO member states to have no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new member states of the alliance.

foreseeing times ripe for the creation of a strong, stable and lasting partnership through the work of a “Permanent Joint Council”, which was to have ensured constant consultation and cooperation between the parties⁸. But it was precisely at the time when new perspectives seemed to open up that Moscow began to look suspiciously at the birth of a project – announced by the NATO summit of July 8-9, 1997 in Madrid – which would lead the Alliance to expand in the East in a period of just two years to include Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary in 1999. The feeling of the Russians was that they did not in fact have any say in NATO decisions within the framework of a relationship that was configured more on the lines of a “19+1 model” than on a “20” model, that is, all partners of the same rank gathered at the same table with equal dignity. This impression seemed to be confirmed in the decision, strongly opposed by the Russians but also upheld by NATO, to bomb Serbia in March 1999 to induce it to return to the peace negotiation table and end the war in Kosovo. Abandoning the “Permanent Joint Council” in protest, Moscow however agreed in June to let its soldiers participate in the international contingent in Kosovo (KFOR). Russian troops were to collaborate with those of NATO in three regions of the country, along with France in the north, the United States in the southeast and Germany in the south. Furthermore, they were to have ensured the security of Slatina airport in the British zone. It was an important decision, the only one at that time making it possible to save the small steps previously taken for a real rapprochement between historical enemies.

In order to save the pro-Western policy followed until then, Yeltsin also tried to propose the alternative of a security system centred on OSCE under European leadership, but this was not well received.

4. Primakov at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

It was then in the context of these events that the new foreign minister Primakov outlined for the first time his concept of “multi-vectoriality” (Primakov 2018). According to this doctrine, the US-led unipolar system resulting from the fall of the USSR, in addition to being conceptually undesirable in the eyes of the Kremlin, had already demonstrated its impracticability due to the uncertainty of American choices and the time had come to develop a new international system. In Primakov’s view it was to have been based on a plurality of major players among which, in addition to the USA, he included China, India, Brazil and, obviously, Russia. Almost a decade ahead of time, he had in fact predicted the BRICS group that was to have much success from the early 2000s⁹. From the list of the components of the new “international concert”, he did not

⁸ The Permanent Joint Council, which could meet at different levels, from Heads of State to ambassadors, had the faculty of creating specific working groups on topics of common interest: the situation in the former Yugoslavia; peacekeeping; security in the Euro-Atlantic region; activities in the political and defence fields against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; issues related to nuclear weapons; strategies and doctrines of NATO and Russia; disarmament and arms control; search and rescue at sea; fight against international terrorism; scientific cooperation related to defence; civil planning in the case of emergency and assistance in the case of disaster. It met for the first time on July 18, 1997.

⁹ Acronym formed from the initials of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, whose extraordinary economic growth has made them the protagonists of the international economy.

exclude Europe but, with a sixth sense that the future would unfortunately confirm, he believed that the community dimension was incapable of expressing a unified line and that it was therefore appropriate to direct attention to individual European nations, in particular France. It would be improper to conclude that the Russian-European dialogue broke off with Primakov. Rather, compared with the idealism that had characterised the previous phase, the new multi-vectorial orientation re-established relations according to the yardstick of Russian national interest. That is, no longer an almost uncritical passion for the European (and American) model, but rather the search for agreements that would respond to the Federation's main economic or strategic needs. It is in this light that the start of activity of the *Cooperation Council between the European Union and the Russian Federation*, with the summit held in Brussels on 27 January 1998, should be seen. The meeting was defined a "very important milestone" in relations between the European Union and the Russian Federation, which was expressly recognised as an *equal partner*. The significance attributed by Moscow to the Cooperation Council was demonstrated by the large delegation sent to the meeting. Led by Primakov, it included Deputy Foreign Minister Nikolai Afanassievskiy, First Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs Vladimir Vasiliev, Deputy Minister of Foreign Economic Relations Ronald Piskoppel and Deputy Minister of Justice Liudmila Zavadskaya. During the talks, the representatives of the EU and Russia reaffirmed the mutual *status* of strategic partners for peace, stability, freedom and prosperity in Europe, expressly speaking about sharing responsibility for the continent's future. After reaffirming attention and support for the reform processes under way in Russia in order to strengthen political and economic freedoms and confirming the will to promote the integration of Moscow into a wider European economic area, the delegations focused on a wide range of concrete dossiers, including: cooperation in the fight against crime, trade relations and economic cooperation, including the creation of the necessary conditions for the future establishment of a free trade area, assistance programmes such as TACIS, regional cooperation and new potential areas of common interests such as space research, environmental protection and arms conversion. Good progress in that same period of negotiations for Russia's accession to the World Trade Organisation was considered a further positive factor¹⁰.

However, the good auspices expressed in Brussels suffered the very serious financial crisis that hit the Federation in the summer of that year and then the decision of most European governments, including Italy, to support the NATO attack launched on Serbia in 1999 against the will of Russia and without UN authorisation. Precisely in the light of the emergence of these new tensions, it was Germany that revived the issue of relations with Moscow through the creation of a "Common European Economic Space" (CEES) with the Federation. The idea, barely mentioned in reality in the 1994 agreement, was taken up at the European Council in Cologne in June 1999, in the last phase of the Yeltsin presidency: on that occasion an articulated and long-lasting action plan was adopted which was given the definition of "Common Strategy

¹⁰ In fact, these negotiations would have continued for a lengthy period and the Federation only entered the WTO in 2012.

towards Russia" (CS) (European Commission 1999: X). It was the first application of a new instrument envisaged by the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1999, which, within the CFSP, was intended to launch "common strategies" which would compensate for the lack of effectiveness in European Union foreign policy. Specific initiatives were envisaged in the political and security fields, economic issues, trade and investment, energy, etc. Each new EU presidency would have to present a plan to improve the strategy in question, the ultimate aim of which was to make the already many beneficial tools provided for by the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EU-Russia Summit Statement 2001: X) tangible and maximise them¹¹. In the case in question, the primary goal of this four-year *Common Strategy* was to support Russia's reintegration into the European political and economic area through the consolidation of democracy, the rule of law and public institutions; integrate the country into the European economic and social space with the aim of creating a future free trade area; cooperate for strengthening security and stability in Europe and in areas of common strategic interest; and work together to respond to international challenges in the nuclear, organised crime, international terrorism and environmental security sectors. The idea of promoting common initiatives in the field of conflict prevention, peacebuilding and peacekeeping operations, not only in Europe but also in areas outside Europe that were of common interest, was very interesting.

Despite the numerous ups and downs and although never a word was said in favour of the idea of an association of Russia with the European Community nor, even less, of the idea of its possible integration, on the whole relations between the Federation and the European Union were thus positive in the 1990s. In fact, the various agreements stipulated enabled systematic collaboration at the level of ministerial apparatuses on concrete questions, above all trade issues and the matter of security, guaranteeing, even in the most difficult moments of that decade, the thread of a constant dialogue that the arrival of Putin, at least during his first presidency, that of the "golden age" of Russian-Western relations (between 2001 and 2004), did not appear to call into question.

¹¹ Among the meetings envisaged by the agreement, and regularly held, one of the most important was that of May 17, 2001 in Moscow which led to the creation of a "High Level Group" charged with working towards the effective realisation of a common European space in order to link the Russian and European markets, which together represented around 600 million consumers.

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