

## RUSSIA

Vadim Kononenko, RESEARCHER, FINNISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS



# Strategic Loneliness

Preparing for the first visit by United States President Barack Obama, Moscow sees the global recession not only in economic terms, but also as a sign that the political and ideological predominance of the west is withering. Despite itself being severely affected by the meltdown, Russian leaders sense the right moment to launch ambitious new policy proposals on pan-European security and energy. While the Kremlin might be right in assuming that, stricken by crisis, Europe is open to new ideas, its schemes are not a real alternative. It is also unclear, whether Russia is prepared to play by the rules it so actively promotes.

**I**N INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, INITIATIVES AND proposals are regularly launched, particularly when global crisis ushers in uncertainty and insecurity. More often than not, 'new' proposals turn out to have a longer history. Although billed as aiming at meeting common interests, they often reflect the interests of the state proposing them. Sometimes initiatives are launched not to be fulfilled at all, but simply as public relations strategies and tactical moves. Russia's proposal to redefine European security and energy has all these elements.

For starters, Russia's initiative to create a global energy framework is not particularly new as it was proposed in 2006 during Russia's chairmanship of the group of eight leading economies (G8). Russia's view of a multipolar world which underpins the current security proposal has also been the staple of its diplomacy for years.

Certainly President Dmitry Medvedev is interested in promoting these ideas as they add depth to his somewhat unfamiliar profile abroad. Indeed Medvedev devotes most of his public statements outside Russia to presenting and

explaining the idea of a new security arrangement for Europe. Yet despite this, the proposals lack substance and raise more questions than answers.

## HELSINKI PLUS OR MINUS?

Speaking at a policy conference in Evian in October, Medvedev unveiled the plan of a new pan-European security arrangement. In April, on a state visit to Finland, he reiterated the need for a new European security treaty by referring to the Helsinki agreements of 1975. The new 'Helsinki plus' would be a foundation for multilateral cooperation in the 'post ideological confrontation age'.

In Russia's view, such exclusively western clubs as NATO or the European Union are not fully adequate to address the security challenges, because not all countries on the continent are members. As Medvedev pointed out, the new pan-European security pact should guarantee equal security for all. There should not be any military alliances or coalitions that could undermine the unity of the common security space.

The projected European security treaty is seen to limit NATO's role as the major military alliance in Europe, or at least somehow influence relations between individual NATO members. The initiative is also regarded as a reaction to the EU's political projects in Eurasia – the Eastern Partnership and European Neighbourhood policy – both are seen by the Kremlin as competing with Russia in its immediate geopolitical sphere of interest.

By evoking the spirit of Helsinki, Russia would like to launch a platform in which it would have a seat as a prominent member, a founder, and a key facilitator of the political process. Needless to say, the prospective pan-European conference on security is seen as taking place in Moscow.

Paradoxically, the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE), which is about pan-European cooperation and dates back to the 1975 Helsinki agreement, is only mentioned in passing. In fact, Russia has been dissatisfied with the OSCE for many years, criticising it as ineffective and preoccupied with human rights and election monitoring.

Russia has tried to curtail the influence of the OSCE by blocking some of its decisions and not cooperating with election observers or setting its own standards for election monitoring. It appears that instead of 'Helsinki plus' the arrangement Russia is seeking could be called 'Helsinki minus' with democracy and human rights excluded. In fact, Russia would want the new security arrangements to be based on the energy trade rather than democracy.

## ENERGETIC

According to the Russian proposal, outlined in a concept paper recently made available by the Kremlin, the new energy treaty would include most energy sources, including fossil and nuclear fuel, and the entire production process from extraction to supply and transit. Russia would like

other countries involved in energy transit to commit to making the process uninterrupted and transparent. The treaty aims to restore Russia's – or Gazprom's – reputation as a reliable energy supplier, which was tarnished after the latest gas war with Ukraine.

Moscow's proposal for a new energy charter can also be interpreted as an attempt to revise the energy arrangements in Europe, such as the 1991 European Energy Charter. The Kremlin has been critical about the Charter, which Russia signed but has not ratified, as incompatible with Russia's national interests. Should it be accepted by other states, the new agreement would replace the current Charter. However, in its present form, the proposal has much less substance than its predecessor and is not very dissimilar from it.

Both aim to maintain the transparency of energy trade and security of transit. The difference is that the Russian version is less binding and emphasises both the sovereign right of the state to control its natural resources and open access to energy sector investments.

The proposal also mentions the possibility of an exchange of assets between exporting and importing countries, which has been part of Gazprom strategy to foster its presence in Europe by acquiring EU infrastructure and energy companies. Yet at the same time, Moscow remains unwilling to protect other countries' foreign investments in Russia.

It is unclear how far Russia would be prepared to go with this proposal. For example, will central Asian countries have the opportunity to monitor their gas and oil transit through Russia? Or will foreign investors be able to review Gazprom's strategic plans?

## LONE BEAR

Despite backing from France, Italy and Germany, and some polite responses from traditionally friendly countries like Finland, Russia's proposals met with little enthusiasm in Europe. This was to be expected, given the war in Georgia and the general mistrust towards Russia.

The truth is that in recent years, Russia has been avoiding binding agreements with the EU and other institutions, such as NATO or the World Trade Organization. Instead Moscow preferred bilateral relations with individual states, including projects relating to energy and security.

Now Russia has put forward proposals for a multilateral agreement, but this is mainly a reaction to the fact that the west has been proceeding with bilateral agreements with Russia's neighbours such as Ukraine, Kazakhstan or Belarus.

It is understandable that Russia is concerned about its strategic loneliness, however it is unclear whether it is prepared to play by the rules it so actively pledges to promote. It could well be that Russia is mainly interested in having a high-level grand project which would help to change its image as a lone bear, while still conducting most of its diplomacy and trade outside this cooperative framework. This might be the reason why Medvedev's initial proposals were so vague. But as such, they will bring little added value for Russia and hardly change anything in its relations with the west.

