

Farewell to the liberal technocrat?

Reassessing Medvedev's foreign policy legacy

Andrey Makarychev

1 March 2012

Foreign policy under Medvedev: a liberal-technocratic approach

Russia will elect its next president on 4th March 2012 (or two weeks later, should a second round of elections prove necessary). Formally, it is only going to be in May that the incumbent head of the state Dmitry Medvedev transfers presidential powers to his successor, but in reality his presidency is already over. The end of his tenure was marked by growing domestic and international scepticism about his personal leadership, but in this analysis I would like to abstain from the emotionally politicised assessments of his four years in office, and focus instead on those changes that have occurred in the foreign policy domain since 2008.

One of the pivotal criteria for judging the success or failure of Medvedev's diplomacy is the progress made by Russia in its integration into international society. From this crucial viewpoint, he certainly widened the 'window of opportunity' for a more positive interaction with the West, although the movement in this direction has obviously not been linear. Medvedev also took some important steps towards admitting that Russia is more of a regional than a global power. He certainly opened up more scope for alternative political discourses, and in so doing made Russia more susceptible to international norms of democracy, human rights, and civil freedoms.¹

All this made many in the West perceive Medvedev as a liberal alternative to a more conservative Putin, though most comparisons between the two leaders were made on the differences in their styles of communication and rhetoric.

[T]he worldviews of Medvedev and Putin have appeared to differentiate, with Medvedev in the liberal camp and Putin in the great power balancer camp (the latter with nods to Russian nationalists as well).²

¹ Stefan Meister, "Eine wachsende Mittelschicht und neue Kommunikationsformen verändern die russische Gesellschaft", *The European*, 17 December 2011 (<http://dgap.org/de/article/20190/print>).

² Andrew Kuchins and Igor Zevelev, "Russian Foreign Policy: Continuity in Change", *The Washington Quarterly*, winter 2012, p. 158.

Andrey Makarychev is Visiting Professor at the Free University of Berlin and Professor of International Relations, Nizhny Novgorod Linguistic University, Russia.

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It was the alleged “pro-Atlantic” bias in Medvedev’s foreign and security policy, for which he was lambasted by nationalistic voices that, for example, portrayed the Foreign Policy Concept adopted in 2008 as being too conciliatory to the West.³

Yet Medvedev’s alleged liberalism is a very partial and relative conception. His liberalism was more an unintended product of a deeply de-politicised vision of governance than a set of fundamental values. Putin’s was a foreign policy philosophy that, being grounded in an apolitical – and thus managerial, technocratic – type of thinking, nevertheless required regular comebacks of political momentum (as exemplified by the famous ‘Munich speech’ – widely perceived in the West as a restoration of Cold War confrontational rhetoric). Against this backdrop, Medvedev was much less inclined to politicise Russian foreign policy. His proposal for a new security architecture in Europe seems to be in contrast to the Munich speech of Putin. Of course, as the recent debates in the UN Security Council over Syria have demonstrated, he could not avoid politically divisive and even confrontational situations, but Russia’s obstruction to Western pressure on the regime in Damascus was a reactive move that can be understood in light of Russia’s deep dissatisfaction with the way the situation in Libya was handled in 2011.

It could be argued that “the technological approach to politics is not far from the traditional liberal political philosophy”.⁴ Against this backdrop, the Medvedev presidency has demonstrated both the possibilities and limitations of what might be dubbed a liberal depoliticisation of Russia’s integration into international society. Yet in (re)assessing Medvedev’s foreign policy record in this vein, one has to take into consideration two important factors – one domestic, the other external. First, it is obvious that as Russia’s President, Medvedev has never enjoyed the freedom to take his own decisions in the sphere of foreign policy. The most substantial elements of foreign economic and security policies were under the control of Prime Minister Putin and his team in government. There is evidence that it was Putin who decided on the launch of military operations against Georgia in August 2008, as well as controlling the negotiations with Ukraine on the gas issues. It was Putin who stood behind the current ‘thaw’ in Russia’s relations with Poland.⁵ The Putin-Medvedev tandem was based on a co-existence of two leaders who had to informally divide between themselves the foreign policy domains. As a result of this power-sharing game, certain spaces for more or less autonomous manoeuvring were periodically opening for Medvedev, in spite of his evident weakness as a political leader.

Second, it was the policies of Russia’s stronger partners – above all the United States – that predetermined some of Medvedev’s policies; characterised as presumably liberal. To a large extent, this was due to the “reset” in US-Russian relations announced by both presidents in 2009. Arguably,

[T]he Russian perspective on the US changed because of the impact of the global economic crisis and changes in the Obama administration’s policies that addressed issues of greatest interest to Moscow.⁶

As a result, it was US pressure that made Moscow join the international sanctions against Iran and break its previous commitment to sell S-300 air defence systems to Tehran.

³ Vladimir Pavlenko, “Kontseptsia vneshnei politiki: ispytanie krizisom, *Obozrevatel*”, *Observer*, No. 1, 2009 (http://www.rau.su/observer/N1_2009/006_024.pdf).

⁴ Todd May, *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière. Creating Equality*. Edinburgh University Press, 2008, p. 149.

⁵ Konstantin Gaaze and Mikhail Zygar, “Pust’ opiat’ budet solntse”, *Russkiy Newsweek*, 9 May 2010.

⁶ Andrew Kuchins and Igor Zevelev, op. cit., p. 159.

Important progress in de-securitising relations with Georgia – i.e. the conclusion of an agreement with the Georgian government that made Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization possible in autumn 2011 – was to a great extent orchestrated and mediated by the US. Likewise, it was Germany who “sent a clear signal to Moscow that EU-Russia relations are unlikely to progress unless Russia normalises relations with countries such as Poland”.⁷ It was therefore the structural dynamics within international society itself that significantly facilitated Medvedev's allegedly liberal moves.

Major issues on Medvedev's international agenda

Yet what is the main evidence for Medvedev's depoliticised accents in foreign policy that, by and large, have to be seen as important steps towards a more constructive Russian stance in the world? Let's consider a few of the most illustrative cases.

First, Medvedev instructed the Russian Foreign Ministry to draft a blueprint indicating how Russian foreign policy mechanisms could be reshaped to become more pragmatic/profit-oriented and, thus, less ideological. The resulting document entitled “The Programme for Effective and Systemic Use of Foreign Policy Factors for the Sake of Long-Term Development of the Russian Federation” was to some extent inspired by the idea of Russia as a “liberal empire” evoked, in particular, by Anatoly Chubais several years ago. In this document the Foreign Ministry acknowledged the need for dialogue and cooperation with the US in the post-Soviet area; the adaptation of successful instruments for modernisation developed by Russia's key international partners; the interest in large-scale investment in the Russian economy and the possibility for a long-term lease of land to foreign business in Russia's Far East, etc. The ‘economisation’ of Russia's foreign policy went as far as claiming that Russia's efforts to get Western economic sanctions against certain countries lifted (namely Armenia, Uzbekistan, Iran, Cuba, Syria, Serbia) and assist them in overcoming isolation are expected to be materially rewarded by special economic benefits and privileges for Russian corporations.⁸ In fact, this statement is a bold illustration of the deeply depoliticised nature of the Kremlin's foreign policy philosophy – bereft as it is of any meaningful normative or value-based foundations.

Second, it was under Medvedev that Russia acknowledged more distinctly than before the utility for Russian interests of NATO's presence in Central Asia:

Washington and Moscow closely coordinated their response to the chaos triggered by the ouster of President Bakiyev in spring 2010 and to the subsequent ethnic clashes in southern Kyrgyzstan,⁹

which indeed opens prospects for more constructive Russia-NATO cooperation in the future.

Third, Medvedev signed the Meseberg declaration, which opens the prospects for Russian - German security cooperation, and agreed to consider cooperation over the Transnistria conflict as a concrete example. Moscow tried to exert strong pressure upon Igor Smirnov, but ultimately failed to dissuade him from running again for the President of this break-away territory. Nevertheless, the Meseberg process is one of few instances of Russia's tacit acceptance of the principle of conditionality, which it refutes. Russian diplomats even

⁷ Ben Judah, Jana Kobzova and Nicu Popescu, *Dealing with a Post-BRIC Russia*, London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2011, p. 50.

⁸ “Programma effektivnogo ispol'zovania na systemnoi osnove vneshnepoliticheskikh faktorov v tseliakh dolgosrochnogo razvitiia Rossiiskoi Federatsii”, *Russkii Newsweek*, 11 May 2010.

⁹ Ben Judah et al., op. cit., p. 45.

expressed interest in participating in some of the Eastern Partnership projects as well (instead of earlier irritation and criticism of this EU initiative).

Fourth, in relations with Poland and Norway, agreements were reached on visa-free border-crossing for dwellers of adjacent territories, which is an important breakthrough in the so far ineffective state of negotiations on visa issues with the EU. Taking into account Russian sensitivity on these issues, the agreements concluded with these two neighbouring countries are models for progress in the talks with Brussels. Besides, Russian-Norwegian relations improved significantly as a result of the Barents Sea agreement concluded by Moscow and Oslo in 2010, which delineated the Arctic borders between the two countries and opened the way to develop the vast oil and natural gas reserves in the Barents Sea.

Fifth, Medvedev refused to interfere in the issues of non-citizens' rights in the Baltic States, claiming that this was not Russia's problem. This attitude to some extent contradicts the concept of the 'Russian world' aimed at supporting Russian-speaking communities living abroad. He also refused to intervene in the ethnic conflict in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010, explaining that it was a domestic affair of this country. This inaction seemed to contravene the imperial logic that is often ascribed to Russia's diplomacy toward its neighbours.¹⁰

Sixth, in streamlining the Putin-promoted project of the Customs Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan, Medvedev recognised more clearly than anyone else that it went beyond the traditional logic of state-to-state liaisons. The Customs Union, in his interpretation, is about supranational integration, which presupposes the delegation of certain part of sovereign competences to the new bodies.¹¹ It was also acknowledged that the putative project of Eurasian Union is modelled on the EU's integration model and that in the security sphere its founding members have a lot to learn from the NATO experience.¹²

The pitfalls of liberal technocracy

On the other hand, the internationalist agenda pursued by Medvedev was far from conclusive. Three cases appear to be the most illustrative in this respect. The first is Medvedev's blueprint for a new security architecture in Euro-Atlantic mega-region, which was aimed at proposing a common set of rules for the sake of equal and collective security. The very idea of finding an all-encompassing institutional solution for the entire wider Europe region is both liberal and, to some extent, apolitical, yet Moscow's lukewarm attitude to the several attempts of formulating common EU-Russian, or NATO-Russian conceptual approaches to a new security architecture is deeply political, since it reveals the domination of the power component in Kremlin logic. Thus, Moscow ignored at least two chances to reinvigorate the security dialogue with the West – it disregarded the "Helsinki Plus" report of the EU-Russia Working Group on Human Security chaired by Javier Solana in 2010, and distanced itself from the Euro-Atlantic Security Initiative (EASI), chaired by Igor Ivanov, Wolfgang Ischinger and Sam Nunn.

The second case – that of Libya – demonstrates the force of resistance to Medvedev's policy of rapprochement with the West, and its limitations. The war in Libya was one of the instances where Putin's and Medvedev's positions clashed at a certain point. In spite of Putin's parallels between the military operation against Gaddafi and colonial invasions,

¹⁰ Fiodor Lukianov, "Imperia naoborot", *Gazeta*, 17 November 2011 (<http://www.gazeta.ru/column/lukyanov/3837597.shtml>).

¹¹ *Soyuznoe Veche*, No. 59 (414), 22-28 December 2011, p. 1.

¹² *Soyuznoe Veche*, No. 59 (414), 22-28 December 2011, p. 4.

Medvedev at the G8 summit in Deauville not only expressed his understanding of the West's policy towards Libya, but also confirmed the oppressive and therefore illegitimate character of Gaddafi's rule. Medvedev made clear that the Arab revolutions were not provoked from the outside, but caused by authoritarianism, corruption and mismanagement. He authorised the ban on visiting Russia for Gaddafi and members of his family, and put an end to Russian business operations in this country. As early as March 2011, Konstantin Kosachov, Head of the International Affairs Committee of the State Duma, supported the prospects of military operation against Gaddafi, thus making both normative (solidarity with the Western conception of sovereignty as responsibility) and political (support to the coalition forces operation in Libya) points. Later, Mikhail Margelov, presidential envoy to Libya, joined the chorus of voices eager to see Gaddafi in The Hague tribunal. He also claimed that Russia was ready to open its representative mission in Benghazi, based upon earlier acceptance of the opposition as a legitimate interlocutor.

It appears that the Medvedev administration did want to use the crisis in Libya to take another bold step along the path of fostering Russia's pro-European Atlantic agenda. Yet the importance of Medvedev's pro-Western shift should not be overestimated, for at least three reasons. Firstly, his sympathies to the anti-Gaddafi coalition were no more than a technological move aimed at garnering Western support for Russia's modernisation agenda. Secondly, for Medvedev the symbolism of his engagement with the West was greater than its substance: the key to his 'Libyan' narrative was the alleged 'petition' from Western leaders who asked Russia to mediate between Gaddafi and the opposition, and by doing so confirmed Russia's indispensability as a key security actor. Thirdly, Medvedev's good intentions should be viewed not as a well-considered strategy but rather as a by-product of the growing imbalances in the Russian policy-making system. Some of his pronouncements were implicitly rebuffed by much more critical to the West utterances by Vladimir Putin, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and vice-Prime Minister Sergey Ivanov. Against this background it is quite telling that in the seemingly similar case of Syria, the Kremlin has adopted a much more explicit anti-Western standpoint.

Concluding thoughts

The presidency of Medvedev, in comparison to that of Putin, can be viewed as a more consistent version of the de-politicisation of Russia's external relations. Medvedev's alleged liberalism – which was ascribed to him by analysts and journalists eager to somehow distinguish him from Putin – is grounded in the pre-eminence of legal and economic arguments, which constitute the most fertile ground for de-politicising Russia's international behaviour. Arguably, it is this liberal technocratic agenda that was instrumental in the moves towards Russia's deeper integration with the West.

But the long-term impact of these moves should not be overestimated – suffice it to recall the short-lived “reset” of Russian-American relations, followed by a new phase of confrontation in the autumn of 2011. Yet Medvedev – despite his far less convincing legacy in Russian domestic politics – deserves some praise for having indirectly contributed to the growing plurality of Russian foreign policy discourses and alternatives; an asset that needs to be preserved and defended in the years to come.