The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

A Battle Is Raging for Russian Foreign Policy (Op-Ed)

By Tatiana Stanovaya

November 02, 2015



President Vladimir Putin takes advice from three distinct groups of foreign policy ideologists who can be labeled warriors, merchants and pious believers. Each of them serves a role, but they have very different views of how Russia should develop.

The president deliberately does not privilege one over another and tries to keep his options open. He is constantly lobbied with dossiers full of proposals and ideas and uses them tactically. Novaya Gazeta newspaper caused a stir earlier this year when it published a memorandum with a scenario for the annexation of Crimea that had been allegedly presented to the Kremlin early in 2014.

It would be wrong to take this as proof of a long-term Kremlin plan to seize the Crimean Peninsula. It is much more likely that the Crimea operation was a last-minute improvisation that drew on a contingency plan. Putin simply pulled the relevant dossier off the shelf and put it into action.

Currently, the "warriors" enjoy the most favor in the Kremlin. They consist not only of officials in the Defense Ministry and the counter-intelligence service, the FSB, but also of men outside the security sector who can be described as "hawks," such as parliamentary speaker Sergei Naryshkin, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin and presidential advisor Sergei Glazyev. Pretty much anyone who stands to earn money and privileges if Russia follows an isolationist course can be called a warrior.

It would not be correct to call this group a "Party of War." They are a disparate collection of public figures united by an interest in confrontation, who know that the worse things get with the West, the stronger they will grow. These warriors would be willing to bring their children home from schools in the West, close their foreign bank accounts, and sell their dachas, as this would strengthen their position within Russia.

The "merchants" are most in tune with the ambiguous line currently pursued by the Russian state: seeking neither war nor peace and the maximum possible room for maneuver. Even Putin's current aggressive stance still leaves the door open to a possible U-turn in which the Kremlin seeks reconciliation with the West, praises democracy and Western values.

The merchants are mostly businessmen who emerged in the 1990s or who prospered with Putin's blessing in the 2000s. State sector businessmen have been hurt by Western sanctions and as a result become more reliant on the favors Putin provides. Those in the private sector have suffered less but are minimizing their risks by giving full support to the Kremlin.

The merchants oppose confrontation with the West and want sanctions to be lifted as quickly as possible. Rosneft CEO Igor Sechin has complained about the falling capitalization of his company. Gennady Timchenko has redistributed his assets in order to minimize losses. According to oligarch Oleg Deripaska, "we need to work for a de-escalation of tensions with the U.S. ... and with Europe."

Potanin and Deripaska remain completely loyal to Putin, accepting that his 90 percent approval rating will not change. But they are afraid that sanctions will stretch into the long term. "We can't leave Europe and the U.S., and they can't leave us," said Potanin. For him the West is a difficult partner, but a partner nevertheless.

Even though the warriors and the merchants both back Putin, they differ strongly on domestic Russian policy. Veteran market reformer Anatoly Chubais keeps up a dialogue with opposition leader Alexei Navalny, whom much of the establishment would like to see behind bars. Potanin calls telecommunications magnate Dmitry Zimin a "real patriot" just as a television documentary on NTV labels him an agent of the U.S. State Department.

The third group, the pious believers, makes a louder noise than the others, but has a smaller influence. It consists of the Orthodox Church, zealous parliamentarians, propagandists, and religious activists. Warmongering is their sacred duty. Social aggression and hatred is their raison d'etre — and a useful practical tool for the Kremlin.

The believers give the regime a solid base in society. The ideology of the new Putinism rests on traditional values, religious faith and contempt for Western lifestyle and civilization.

The stock of the believers is highest when the West attacks Russia, when Russia's enemies

twist Putin's arm and trample on its national interests. The more enemies Russia has, the greater their freedom of action, their budgets, and their career potential. But, unlike the warriors, the believers want the West to stay accessible so they can wage ideological combat there. A harsher confrontation with the West would make redundant the army of spin doctors who are currently fighting propaganda battles in the decadent West.

Putin presides over and above all these different conglomerates. He views them as actors in a play he knows well. The warriors are a powerful resource, the merchants are subjects with a certain political potential, and the believers are a Greek chorus who make threatening noises. In Putin's mind, all of them can co-exist.

However, it is unlikely that the warriors and the merchants will always agree to the limited roles assigned to them. If it ever develops into a real political force, a Party of War would acquire a separate identity and begin to make the Kremlin dependent on its actions. The merchants are fed up with the new trends and aspire to play a more long-term political role. So Putin's biggest foreign policy dilemma is whether he wants to fight or to do business.

Tatyana Stanovaya is director of the analytical department of the Center of Political Technologies in Moscow.This comment originally appeared on Carnegie Moscow's Eurasia Outlook blog*.*

See also on Eurasia Outlook blog:

The Silence of the CIS: Russia's Neighbors and the Syria Crisis

The Fall of Filat: Moldova's Crisis Deepens

Russia's System of Managed Chaos

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/11/02/a-battle-is-raging-for-russian-foreign-policy-op-ed-a50600