

Vladimir Putin's first visits suggest a reactive foreign policy

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Between 31 May and 7 June, President Vladimir Putin paid his first visits abroad since his re-election, to visit Belarus, Germany, France, Uzbekistan, China and Kazakhstan in succession. He also took part in the Russia-EU summit in St. Petersburg (4 June) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Beijing (7 June). During the visits several documents were signed, although most of them were declarative in nature (such as a declaration on deepening Russia's strategic partnership with Uzbekistan, and a number of memorandums of mutual understanding between Russia and China). In Minsk and Beijing and at the SCO summit, a joint statement was adopted relating to the current international situation. No documents or resolutions were signed which would entail any major change in Russia's relations with these individual countries or organisations.

Commentary

- Vladimir Putin's first travels since re-taking the presidency indicate above all that his course in foreign policy will continue; no changes in strategy have been announced. There was no common denominator in the route of his travels – except for the fact that the countries chosen are all considered to be key partners for Russia. The route of his journey was determined by tactical considerations: Uzbekistan has been favoured over Kazakhstan, and Mr Putin's absence from the G8 summit in the U.S. was an anti-American gesture, but not necessarily an anti-Western or anti-European one.
- The course of the trip confirmed that the post-Soviet area, and especially the project for its integration within the Common Economic Space being implemented by Russia, will remain a priority of Moscow's foreign policy. This message has been reinforced by the fact that after the trip, a separate department was created within the presidential administration for managing economic and social cooperation with the CIS countries, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. At the same time, tangible results from his visits to the CIS countries have been limited, and the trip should be seen more as Russia 'ticking off' the area in which it lays claim to exclusive influence.
- The content of the joint statements and communiqués issued indicates that Russian foreign policy will largely be a response to the dynamics of events around it, and will thus be reactive in nature. A key theme, especially throughout the Asian leg of the trip, was the Arab revolutions and the situation in Syria. In the events in the Arab world, Russia sees the hand of growing Western interventionism, which it will work to oppose. This is

demonstrated by the proposal in June to convene an international conference on Syria in Moscow, which in practice would serve to maintain the Assad regime. The 'Arab spring' also raises the Kremlin's concern that it could encounter this kind of unrest within the post-Soviet area; this will lead to closer political cooperation along the Russian-Chinese line and within the post-Soviet area, despite the differences of interests which exist, especially in the latter case.

- The Asian part of the journey also demonstrated that the situation in Afghanistan during the ISAF's withdrawal from that country will pose an ever greater challenge for Russian policy, principally in the context of Central Asia.