The Paranoia Card
A comment on Tsygankov’s "The Russophobia Card"

By Andreas Umland

I think that Andrei Tsygankov's recent article on “American Russophobia” in The Moscow Times (April 3rd, 2008, p. 8, http://www.moscowtimes.ru/stories/2008/04/03/006.html, or http://www.opednews.com/articles/opedne_andrei_t_080403_the_russophobia_card.htm) is a rather useful illustration of how current US rhetoric on Russia can be perceived. It would be especially helpful, if this article were reprinted in a major US outlet.

Yet, there are, at least, three additions that need to be made to Tsygankov’s argument:

First, US "anti-Russian" rhetoric is not that particular. One can hear similar voices in both Western and Eastern Europe. Tsygankov reproduces here a common Russian allegation that the West's current "anti-Russianness" is a sole result of Russia's recent "resurgence" as an international economic and political factor, or even a pathological reaction to Russia's purported "rebirth" as an independent nation under Putin. However, as Tsygankov should know, much of the more competent criticism of current Russia comes from people who not only know and study, but actually like or even love the Russian people, culture and customs - not to mention the various Russians and half-Russians among the critics.

What Tsygankov seems to allege is what one often hears inside Russia too: If you criticize Putin, you are a "Russophobe". And if you are in favour of his policies, you are a "patriot". Tsygankov apparently applies a similar logic: Criticism of Putin's dismantling of democracy is emotional and unhelpful. Ignoring such developments is sober and constructive. Yet, I am afraid, some of those less critical of, or vocal on, recent Russian domestic political developments, simply don't care about Russia and are certainly no “Russophiles”. They just want to do business as usual, and Russia to deliver oil, gas etc. in time.

Second, Russia herself has created much of - what one may call - the institutional background of Western criticism of her internal developments. She has entered the Council of Europe, and transformed the G7 into the G8. Russia is a prominent member of the OSCE, and engages with NATO in a special Council. The fundamental basis of all of these organizations are, however, those principles which Putin has violated repeatedly in recent years. Moreover, the Russian political elite is mocking Western values by making up concepts like "sovereign democracy" - based on half-democratic procedures, pseudo-pluralism, subverted checks and balances, a government-manipulated civil society, etc. If, as Tsygankov seems to think, "Russophobia" is the major problem in Russian-Western relations, then Russia should leave the above organizations. This would immediately cool down Western criticism of Russia. If Russia were an international actor similar to China, Brussels and Washington would treat Moscow like Beijing - a state different from ours, but one has to do business with and should thus leave alone regarding its domestic matters.

Third, certainly, Western criticism of Russia has become harsh recently, and is, I agree with Tsygankov, sometimes ridiculously incompetent. Yet, this still does not compare to what Russia's most influential political commentators today publicly opinie about the United States and NATO, on a daily basis. Whoever knows Russian and had the chance to watch Russian TV for a couple of days may agree that Russian views on Western foreign policies, in general, and the US’s role in the world, in particular, are nothing less than paranoid. The bizarre conspiracy theorizing that has taken hold of Russian public opinion
nowadays goes far beyond Western “Russophobia”. The West is not simply criticized, but
demonized and made responsible for many of the mishaps of recent Russian or even
world history. In its daily portrayal in Russian mass media, the US political elite comes
across as a bunch of scoundrels whose every word on Western intentions in international
affairs needs to be seen as a purposeful lie.

Much of what Putin has recently done to Russia’s political institutions is justified by this
kind of discourse: Russia needs to protect itself from various foreign agents, national
traitors, and Western spies. An open political system is not something that Russians can
afford in conditions of massive Western attempts to subvert the nation’s independence and
uniqueness. In the opinion of people like Gleb Pavlovskii, Mikhail Leontev, Alexander
Dugin and many other prominent commentators, Russia is fighting a hidden war with the
West, and, therefore, needs to become a fortress within which democratic niceties are
dangerous luxury. The core of current Western-Russian misunderstandings lies at least as
much in this kind of views as in Western “Russophobia”.

In the unlikely case that Russia becomes a truly democratic country, much of what
Tsygankov laments in his article would simply disappear.

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