ULKOPOLIITTINEN INSTITUUTTI
UTRIKESPOLITISKA INSTITUTET
THE FINNISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

October 2011

FIIA COMMENT 12/2011

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Putin's Eurasian Union dreams > Russia's ambition to reintegrate former Soviet lands poses a dual challenge to the EU

On 4 October Vladimir Putin unveiled what is likely to become Russia's foreign policy programme for the next 6 to 12 years. While rivalling Brussels' ambitions in the "shared" neighbourhood, Putin's Eurasian integration plan also contains an ambiguous call for enhanced cooperation with the EU.

Given Vladimir Putin's scripted return to the Russian presidency next spring, the publication in *Izvestia* of his op-ed entitled "A new integration project for Eurasia" amounts to more than electoral campaigning for a domestic audience. His plan to turn the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan into a Eurasian Union able to attract other post-Soviet countries should, in fact, be seen as the founding stone of Russia's foreign policy on the 2024 horizon.

This should come as no surprise. Over the past twenty years, the idea of restoring ties between ex-Soviet republics remained popular for a majority of CIS citizens and it never left the minds of Russian policy-makers. The issue eventually became vital in the mid-2000s following the "colour revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, in which Moscow saw an illegitimate Western incursion into its backyard.

The timing for releasing the Eurasian Union project was well-chosen: Putin's article came out a few days after the Eastern Partnership Summit in Warsaw revealed the mutual prejudices of the EU and its Eastern Partners. Against this background, Putin's offer contains more tangible benefits for them than does the EU's.

In focusing on the economic component of a "modernised cooperation", the Eurasian project could meet the pragmatic expectations of many CIS countries – although for Russia the rationale is more geopolitical than economic.

For its neighbours, however, the prospect of goods, capital, services and labour freely circulating within a potential market of 165 million customers, under a unified legislation and with privileged access to cheaper gas, is surely attractive. This is true for Belarus, a pillar of Russia's post-Soviet reintegration dreams, but also for countries disappointed with the persistent absence of a firm EU accession perspective, such as Ukraine.

Although Putin's article carefully refrains from mentioning the latter (referring instead to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as potential members), attracting Ukraine into the Eurasian Union is a key objective of the initiative. Given the ongoing cooling of relations between Kiev and Brussels, Ukraine might consider a Russia-backed integration project as a prospective alternative.

This would be a setback for the EU's Eastern neighbourhood policies as a whole. Ironically, the biggest challenge for Brussels lies elsewhere: in the covert advances Putin makes towards the EU of getting involved with the Eurasian Union.

This is actually the project's most unexpected innovation: although rivalling Brussels' own plans for the "shared" neighbourhood, Putin claims that joining the Eurasian Union would not impair the EU aspirations of its members. However contradictory, the two integration processes would even develop symbiotically thanks to enhanced cooperation between the European Union and the Eurasian Union.

There is nothing new here: the Eurasian-bridge rhetoric was present in the Kremlin's response to the 2003 Wider Europe initiative and it has dominated Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's discourses on supposedly "shared" (Christian) values ever since.

Positive references to the EU abound in Putin's article: a model to outperform, the EU is presented as the Eurasian Union's natural strategic partner and key interlocutor in the face of "the outside world". The message is that the EU should thus unite forces with a Russia-led union of post-Soviet lands against their common economic competitor (China) and civilisational enemy – radical Islam, unnamed in Putin's article, which only presents the economic section of the offer.

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The proposed alliance could seduce many business circles and governments in Europe. Given its current economic crisis, the EU cannot afford to snub a regional cooperation invitation if it entails a prospect of developing transit connections with Central Asia and APEC countries. Brussels should be cautioned against engaging in an unprincipled partnership with Russia for several reasons, however.

Firstly, regardless of the claim that the project does not amount to restoring the Russian or Soviet Empire, and is well-intentioned towards the EU, Putin's agenda is clearly a geopolitical one. The fact that Russia might use the would-be Eurasian Union to tighten its grip on Caspian hydrocarbon resources would surely not result in more secure and diverse energy deliveries for EU countries.

Secondly, the values underpinning any Eurasian ideology are hardly compatible with European ideals of democracy. An integrated Eurasia would build on the Customs Union, which is currently a club of autocrats who would surely prosper under the auspices of a supranational body dominated by Putin III.

Thirdly, the variable geometry of the proposed Union implies that breakaway entities such as Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia might take part in it. This would not only put additional constraints on Moldova and Georgia. As the 2008 five-day war illustrated, when frozen conflicts warm up, they also have the capacity to threaten regional peace and divide EU member states.

For now, Brussels should not see Putin's initiative as anything other than a tactical riposte to its own neighbourhood policies. Should it pose a threat to anybody, this is for Putin's future foreign policy concept papers to reveal. The documents to be adopted at the next CSTO meeting on 20 December will probably detail the geopolitical and security components of his new strategy for Eurasia.