

# Humanitarian Intervention: Russian Perspectives

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## Introduction

**W**HEN the idea of ‘humanitarian intervention’ as a comprehensive concept was first articulated by Tony Blair in his Chicago speech of 22 April 1999, Russia’s reaction was predictable, even if not characterized by impressive integrity. Indeed, this reaction is inscribed into a broader set of Russia’s thought patterns—concerning the country’s recent (and not so recent) history, the challenges that it is facing, its perceived interests in the international arena and the available means of protecting them.

## The Russian context

The very notion of ‘intervention’ has a clear negative connotation to the Russian ear. For decades, the ‘intervention of 14 countries against the first state of workers and peasants’ (in 1918-1922) had been a cliché of official Soviet history. The Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) was considered a just struggle against the Nazi interventionists. During the Cold War, interventions of all kinds were either planned or actually carried out by ‘imperialist and reactionary forces’ (in Korea, Egypt, Congo, Vietnam, Grenada and so on).

As for the use of force by Moscow in the international arena, it has never been presented or assessed in terms of ‘intervention’. The ‘march to Warsaw’ and the humiliating defeat of the Red Army during the war with Poland (1920) were either kept under silence or considered a gloomy episode attributed to the excessive zeal of true believers in the ‘world revolution’. The westward expansion of the USSR in 1939-1940 was justified as (1)re-establishing the territorial *status quo ante*; (2)responding to the aspirations of the indigenous populations; and (3)necessary in terms of preparing the country for the imminent war with Hitler. The Soviet Army

was used in Hungary (1956) to repel the counter-revolutionary uprising; in Czechoslovakia (1968) to protect the ‘common achievements of socialism’; and in Afghanistan (1979) to prevent the eventual political re-orientation of the country. In other words, these were by no means interventions. Even less so were military assistance efforts to client regimes or ‘national liberation forces’ (in Cuba, North Vietnam, Angola, Nicaragua and so on) which were mandated by the exigencies of the global bipolar confrontation.

This reluctance to consider Moscow-initiated acts of using force as intervention is telling. In the Soviet context, ‘interventions’ were nasty political acts that violated international law, whereas Moscow’s use of force simply did not fit into this category.

Moreover, while Bolshevik tradition has always given priority to political goals, the importance of legal aspects seemed to increase alongside the USSR becoming a well-established member of the international community. Acts of intervention ignored, circumvented or undermined the sovereignty of states, which principle was considered the cornerstone of the international system. Since Moscow aimed at consolidating its own position in the system rather than destroying it, an insistence on respecting the principle of sovereignty was imperative.

What was noteworthy, however, was that the Kremlin did feel uncomfortable when the legal coverage of its actions was insufficiently convincing. This was obvious in cases like Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan, when officials hesitated about insisting on the thesis of ‘being invited in by legitimate authorities’. Instead of relying on a desirable legalistic justification, the whole problematic had to be moved to other spheres—for instance, that of normative values (appeals to the ‘socialist internationalism’) or geopolitics (preventing destabilization in the southern reaches of the USSR).

Thus, the Soviet heritage has provided Russia with considerable ambivalence in its attitudes towards international interventionism. These attitudes combined two mutually contradictory components—the political rationale and the legal framework. While the prominence of the political rationale was undeniable, the importance attributed to international law (in particular, to norms concerning the sovereignty of states) was not mere propaganda and genuinely reflected substantive interests of the country in the international arena.

In addition, the Russian language differentiates between notions of ‘interference’ and ‘intervention’ in a more substantive way than seems true in English. For instance, defining one of the Helsinki principles as ‘non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states’ is misleading for a Russian who would instead only speak about ‘non-interference’, reserving the term ‘non-intervention’ for the non-use of *armed forces*.

Accordingly, any ‘humanitarian intervention’ is *ipso facto* a military operation and does not imply even a possibility of using other means (economic, political, diplomatic) to resolve disputes. In other words, ‘intervention’ to the Russian ear sounds more aggressive and belligerent than it may actually be, and Russians would agree with Kofi Annan that the word ‘intervention’ has come to be used almost synonymously for ‘invasion’ (without, however, understanding well his proposition that ‘the most effective interventions are not military’).

There are also some problems with the ‘humanitarian’ part of the term under discussion. Here again, some residual perceptions hark back to the Soviet past. Only a few of those who regret the disappearance of what used to be a strong and influential country would blame the West for deliberately destroying the USSR (in particular, by promoting human rights values). But Russians of older generations do remember that focusing upon ‘so-called human rights’ was a means of exercising political pressure on the Soviet Union and thus undermining its political cohesion—means that in the final analysis were not completely ineffective. Accordingly, these relatively recent nostalgic memories and regrets do not necessarily make the notion of ‘*humanitarian* intervention’ any more attractive than intervention *per se*.

In this context some analysts would also develop an argument that throughout the whole history of Russia, including its communist period, the individual has always been subordinate to the communal, that considerations of the state (or empire) are given priority over those of the individual, so that the value of human life has been relatively low (as compared with the western realities). This pattern may be criticized or, alternatively, presented as a source of Russia’s vitality; but in either case there are grounds for not expecting Russian hyper-sensitivity towards humanitarian tragedies that would justify humanitarian intervention. Whether such a general assumption is correct may be debatable; but it does add something to the understanding of Russia’s lack of enthusiasm with respect to the notion of ‘humanitarian intervention’.

It is also true that during the last 10 to 15 years, characterized by an unprecedented growth of violence in Russia and its vicinities (criminality, ethnic conflicts, technological catastrophes and so on), the ‘psychological tolerance’ threshold of public opinion and the mass media towards human sufferings has become considerably higher. This does not at all mean that Russians have become heartless and unfeeling. However, knowing that in Russia there are hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of refugees and ‘displaced people’ who can expect little government help, political support for projects focusing upon similar tragedies elsewhere may not be guaranteed.

Recent developments in the country have produced another psychological phenomenon that is relevant to Russia’s perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the idea

of humanitarian intervention. Promoting a business-oriented and pragmatic atmosphere in Russian society is essential for reforming the economic system. But the reverse of the coin is the evolution of a public mood that seems to be losing its taste for, and interest in, actions based on solidarity and altruism. In some respects, a value-based concept of humanitarian intervention would be better tailored for Russia's 19<sup>th</sup> century traditionalism than for Russia's 21<sup>st</sup> century post-modernity in the making.

### **The Low Priority of Interventionism**

Against this background, it is not surprising that attention regarding arguments promoting humanitarian intervention is considerably lower in Russia's public debate as compared to what takes place in the West.

On a conceptual level, the predominant mood in the country focuses on reducing its international involvement and overcoming Russia's residual superpower complex. Any ideology of interventionism would be seen by the public as an attempt to re-establish Russia's globalist orientations at a time when the country needs to focus its resources and energy on domestic transformations.

In practical terms, foreign policy issues are considered mainly in terms of the concrete challenges that Russia is (or may be) facing. Humanitarian interventions, unless they directly affect Russian interests, will generate little domestic support. Indeed, political elite attitudes seem to be increasingly marked by isolationist trends. When planning Russia's participation in international peacekeeping missions, for example, the government could never be fully confident that it would get the support of the upper house of parliament, the Council of Federation—support which is required by the Constitution.

Presumably, this relatively low interest in humanitarian intervention could change if dramatic developments take place in areas of significant sensitivity for Russia. Widespread abuses of the human and civil rights of ethnic Russians in other post-Soviet states could be one such matter of sensitivity. However, the political and emotional salience of this problem has diminished during the 1990s (although it is by no means removed from the agenda and might be used by some forces in a future power struggle).

In general, however, options for intervening in order to protect human rights in other countries are not matters of high priority. This is clearly reflected in the official Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation adopted in July 2000. Noteworthy, the section of this document entitled 'Human rights and international relations' does not even mention the problem of humanitarian intervention. Instead, Russia's self-

assigned goal is very generally defined as ‘searching for respect of human rights and freedoms all over the world on the basis of observing the norms of international law’.

This parallels an almost complete lack of ‘positive interest’ towards the issue of humanitarian intervention on an unofficial level. In Russian publications on international affairs, with very few exceptions, one can hardly find even very general arguments in favor of building a sustainable theory of humanitarian intervention or considering its practical aspects. For instance, there is no analysis in the Russian literature of cases where intervention might have violated international law but nonetheless aimed to protect human rights and/or stop genocide (e.g., the use of armed force by India in East Pakistan in 1971, by Tanzania in Uganda in 1979, and by Vietnam in Kampuchea in 1979).

By contrast, there is considerable ‘negative interest’ towards this issue. Indeed, Russian analysts have developed such a serious critique of humanitarian intervention that its implementation might seem either impossible or fraught with extremely grave implications. In addition, there are grave suspicions that attempts to highlight the notion of humanitarian intervention aim at achieving far-reaching political goals with very negative consequences both for Russia and for the overall organization of the international system.

### **Russian Criticism**

Most Russian analysts see numerous inconsistencies in the idea of humanitarian intervention, point to its conceptual weakness, warn about its dangerous practical implications and blame its supporters for deliberately promoting this approach with biased political purposes.

#### *Reluctance Towards Messianism*

Humanitarian intervention is widely perceived as aimed at ‘disseminating’ democratic standards—those that are associated with only one part of the world. Many Russians feel uncomfortable with the Eurocentric character of the humanitarian intervention doctrine and its intrinsic assumption of a linear evolution of various societies from ‘less developed’ towards ‘more progressive’. It is argued, for instance, that human rights values have traditionally been accorded lower status in most of Asia, even in those countries with as long and rich a societal history as Europe. Thus caution is required when applying the Eurocentric human rights standards to these countries—which in any case should not be done mechanistically.

What is noteworthy is that this line of thinking is inherent to many Russians who would be ready to share and adopt the European normative paradigm. Even for them,

imposing such a paradigm by force on the rest of mankind is a doubtful policy. While there are some voices that support efforts to more actively establish 'democratic order' in various part of the world, such opinions represent an insignificant part of Russia's political spectrum. There remains the relatively fresh memory of Soviet attempts to 'make others happy against their will'. Viewed from this angle, imposing democracy does not differ very much from imposing communism.

Furthermore, humanitarian messianism is unacceptable for practical as well as ethical reasons. Such messianism will inevitably provoke strong resistance from 'non-democratic' parts of the world, making them more arrogant and assertive rather than responsive to democratic values. Promoting such values requires time and patience rather than an energetic enforcement that would only be counterproductive.

### *Lack of Clear Criteria*

It is also argued that the international community is hardly able to elaborate clear and universally accepted criteria that would define situations eligible for humanitarian interventions. Even if there were common understanding of some very general principles (such as the unacceptability of genocide) major international actors would inevitably have serious disagreements on how to assess concrete political situations in various countries.

In addition, different domestic contexts and socio-cultural traditions will complicate procedures for assessing a conflict situation and applying general principles. There may be cases where domestic actors, both authorities and public opinion, would give priority to maintaining stability and territorial integrity at the expense of protecting human rights. The external proponents of humanitarian intervention would either have to accept this domestic (quasi-) consensus or, alternatively, to challenge it, which in both cases would severely undermine the cohesiveness of the concept.

### *Destabilizing Implications for Domestic Politics*

A particular Russian concern focuses on the concept's triggering effect for separatism. Notwithstanding the motives for humanitarian intervention, such actions might undermine and complicate the domestic problems such intervention is intended to resolve. As one Russian analyst notes, giving priority to humanitarian law over traditional international law 'would actually push radical and extremist groups inside religious and ethnic minorities towards radicalizing conflicts up to the use of armed force in the hope of winning a victory with the support of peacekeeping troops'. A noteworthy warning is addressed to western countries: 'This process may affect not only the periphery of the international system, but its nucleus as well, including Western Europe'.

Serious skepticism is also expressed with respect to potential international involvement in domestic conflicts in general. Such conflicts have very specific origins, dynamics and constellations of conflicting forces; any external involvement might complicate the situation rather than make it more stable. In addition, external involvement is often suspected of being used to promote selfish interests. As an expert from the Russian Ministry of Defense argues, the involvement of international organizations in Chechnya (i.e., "humanitarian intervention") has been harmful rather than helpful; indeed, because of such involvement, 'the critical mass of the conflict is becoming even more critical.'

### **Double standards**

Russian analysts and observers warn that, against this background, the practice of double standards is almost inevitable. The Kurds in Turkey have been subject to a more savage, larger-scale and longer-term persecution than were the Albanians in Kosovo, but 'humanitarian' air strikes were directed against Belgrade rather than Ankara. Given that all humanitarian interventions are based, to a very considerable degree, on subjective assessments, the legitimacy of *any* humanitarian intervention will be seriously compromised.

### *Who Takes the Decision?*

More broadly, the decision-making process with respect to humanitarian intervention is a matter of special concern in Russia. Moscow proceeds from the logic that any such decision should be adopted by the UN Security Council. The provision of the new Security Concept of NATO allowing for future 'non-Article 5' military operations (including those that amount to humanitarian intervention), without the consent of the UN Security Council, has been strongly criticized in Russia both by officials and by analysts.

Russia's insistence on maintaining the centrality of the UN Security Council is by no means related only to the issue of humanitarian intervention. For Moscow, Russia's permanent seat on the Security Council is one of the few remaining attributes of the country's international status as a great power. In this context, it is only natural that Russia's diplomacy is not inclined to any flexibility with respect to attempts to reduce the role of the Security Council or to reconsider the veto power of its permanent members.

This is especially relevant to issues of using force on behalf of the international community; the UN Security Council should be the only institution entitled to take such decisions. Thus, even if intervening on humanitarian grounds does become practical policy in the future, the final word should be that of the UN Security

Council. If and when the latter is paralyzed by the failure of P-5 to come to agreement, there should be no humanitarian intervention at all rather than carrying it out on an inappropriate legal and political basis.

On the question of the UN Security Council delegating its authority regarding intervention to other multilateral institutions, attitudes in Russia are ambivalent. On the one hand, there are fears about a 'devolution' of UN Security Council authority. On the other, considerations of practical efficiency may push exactly in this direction. Indeed, there may be cases where it is undeniable that institutions such as the OSCE, the OAU or even NATO are better suited for carrying out forcible humanitarian missions. Presumably, Russia might only accept this if they operate on the basis of a UN Security Council mandate and under its supervision.

### *Carte-Blanche to Aggressors*

Russian criticism often focuses upon the political motives, rather than the substance, associated with humanitarian intervention. It has become common place to accuse NATO and the USA of precisely such political motives in launching their aggression against Yugoslavia and of using force in general. More broadly, the West is seen as attempting to call into question the basic principles of contemporary international law and of replacing these with a new philosophy of humanitarian intervention.

It is precisely in this context that Russia's official attitude to the idea of humanitarian intervention was initially formulated. Even before being elected President, Vladimir Putin stated on 1 February 2000, in what was considered his first conceptual foreign policy outline, that 'it is inadmissible, under the slogan of so called humanitarian intervention, to cancel such basic principles of international law as sovereignty and the territorial integrity of states'.

In the Foreign Policy Concept this approach was elaborated further: 'Concepts such as humanitarian intervention and limited sovereignty' are promoted in order 'to justify unilateral forceful actions circumventing the UN Security Council', which is why attempts to make such concepts internationally acceptable should be rejected.

### *Threatening the International Order*

In an even more radical critique, the concept of humanitarian intervention is blamed for dangerously undermining the foundations of the existing international system. According to a Russian analyst, 'the whole world order of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with its mechanisms and institutions of international interaction, the one that was created by enormous political and financial efforts, has become a matter of the past. As a substitute to the fundamental concept of sovereignty of nation-states that were for



centuries the only subjects of the international law, a cosmopolitan ideology of protecting human rights is being imposed onto the world community’.

In 1998, in the context of the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Treaty of Westphalia, it was fashionable to discuss the future of the international system based on the unconditional primacy of states in their domestic affairs. Today, the collapse of the Westphalian system is regarded as a serious danger prompted by, among other driving forces, the concept of humanitarian intervention. Even if human rights are becoming a more weighty factor of international life, they should be inscribed into the existing UN-based legal framework and should by no means be given priority at the expense of the Westphalian principle of state primacy—this logic seems predominant even in those circles recognizing the importance of ‘humanitarian’ rationales in world politics.

### **The Kosovo Factor**

Russia’s political debate over intervention was strongly influenced by the fact that ‘humanitarian intervention’ became a subject of broad discussion in the context of developments in Kosovo. This influence was dramatic—Russian negativism regarding NATO’s Yugoslav operation turned into a broader negativism towards ‘humanitarian interventionism’. One can hypothesize that Russia’s attitude towards the latter might have been different in the absence of the former. Indeed, the Kosovo case has come to be seen in Russia as a concentrated manifestation of all the contradictions and negative consequences that humanitarian intervention implies.

Thus, all officially proclaimed grounds for the NATO military campaign notwithstanding, Yugoslavia was regarded as the victim of aggression from powerful nations, the object of unfair treatment on the part of those who are stronger and more numerous and can impose their will on one who is weaker. It is noteworthy that such Russian attitudes parallel the arguments of those in the West who recognize that, even if the war against Yugoslavia was not legitimate in the proper sense, it was based on moral considerations (i.e., solidarity with the Kosovars as victims of repression). Indeed, Russia’s overall approach, both in terms of official policy and public opinion, was also marked significantly by moral imperatives, although applied to different actors in the Kosovo drama. For even the most impartial observers in Russia, Kosovo showed how using ‘moral imperatives’ to justify the ‘humanitarian’ use of force can cut both ways.

Paradoxically, what was presented in the West as an intervention aimed at promoting democratic standards has seriously undermined them in Russia. The NATO military operation in Yugoslavia has been broadly perceived as discrediting ‘democratic values’ (to the extent that they are associated with Western countries); one popular thesis argued that NATO air strikes were directed against Russian democracy rather

than Milosevic. Furthermore, a real identity crisis has afflicted domestic pro-Western groups; most of them condemned the actions of NATO, and many found themselves uncertain about continued cooperative relations with the West in tune with the increasingly skeptic reaction of Russian society at large.

The issue of the criteria justifying intervention was also put to the test by Kosovo. Many Russians believed that even if Belgrade's behavior in Kosovo had been far from irreproachable, it had by no means amounted to genocide. The 'double standard' argument was also raised: it would be unjust to blame only the Serbs for what had happened, without paying attention as well to the destabilizing activities of separatists in the region or to other similar cases in the Balkans, such as that in 1994-95 when several hundred thousand Serbs were pressured out of the Krajina.

The opposition of Russian public opinion to the NATO military campaign against Yugoslavia was also intimately connected with Russia's own military operations in Chechnya (in 1994-96) and with the earlier Soviet experience in Afghanistan. Both these cases generated a deep conviction that air strikes are not the most appropriate means for dealing with ethnic problems (a conviction that turned out to be insufficient to prevent the use of force in Chechnya some months later and that was apparently eroded precisely by the developments in and around Kosovo).

The human cost of humanitarian intervention is another problem that was highlighted in Russian debates about Kosovo. Significant collateral damage inflicted upon civilians was regarded as seriously undermining western rhetoric about humanitarian motives for military actions.

Developments in Kosovo have also convinced many Russians that humanitarian intervention is a doubtful enterprise in terms of its efficiency. In the early stages of the campaign, the air strikes became a pretext for Milosevic to intensify ethnic cleansing in the region, the exact opposite of the humanitarian intervention goal. And after UN Security Council resolution 1244 was adopted and a *de facto* protectorate in Kosovo was established, Russia criticisms about subsequent developments have become even more strident. In particular, Russians focus upon the failure of the NATO-led KFOR to provide effective security protection to the Serb minority in Kosovo. It is pointed out that 350,000 Serbs fled Kosovo after the introduction of NATO-led forces, while numerous reports of violence against Serbs have been submitted by independent observers. This has led many Russians to believe that either NATO's human rights considerations are a pretext, or that such considerations are applied selectively and do not apply to the Serbs.

Paradoxically, the image of NATO playing unfair and being hypocritical has only become stronger in the aftermath of the air strikes. And it is claimed that, after

establishing international control over the region, the humanitarian situation there has worsened rather than improved. Finally, while new evidence of western bias emerges, the 1999 decision of NATO to intervene appears to many Russians not only increasingly unconvincing in terms of its humanitarian justification, but also based on deliberate manipulations, misinformation and provocation.

Numerous aspects of developments in Kosovo under occupation are regarded in Russia as leading to the province's *de jure* secession from Yugoslavia, which only demonstrates the disastrous implications of humanitarian intervention for a state's territorial integrity. Furthermore, there are growing concerns about attempts to 'export' secessionism to neighboring areas, with Montenegro becoming the next target where the model of humanitarian intervention can be used.

Finally, the Kosovo case was assessed by many (if not most) Russians as a clear demonstration of eventual global repercussions that might be generated by humanitarian interventionism. That the intervention was initiated in flagrant violation of international law might deliver a critical blow to the UN-based international order. It is expedient for Russia to try to prevent this collapse and hinder the establishment of a new international system allowing arbitrary interference in the internal affairs of states (on 'humanitarian' or any other grounds).

There is a widespread feeling in Russia that this way of looking at the Kosovo case (and learning appropriate lessons) might resonate with a number of other international actors, including such influential ones as China and India. Both, similarly to Russia, have reason to be extremely concerned about the humanitarian intervention concept, which in turn creates grounds for rapprochement between the three countries. Paradoxically, the theory of humanitarian interventionism and its practical implementation in Kosovo might well promote the 'trilateral configuration' (Russia—China—India) concept that was rather skeptically assessed by many observers when it was first launched by Yevgeniy Primakov.

Observers and analysts in Russia ask this about Kosovo: is it a precedent establishing a new pattern of international behavior, or is the type of humanitarian intervention against Yugoslavia an exception rather than the emerging rule? The 'alarmist' pole of the political and research communities predictably opts for the former; the latter is supported on various grounds, with one popular thesis arguing that NATO actions in Kosovo have irreparably discredited the very idea of humanitarian intervention (even in the eyes of its proponents).

### **Interventionism: Tailored for Russia?**

Russian anxiety about the possible applicability of the Kosovo pattern to Russia itself, or to its immediate environment, stems in large part from concerns for the country's territorial integrity. If a humanitarian catastrophe (especially one with a considerable ethnic dimension) is regarded by NATO countries as a legitimate ground (or pretext) for intervention, and if such situations could arise in Russia (which is by no means implausible), then Russia itself could sooner or later become a target of one of the next 'humanitarian interventions'. 'Serbia today, Russia tomorrow' – this was a major concern underlying the overly alarmist reaction to the developments around Kosovo.

The 'second war' in Chechnya that began in autumn 1999 could not but increase Moscow's negativism with respect to the concept of humanitarian intervention. Indeed, what was officially called a 'counter-terrorist operation' had a deplorable and even tragic side effect for the civilian Chechen population; thousands became victims of violence and objects of infringement, even if not as a result of a deliberate policy. International condemnation of Moscow for the indiscriminate use of force drew on parallels between Chechnya and Kosovo, where Belgrade had been blamed for violent pressures against the Albanians. This made Russia painfully sensitive towards all that the concept of humanitarian intervention implies.

Using inverted logic, one could argue that the western intervention in Kosovo *contributed* to the on-going tragedy in Chechnya. For one thing, the most recent round of hostilities in Chechnya began under the obvious impact of the 'Kosovo model', official statements to the contrary notwithstanding. After three years of 'hesitation' with respect to the breakaway republic, Moscow decided to use force, exactly as NATO did in Yugoslavia, but with the convincing justification that it was applying such force to its own territory, that is, without violating the international law. While the Chechen conflict might easily have re-ignited without Kosovo, NATO's intervention against Yugoslavia certainly contributed to eroding the political and psychological obstacles that had previously reduced Moscow's freedom of action in how it conducted itself in Chechnya.

It also seems quite possible that Kosovo had more a wide-ranging influence on affecting attitudes about the use of force, whether in terms of domestic or external conflicts. Certainly Kosovo made the use of such force more acceptable (or at least *less unacceptable*) to Russia's government, political elites and public opinion at large, which is indeed a paradoxical consequence of humanitarian intervention policy.

Furthermore, Russian authorities cited Kosovo when they rejected criticism from the West about the humanitarian aspects of the Chechen conflict (considerable number of civilian victims, refugees, human rights violations and so on). Such arguments may not seem convincing when one considers the specific characteristics of both operations. However, the Kosovo-Chechnya link is based not so much on a rational

comparison as on a sub-conscious thought pattern: we had to ‘swallow’ your actions in Kosovo, you have to do the same with ours in Chechnya.

Such logic can of course be considered simplistic, ill-grounded or infantile, but it does exist in Russia’s policy thinking and policy-making. Ironical as it may be, humanitarian intervention in Kosovo made Moscow immune to criticism from those strongly condemning it for the humanitarian atrocities in Chechnya. Moreover, some Russian observers note that, while NATO faces daunting problems in fulfilling its mandate in Kosovo, NATO indignation with Moscow’s operation in Chechnya is becoming more moderate. A different variation on this theme is that the two sides may have achieved a deal of ‘exchanging Kosovo for Chechnya’, with Russia reducing its support for Milosevic in return for the West softening its humanitarian criticism of Moscow’s conduct in Chechnya.

In Russia’s view, there is an additional —and to some more realistic—scenario for humanitarian interventions; that of external involvement in conflict zones in the former Soviet republics other than Russia. While NATO would certainly consider risky any intervention against Russia itself, there would be fewer restrictions (or self-restrictions) if the Kosovo model were applied outside Russia (‘Serbia today, Nagorno-Karabakh tomorrow’). Such actions would constitute a direct challenge to the logic that considers all ex-USSR territory as ‘Russia’s vital interest zone’. Whether this logic is justified and how it is translated into practice is a different question. At the very least, however, humanitarian interventionism is regarded as a potential means of undermining Russia’s prospects within the post-Soviet space and Russia’s relations with other CIS countries.

In a broader sense, this applies to the whole of Europe as well. The Yugoslav air strikes carried out by NATO were viewed as the most convincing justification yet for Russia’s fears over the prospect of establishing a NATO-centered Europe. In such a Europe, NATO pretends to have the right to decide where, when and how to intervene—whatever the opinion of other international actors might be, Russia included. Indeed, the Kosovo phenomenon has contributed to consolidating Russia’s anti-NATO stand more than the entire vociferous campaign against the enlargement of NATO. Where Russian arguments about NATO’s ‘aggressive character’ had previously looked like either pure propaganda or something inherited from the Cold War, the ‘humanitarian intervention’ against Yugoslavia was perceived as an impressive manifestation of their validity.

### **Other Considerations**

Although Russia’s official and unofficial attitudes towards the concept of humanitarian intervention are unequivocally critical, it is also important to point out

other motives in statements and writings on the issue. The very existence of such motives is indicative, even if they are marginal and represent the exception rather than the rule. It should also be noted that these motives are often expressed implicitly rather than explicitly, containing considerable ambivalence rather than clear-cut formula and recommendations. Nonetheless, they do outline the possibility of an alternative option in the development of Russia's thinking about humanitarian intervention.

It is noteworthy that this could even be said about the above-mentioned Foreign Policy Concept. One of its sections appeals to 'developing concrete forms of the international community's reaction to various acute situations, including the humanitarian crises'. In other words, this official document recognizes the very possibility that circumstances might require international actions motivated by humanitarian considerations. Whether such 'reactions' take the form of intervention is a different matter; what seems important, however, is the fact that the necessity of an international response to future humanitarian crises is recognized. Thus, in this context, the very notion of 'humanitarian intervention' may be implicitly considered as something that is not absolutely impossible or excluded.

Furthermore, a careful reading of the above-quoted Putin's statement implies that his approach does not deny the possibility of intervening with humanitarian purposes. Indeed, 'so-called humanitarian intervention' is not rejected as such, but only so far as it challenges the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity of states. It might implicitly mean that intervening without challenging these principles is acceptable (i.e., humanitarian intervention that is 'invited' by a sovereign state would be legitimate).

Even traditionally-oriented international law specialists, who are by definition the most severe critics of humanitarian intervention, give examples of flexible approaches. Some of them recognize that 'the idea of humanitarian intervention is contained in the international law documents' (and not invented with political purposes, in order to promote a 'unipolar world' dominated by the USA and NATO). Others would even carefully endorse the idea of humanitarian intervention: "In exceptional cases...the UN should get the right to intervene in a domestic conflict, notwithstanding the position of the state where this conflict takes place"; the reasons for such an intervention might include "massive crimes against humanity, genocide, brutal repression against the civil population, combatants and POW."

Moving further along this line of thought implies reconsidering traditional assumptions in two contexts: first, by upgrading and highlighting the role of humanitarian considerations, and secondly, by expanding the spectrum of options when military force could be used in the international arena. Obviously, these two

contexts are not necessarily linked directly; but getting accustomed to the use of force in the international arena may be an important element of humanitarian intervention. It is true, however, that interventionism might have nothing (or very little) to do with humanitarian problems, with other rationales prevailing or even having an exclusive character.

Even before Kosovo, Russia's approach to this 'new interventionism' was tested by the crisis involving Iraq from November 1997 through March 1998. Moscow played a considerable role in attempts to develop alternatives to intervention, as well as in building a diplomatic and political coalition against it. For a time this policy was successful and prevented air strikes against Iraq. But, when the USA and Great Britain did resume bombing in October 1998, they did so unilaterally, in the absence of an appropriate mandate from the UN Security Council and without other countries, including Russia, being able to hinder them.

In a sense, this was a strong signal that legal or political arguments may have no effect when major powers are keen to intervene. What happened in Kosovo half a year later only confirmed this trend. Lamentations about international law did little to prevent intervention, any more than protests and other gestures not supported by something more significant than words. The logic of increasing pragmatism that characterized the evolution of Russia's foreign policy from Kozyrev to Primakov to Putin required reactions (and actions) other than publicly expressed indignation and protests.

Such protests had to be replaced (or, at least, supported) by alternative arguments, visions and suggestions. Two such themes deserve mention as the most significant (even if low profile) indications of possible alterations in Russia's policy.

### *Developing a Legitimate Framework for the Use of Force*

At the G-8 summit in Cologne, Germany (1999) Russia suggested considering the legal aspects of the use of force in international affairs. This proposal seems to have had a double purpose. First, it was obviously oriented against current manifestations of humanitarian intervention; i.e., neither the air strikes against Yugoslavia nor those against Iraq were justified by any existing legal criteria on the use of force. Secondly, however, Russia's proposal contrasted with Moscow's traditional emphasis on the principle of the non-use of force in international affairs. Indeed, the proposal might even be interpreted as aimed at legitimizing the use of force in the international context (i.e., in the form of humanitarian intervention also?).

In strictly legal terms, Russia continues to argue that the non-use of force, as formulated in the UN Charter, has an imperative character. The Charter stipulates directly and unambiguously that the only two exceptions concern the right of states to

individual or collective self-defense (article 51) and to actions aimed at maintaining international peace, with the Security Council being the only body entitled to decide upon appropriate means, including the use of force (article 42).

Russia's proposal was motivated by the recognition that the international community should not disregard the suffering of thousands of people and massive and scandalous violations of their basic rights. It was also based on the belief that reacting to such situations might require the use of force, and that the existing mechanism thereof should be reinforced and made more efficient. In fact, these two theses, taken together, describe the rationale of humanitarian intervention, although without using the term itself.

Russia has suggested organizing a broad debate on this issue, both in the UN and outside it. The aim of such a debate is to bring about collective decisions that would legitimize and multilateralize the use of force across national boundaries. Predictably, the vision of 'legal aspects' as outlined by Russia is completely embedded within its traditional approach (strict observance of the UN Charter, central role of the Security Council, etc.). However, one cannot exclude that more flexible formula might eventually be elaborated in the process of negotiations allowing more efficient decisions and actions in various contexts—including that of humanitarian intervention.

In one sense, Russia's proposal is actually complementary to the idea of Robin Cook, the UK Foreign Minister, to conclude a Memorandum on principles of humanitarian intervention. Russia's skeptical reaction to the Cook initiative seems to be based primarily on a negative attitude towards the notion of 'humanitarian intervention' that is associated with attempts to circumvent the UN Security Council. As a Russian observer argues, such a Memorandum would be a 'substitute for the UN Charter', with Russia the net loser.

Nevertheless, the very fact that Russia highlighted the idea of the legitimate use of force is telling, which might help move the focus of the debate on humanitarian intervention from 'whether' to 'how'.

### *Threats to Terrorists*

On 22 May 2000, Sergei Yastrzembsky, high-ranking assistant to Russia's president, stated publicly that strikes against the Taliban-controlled centers of military training for Chechen separatist insurgents "might represent a very realistic prospect". This statement provoked a storm of comments in Russia's political circles and mass media. It was perceived as clearly reflecting Russia's intention (or, at least, readiness) to use military force against Afghanistan.



These threats were expressed and substantiated in the context of a 'struggle with international terrorism', and not in the context of humanitarian intervention. Nonetheless, links between the two bear directly upon the problem of the use of force against a sovereign state. Certainly, air strikes against the Taliban would be a clear violation of international law and the UN Charter, unless there was convincing proof of aggression from the territory of Afghanistan against Russia or its neighbors. Interestingly, Yastrzhembsky's warning was reported to have been prepared by the Security Council of the Russian Federation but not coordinated with (or endorsed by) the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The latter even refrained from issuing an official statement on this problem.

In fact as well as deed, the whole philosophy underlying the 'legitimate use of force', as described above, might be destroyed by air strikes on Afghan territory. International law, Russia's main argument in its criticism of humanitarian intervention, might become a victim of pragmatism. Sergei Ivanov, influential secretary of Russia's Security Council, when asked about the legitimacy of preventive strikes, responded that "if, fighting with such a terrible evil as international terrorism, we strictly observe the rules, then we'll be losing all the time." Another of Russia's theses would be undermined as well, that the UN Security Council is the only body that has the right to make a decision on using force. According to Anatoliy Kvashnin, Chief of the General Staff, if and when strikes against the bases of Mujaheddins threatening the frontiers of the CIS are considered, "everything will be decided by the leaders of these states... On the other hand, decisions are to be taken by the Council of the CIS heads of state—what they decide will be implemented."

Not surprisingly, comments were made about Russia adopting 'the methods of the USA' (i.e., those that had been strongly criticized by Russia). By announcing its intention to intervene, Moscow proclaimed a readiness to operate in the same way as Washington when the US carried out missile strikes against Sudan and Afghanistan in August 1998 in retaliation for Osama bin Laden's terrorists allegedly blowing up American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. In a curious reversal of roles, Moscow found itself criticized by domestic opponents of humanitarian intervention who used the same arguments that Moscow had previously aimed at the US and NATO. In any event, the integrity and coherence of Russia's negative attitude towards humanitarian intervention were undermined. Some Russian observers even suspect that Russia was actively pushed towards interventionism from outside in order to put it on an equal footing with those who bombed Yugoslavia and Iraq.

Not surprisingly, Russian officials soon changed the emphasis in their proclaimed intention to bomb Taliban bases. The term 'preventive strikes' was abandoned; instead, the notion of 'defense against terrorists' started to be actively promoted, especially with respect to on-going destabilization in Central Asia.

Also of note is that some analysts believe that Moscow and Washington cooperated in this particular case and have found common language with respect to the use of force against the Taliban. Moscow was reportedly promised broad support in ‘resolving the situation in Afghanistan’; in contrast to the case of Chechnya, the West would not criticize Russian actions. Furthermore, a ‘cooperative spirit’ seemed to emerge, not only politically but militarily as well. There were even reports that the USA asked Russia’s assistance for retaliation strikes against Taliban bases, although some commentators saw this as a way of drawing Moscow into the war.

### **Concluding Remarks**

At first sight, Russia’s official position with respect to the idea of humanitarian intervention has been formulated in a clearly negative way. Nonetheless, the focus of Russia’s negativism and the arguments developed to support it do allow various interpretations.

Russia’s approach seems to proceed from the most traditionalist of assumptions, where international relations are completely dependent upon nation states and where there is no allowance for any interference in their domestic spheres (or such interference is permitted on a limited scale, to be agreed upon by the states themselves). From this point of view, the concept of humanitarian intervention is strongly criticized for undermining the existing international order and violating international law. Indeed, it is argued that today’s proponents of humanitarian intervention justify it in the same way as the USSR did in respect to Soviet interventionism. In both cases, ‘realist’ and/or ‘ideological’ considerations are given higher priority than international law.

Russian analysts point to the fact that in the process of developing humanitarian intervention as a concept and then implementing it, a number of problems emerge—relating to its legitimacy, its effectiveness, its humanitarian side-effects and its implications for international law and international order. Furthermore, the interpretation and justification of humanitarian interventions are accompanied by hypocrisies and charges of double-standards. On the one hand, the ‘humanitarian’ argument may be but a mere pretext for intervening—as many Russians feel was true of Kosovo. On the other hand, some interventions, without responding to ‘humanitarian’ criteria (as the West defines them), can nonetheless turn out to be valuable for peace building and state building—as eventual Russian involvement in the post-Soviet space may well be.

At the same time, Russia’s official statements and the wider public debate do not ignore the emergence of dramatic humanitarian situations that might require urgent and, eventually, forcible actions. From this viewpoint, criticism of humanitarian

intervention has a conditional character—it is not to be rejected *en gros*, but only if carried out improperly. In this context, there may be various approaches towards what should be considered inadequate. The Foreign Policy Concept, as quoted above, rejects humanitarian intervention when it is (1) carried out unilaterally and (2) not approved by the UN Security Council. These two reproaches could be interpreted as pointing to ‘unacceptable’ characteristics of humanitarian intervention and, correspondingly, helping to define the conditions for such intervention to become acceptable. Note there is nothing about sovereignty in these two conditions. On the contrary, the logic implied is that the contradiction between sovereignty and humanitarian intervention could be resolved in favor of the latter, if this is done collectively and with due respect to UN Security Council status.

Russia’s reluctance to endorse the idea of humanitarian intervention may be also explained by the fact that the country is experiencing significant problems, both domestically and as far as its international role is concerned. It is doubtful indeed that any weak state would be sympathetic with concepts of intervention. Nonetheless, while re-establishing itself as a viable international actor and overcoming temptations of isolationism, Russia might begin reconsidering its attitudes.

Also important is a broader context of the problem. The very question of humanitarian intervention touches upon a number of issues that have to be addressed: the significance of ethical parameters for foreign policy; the degree to which the variability of political systems, regimes and cultures is to be tolerated; the rules of using force in international relations, and so on. Russia certainly does not have a monopoly in facing such problems with no obvious solutions available.

Against this background, the very problem of ‘humanitarian intervention’ might seem inadequately formulated and misleadingly focused. It leads to arguments over abstract ideas of sovereignty versus external interference, while missing what makes them confront each other in the first place. Indeed, the problem of ‘humanitarian intervention’ is more comprehensive and more challenging than the notions ‘humanitarian’ and ‘intervention’ imply. Rather than imposing the concept of humanitarian intervention as an ‘annex’ to the international law or, alternatively, rejecting it bluntly, the international community, and first of all the major powers, should develop sustainable efforts aimed at promoting stability and peace-building, not only in relations between states, but also in the intra-state context.