Chief Editor Dr. Sandis Šrāders
Editor George Spencer Terry

A RESTLESS EMBRACE OF THE PAST?

The Conference on Russia Papers 2022

Tartu, Estonia

The Conference on Russia Papers 2022

You will not grasp her with your mind or
cover with a common label, for Russia is one of a kind –
believe in her, if you are able…
Fyodor Tyutchev

The United States Congress' sanctions are
squeezing Russia out from Europe.
Vladimir Putin, Valdai Discussion Club, 2017

To stand up for truth is nothing.
For truth, you must sit in jail.
Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Candle in the Wind

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Chief Editor Dr. Sandis Šrāders
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Foreword

Brigadier General Ilmar Tamm,
Commandant of the Baltic Defence College

When meeting with US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken in early December 2021, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reaffirmed Russia's commitment to the principles of security cooperation enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act, signed over three decades ago. Lavrov, however, emphasized that the West and Russia interpret these principles of stability, security, and cooperation differently. It is at such times of high tension that understanding these differing interpretations becomes especially crucial.

Because the Baltic Defence College is the premier center for professional military education in the Baltic states, it is in not only our interest, but also our duty, to strive to understand such issues that again place us on the frontlines. This publication, as well as our educational activities, enable us to plan for brighter and more secure future. As former President of Latvia Vaira Viķe-Freiberga once said, "*We have a great opportunity to move beyond the past and learn the lessons of that painful past.*" In a lecture from 2014, she also compared the present Russian President Vladimir Putin to Peter the Great, the 17th century Russian Emperor who acquired territories in Latvia, Finland, and Estonia, saying, "*I hope the popularity the Russian president enjoys today would end soon and Russia could develop a different concept of who it is without having to threaten the rest of the world.*" In light of these considerations, strengthening Baltic collaboration and coherence, as well as developing common understandings of our difficult past, uncertain present, and interwoven future, are of paramount importance.

With the goals of strengthening Baltic cooperation and continuing our tradition of academic excellence in mind, we are proud to convene our eighth annual Conference on Russia in the midst of such a clash of these aforementioned divergent perspectives and uncertainties. While it is clear that the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have changed many of the things we used to take for granted, has the nature of our relationship with Russia changed?

To better understand adjustments inside of Russia, the collection of articles in 2022 volume address a wide range of these competing worldviews, delving into domestic developments in Russia, shifts in the balance

of international power dynamics, Russian-Baltic relations, and Russia's interests around the world. We hope that by bringing together the perspectives of Russia experts and specialists from around the globe, we will be able to provide the most incisive analysis on recent developments and open up a larger space for thought and conversation on these pressing issues also in the years to come. It is our wish that these chapters will serve as a source of inspiration for the Conference's debates on Russia in 2022, and while one can deliberate on whether the world is post- or past COVID-19, the connection between Russia and the West is here to stay. In this way, this edition of the Conference Proceedings serves as a continuation of our previous efforts and publications, and it is far from the last.

Tartu, 1 January 2022

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Introduction

Dr. Sandis Šrāders,
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The Baltic Defence College's Conference on Russia 2021 centered on the topic of responding to Russian in a multi-threat world, and the accompanying proceedings focused on this topic as well. This current volume, released alongside the 2022 Conference on Russia, takes up the mantle of the previous version, focusing on a single global challenge – the COVID-19 pandemic – looking at how it has reshaped the relationship between Russia and the West. To this point, we will engage with a diverse array of Russia scholars, experts, specialists, and policy practitioners who will present their diagnoses of the role of Russia in a world wherein the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences has become a structural backdrop to both international relations and domestic dynamics. It is our goal to provide a forum for all opinions on these issues, engaging with Western and Russian viewpoints, as well as those that do not neatly fit into either end of this spectrum. Nevertheless, the views expressed by the authors of these chapters are solely their own and do not represent the position of the Baltic Defense College.

The COVID-19 pandemic, as a concrete global problem that transcends borders and worldviews, can easily act as a point of cooperation for Russia and the West. However, has such cooperation materialized? What has changed between Russia and the West? What has stayed the same? Do pre-pandemic trends still hold for this post-COVID world, or have we truly arrived in a new world? With a growing number of challenges such climate change and migration that cut across borders, there will be more and more of a necessity for a common understanding in order to tackle such issues. While COVID-19 is far from the only shared global threat, this editorial focuses on the link between the epidemic and the wider set of difficult relationships that exist between the West and Russia.

Thus, we must ask if it is possible to discard previous tendencies from our thinking, or should we focus on novel ones? No particular answers are promised in the current edition. However, it would be a failure of responsibility if we did not at least attempt to open the floor for this conversation.

In the past, such trends and problems have previously placed significant limits on Russian society's transformations as well as Russia's interactions with the West. While many contemporary Russian thinkers and authors portray Moscow as the last stronghold and defender of traditional values in the face of a revisionist and hypocritical West, the regime has exerted significant pressures and restrictions on its own domestic opposition. As a result of this stance, the Kremlin appears to be locked in a solely confrontational struggle with the West, which has yet to see a way out.

In 2017, Dmitri Trenin of the Moscow Carnegie Center questioned if the West should fear Russia. From one side, Trenin advocated against possible military interventions in near abroad or elsewhere. At the time of this volume's publication, the Russian military is amassing large mechanized units around Ukraine's borders. On the other hand, he argued that the West should fear the Russia's collapse even more. More Western sanctions are in place to prevent Russia from further military adventurism in the face of present pressures. These sanctions could possibly deepen the socioeconomic hardships for the local populace, necessitating the strengthening of already autocratic control. At the moment, these domestic and international goals are inextricably linked, as Putin's regime's survival depends on even little victories abroad to legitimize itself. The outbreak of the COVID-19 virus has brought both problems to the foreground for Russia, those on the frontlines with Russia, and the rest of the globe. In this volume, we aim to learn more about these challenges and how they will affect our common future.

Section I – Views within Russia

Paying the Price for Putin's Adventurism
Russian Public Opinion Leans toward Butter not Guns

Dr. Maria Snegovaya,
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Abstract

As Russia's economy stagnated and real disposable incomes declined in the aftermath of the Kremlin's war with Ukraine, observers have tried to analyze the extent to which these factors are able to shift Putin's foreign policy priorities. This paper reviews the existing evidence to analyze how the perceived deterioration of the economic situation affects the Russian population's foreign policy priorities. Overall, polls reveal dramatic shifts in Russian popular attitudes since 2014. In light of the worsening economic situation, popular demand for a stable and growing economy in Russia has dominated over other considerations. This demand to first improve the economic situation and address domestic problems has resulted in declining support for the Kremlin's foreign policy adventures, such as additional military incursions or managing international conflicts, and an increase in support for restoring "normal" relations with the West. It has also resulted in a decline of public support for the authorities more broadly, as well as for Putin himself. Markedly, these trends have been unravelling against the backdrop of unprecedented heightened militaristic narratives, anti-Western sentiment, and escalatory rhetoric promoted by Kremlin propaganda on state-owned TV channels. While domestic opinion constrains the Kremlin's foreign policy decisions, it has previously proven incapable of imposing serious political costs on Putin for his reckless foreign policy decisions and international escalation. However, as socio-economic problems continue to accumulate, these domestic constraints on the Kremlin's foreign policy will become more severe.

Introduction

Against the backdrop of Russia's economic stagnation and decline of real disposable incomes in recent years, many observers have wondered what

impact these processes will have on the Russian public's support for the Kremlin's aggressive foreign policy towards neighboring countries.

In this regard, two broad streams of scholarship have offered opposing predictions. One group of scholars postulates that militaristic rhetoric and perceptions of Putin's geopolitical victories can foster stronger support for the Russian authorities by allowing the Kremlin to divert mass attention from domestic economic problems and increase domestic solidarity via a "rally around the flag" effect. Another group of scholars questions this assumption, arguing that perception of declining economy will make Russians less willing to bear the burden of an escalating confrontation with the West.

Seven years after the annexation of Crimea, the verdict is clear. According to available evidence, popular demand for a stable and growing economy among the Russian population has dominated over other considerations. This demand has coincided with declining support for foreign policy adventures, such as additional military incursions or managing international conflicts, and growing support for restoring "normal" relations with the West. These trends have also coincided a decline in approval of the authorities more broadly and of Putin himself. All of these factors suggest that Russians are increasingly unwilling to bear the economic burden of Putin's assertive foreign policy.

These findings could lead to a conclusion that Russia's public opinion will increase the costs of the Kremlin's foreign policy decisions. However, to what extent it will be able to constrain Putin's foreign policy options is unclear. Russian society has previously demonstrated its inability to punish the Kremlin for failing to deliver economic growth and for continuing its reckless military escapades. This chapter reviews these contradictory elements of Russian foreign policy.

Trends in Public Opinion: Rally around the Flag against the Stagnant Economy

Guns to Butter

Over the last decade, Russia's economy has remained stagnant. Following the Kremlin's war with Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, international sanctions were imposed on Russia, leading to a domestic economic crisis. Since then, Russia's economy has grown by an average of 0.3 percent per year, while the global average was 2.3 percent per year (Aslund and Snegovaya,

2021). The 2014–15 crisis was followed by a protracted decline of the Russian population's real disposable incomes. They fell by a rate of 3.6 percent in 2015, 4.5 percent in 2016, and 0.2 percent in 2017. The next two years, 2018–19, saw a barely noticeable increase (1.1 percent and 1.7 percent), but the 2020 pandemic year again brought a decrease in real disposable incomes by 2.4 percent (Komrakov, 2021). In an attempt to conceal this trend, Russia's Federal State Statistics Service altered its methodology and recalculated their historical figures going back to 2013. However, this methodological change had no fundamental impact on the results: real disposable incomes continued to fall in the first quarter of 2021 (*BBC, 2021*).

What impact will the continued deterioration of the socioeconomic situation have on societal foreign policy preferences? In recent years, two lines of scholarship have emerged in this regard. One group of scholars has argued that the economic hardship might help the Kremlin to mobilize public support. This school of thought contends by invoking the danger of external threats in times of economic hardship, political leaders can rally the public around the government in a way that would otherwise be impossible (Simmel, 1955; Coser, 1956; Woodwell, 2007; Kazun, 2016). A slightly modified version of the same argument holds that the Kremlin's geopolitical and military victories can divert the society's attention from economic problems. For example, in the case of Russia, some scholars (Guriev, 2016; Sirotkina and Zavadskaya, 2020) have found that the Russian public viewed Putin's performance more favorably when negative economic priming was combined with priming on Crimea. The takeaway from this argument is that the Kremlin may be enticed to engage in more international military escapades in order to boost domestic support.

However, another body of literature calls such an assumption into question. Such scholars have argued that a deteriorating economic situation might negatively affect public willingness to back Russia's bold behavior abroad. Several studies have discovered that negative perceptions of a country's economic situation make people less likely to support military interventions abroad (Tomz and Weeks, 2013; Stoycheff and Nisbet, 2016). In light of worsening economic conditions, Russians may also become unwilling to bear the economic burden of the Kremlin's escalatory behavior on the international stage (Sherlock, 2019). This argument implies that domestic public opinion will limit the Kremlin's willingness to engage in foreign adventures.

Which of the two positions receives the most empirical support? Polling data in Russia backs the second argument. Against the backdrop of the

Crimean annexation, Russians indeed have experienced a patriotic mobilization, and support for the Kremlin authorities and Putin personally skyrocketed (Rogov, 2016). However, as the effects of a stagnant economy became more apparent, the polls revealed a shift in societal priorities despite the ongoing state propaganda effort to rally support around the authorities while exaggerating the threats to Russia coming from abroad (Aleksashenko et al., 2019).

For example, while in the 2014 survey by the Russian Academy of Science (RAS), a majority of Russians (67 percent) primarily associated great power status with "military power," only 47 percent associated great power status with "social justice." In an identical survey four years later, only 49 percent of Russians associated great power status with "military power," trailing the 51 percent of Russians who reported they associate great power status with "social justice" (Kommersant, 2018).

Surveys that explicitly state the cost of Russia's greatness reveal even more startling results (Magun, 2018). For example, in an annual survey, Levada Center, Russia's leading independent polling agency, postulates an explicit tradeoff between a vision of Russia as a great militaristic power and one of a less militarily strong power but with a well-developed economy: "*Would you now prefer Russia to be first and foremost: A great power that other countries respect and fear; a country with a high standard of living, albeit not one of the most militarily strong countries in the world?*" (Levada Center, 2021a).

It is worth noting the dynamic of responses to this question (Figure 1). Overall, throughout the period under observation since 2003, the number of respondents who preferred to see Russia as a country with a high standard of living has consistently outnumbered supporters of "the great power." In various years, 47–66 percent of respondents have chosen this option, compared to 32–48 percent of respondents who preferred to see Russia primarily as a great power.

The temporal dimension is particularly interesting. Right after the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, the number of great power supporters peaked (48 percent) and overcame the other group. However, since 2015 it has steadily declined and, by September 2021, reached its lowest share in twenty years. Correspondingly, the proportion of those who wanted to see Russia primarily as a country with a high standard of living has increased since 2015, reaching the maximum share for the entire period of observations by August 2021. As of September 2021, only 32 percent of respondents

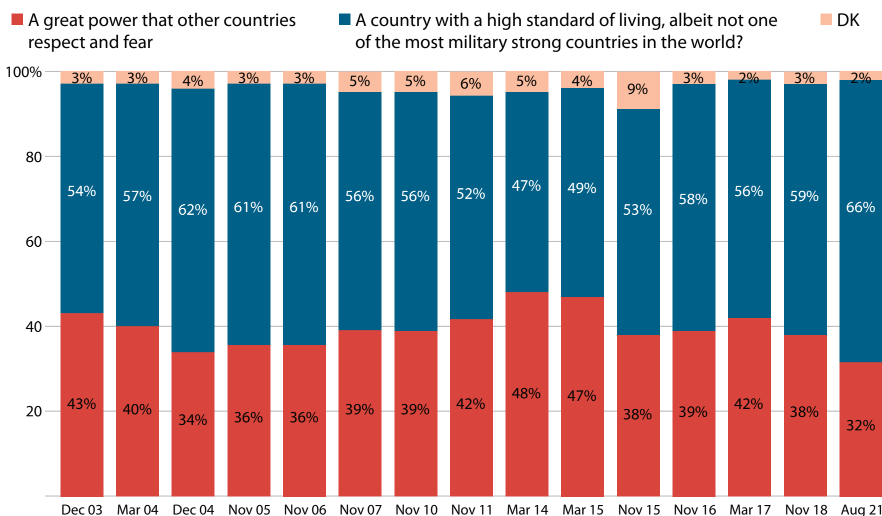

Figure 1. Responses to Levada-Center's question: "Would you now prefer Russia to be first and foremost: A great power that other countries respect and fear; a country with a high standard of living, albeit not one of the most militarily strong countries in the world?" (vertical axis in percent). Levada Center, 2021a

said Russia should be "a great power that other countries respect and fear," while twice as many (66 percent) of respondents thought that Russia should be first and foremost a country with a high standard of living (Levada Center, 2021a). The data also reveals a fairly pronounced generational shift: the idea of Russia as primarily a country with a high standard of living predominates across all age groups, but those between the ages of 18 and 24 are more inclined to take that view (74 percent) while those age 55 and over are more likely to support the idea of Russia as a great power (Goble, 2021).

While convincing, the above survey evidence presented above is correlational rather than causational, and does not allow us to draw causal inferences about the extent to which sociotropic perceptions of the economy shape foreign policy preferences. Other factors, such as declining audiences for state-owned TV channels could play a role. This relationship can also go in the opposite direction: those who disagree with the Kremlin's foreign policy may in turn be less likely to view domestic economic situation favorably.

In order to establish causality, I ran my own survey in 2018 to see how perceptions of Russia's economic situation affect individual attitudes to

foreign policy (Snegovaya, 2020a, 2020b). The analysis was designed as an experimental survey, with participants divided into three groups of approximately 400 people each. One group read an alleged article excerpt that provided no information about Russia's economic situation; another read information implying that Russia's economic situation was poor; and the third read information suggesting that Russia's economic situation was prosperous. Subsequently, all participants answered a set of questions about their foreign policy views, including those that were very similar to the above RAS and Levada-Center questions. The findings from my analysis confirmed previous conclusions. People who had been told that the economy was in trouble were consistently less likely than those who had been given no information – and still less likely than those who had been told that the economy doing well – to favor militaristic and great power narratives. They were also less inclined to want to spend money on defense that could harm economic growth, more likely to believe that Russia's internal problems were more important than external threats, and more prone to prioritize high living standards Russian military strength.[1]

The evidence presented above leads to the conclusion that perceived decline in living standards affects Russians' foreign policy priorities. When faced with a worsening economic situation and a decline in personal income, Russians began to wondering why the authorities spend much-needed money abroad on military escapades rather than redistributing funds to their own population who are struggling financially.

What is remarkable is that these trends are unfolding against the background of unprecedented heightened militaristic narratives, anti-Western sentiment, and escalatory rhetoric promoted by Kremlin propaganda on state-owned TV channels. This could be partially explained by the Kremlin's loss of control over the society's information sources.· While television remains the primary source of information for the majority of Russians, its importance has dropped from 90 percent to 62 percent since 2014 as the role of the internet and social media have grown (Levada Center, 2021b). These recent trends contrast sharply from the period of the 2000s, during which the demand for "a country with a high standard of living" also remained fairly high, albeit never reaching its current levels, but unraveled against

[1] These results should be interpreted with some caution, as 1) the magnitude of the discovered effects fluctuated between a 3 percent and 6 percent change of the range of the variables' scale and 2) most of the results were only significant at a 90 percent confidence level.

the backdrop of a more peaceful and reconciliatory relationship between Putin and the West in the absence of heightened militaristic propaganda narratives.

Relations with the West

Changes in perceptions of Russia's economic situation also correspond to shifts in attitudes towards other conflicts in which Russia is involved, as well as Russia's relations with the West. Rather than supporting further military aggression abroad, Russians increasingly believe that the government should focus on domestic issues such as declining living standards, rising prices, and deteriorating social welfare supports, and that Russia should maintain amicable relations with other countries instead rather than engage in confrontation.

In my own experimental survey (Figure 2), those respondents who perceived the economic situation as worsening were also less likely to think that, in order to be "a great power," Russia should "become a global center of influence capable of regulating international conflicts" or "to have a powerful military" (Snegovaya, 2020a). According to the survey analysis, Russia's economic decline coincides with a shrinking number of Russians supporting military confrontation with other countries. In explaining their reasoning, most Russians expressed concern that regional conflict will produce unacceptable social and economic costs for themselves, for Russia as a whole, and for the communities in the "near abroad" (Sherlock, 2020: 5; FOM, 2014). Even in the case of the annexation of Crimea, which is a source of particular concern among Russians, the popularity of the idea of paying the cost of annexation has waned over time. While Russians overwhelmingly approved of regaining Crimea, by 2015 less than 20 percent accepted paying to rebuild the region and fewer than 10 percent were willing to send their sons to fight in Ukraine (Balzer, 2015: 83; 2019).

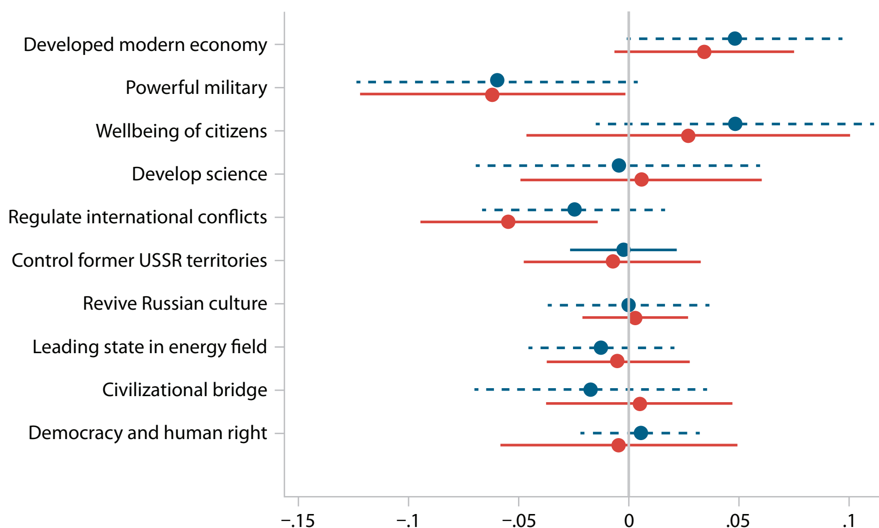

Figure 2. Effects of negative sociotropic treatment on respondents' answers to the question "What must Russia achieve in order to be considered a great power?" OLS regression coefficients, 90 percent confidence interval. Models do not include controls. Robust standard errors clustered on primary sampling unit in parentheses. Dotted line represents the comparison of the group with negative prime with the group with no prime; solid line corresponds to comparison of the group with negative prime compared with the group with positive prime. (Snegovaya, 2020a)

In a similar vein, in recent years Russians have become more supportive of the idea of improving relations with the West. While Russians do not directly associate their declining living standards with deteriorated relations with the West or economic sanctions, public support for improving relations with the EU and the United States, and implicitly for a more reconciliatory Putin foreign policy, has been on the rise since January 2015 (Saradzhyan, 2020, Levada Center, 2020a, 2020b, 2021c, Lomagin, 2021). As their concern about international isolation has grown, Russians have substantively improved their attitudes towards Western countries and Ukraine. The number of those who thought that Russia should treat the West "as a partner" has grown from 55 percent in May 2016 to 67 percent in 2020 (Levada, 2021c).[2]

In contrast, Putin's performance in dealing with specific issues on many foreign relations matters, including relations with the EU and the United

[2] In the 2021 version of the same survey this option was reformulated as "treat the West as an ally" and was subsequently chosen by only 44 percent of respondents asked.

States, has taken a hit since 2015 (Vice, 2017: 7). The proportion of Russians who believe Putin is defending the country's interests has been in decline. In my 2018 focus groups, some participants stated that "he focuses only on foreign policy," "he helps other countries too much," and "he spends too much on defense." Others agreed, saying that "Russian authorities should have revised current budget spending, and taken other steps, before increasing the retirement age." They should "make do with less," "start living within their means," and "cut spending" on arms, on the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, on military operations in Syria, and even on Crimea (Balzer, 2019). These trends have also had an impact on Putin's electoral approval, which has been steadily declining in recent years.

What Does It Mean for Kremlin's Policy towards the West?

While public opinion matters and demonstrates that Russians are increasingly supportive of normalizing of relations with the West, it is far from panacea (Saradzhyan, 2020). In Russia's autocratic political environment, the Kremlin, or rather a very narrow Kremlin elite circle, has the authority to dictate foreign policy (Petrov and Gelman, 2019). To what extent, then, could the aforementioned changes in Russian public opinion priorities influence or even alter the Kremlin foreign policy?

Many previous studies have concluded that Vladimir Putin is overly reliant on popular opinion polls. There is evidence that the Kremlin consistently used polls to back up foreign policy decisions of vastly greater consequence, such as the annexation of Crimea (Trudolyubov, 2015).

However, given recent domestic changes within Putin's regime, including a strong repressive turn against any dissent (Snegovaya, 2021), this reliance on public approval has weakened. On issues where mass and elite opinions diverge, Russian elites are less likely to follow public opinion. When it comes to international relations, Russian elites tend to have far more hawkish foreign policy preferences than Russian society as a whole. For example, the Russian elites have historically held stronger anti-American views than the masses, and when choosing "economy or military force," the balance of answers of the elite representatives also shifted more strongly towards military strength than the responses of the Russian population in general (Ponarin, et al 2018; Magun, 2018). Additionally, the rise in anti-American sentiment began earlier among elites than among ordinary Russians (Zimmerman et

al, 2013: 33). Only in 2014 was the mass-level dislike of the United States able to catch up with the longer-term elite attitude (Ponarin and Komin, 2018), but it has dropped back again in recent years.

Moreover, differences in foreign policy preferences between the Kremlin and the general public are fairly costless for the regime. Russians rarely demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the Kremlin's actions by taking to the streets or actively voting against Kremlin candidates in elections. Most of the time, they comply. According to studies, following the Crimean annexation, many Russians embraced the rallying around the flag sentiment through mechanisms of complacency rather than ideological support (Hale, 2021). Similarly, as shown in Figure 1, a greater number of supporters of higher living standards in Russia prior to 2014 did not stop the authorities from launching a war against Ukraine.

Looking back at Putin's twenty-year rule in Russia, when in the past the regime was about embark on new military adventures, factors other than mass opinion had a stronger impact on the Kremlin's calculus, including Putin's own geopolitical ambitions, Color revolutions in post-Soviet regions (Darden, 2017), oil price dynamics, the threat of NATO or EU expansion into the region (Snegovaya, 2020b), and others.

Overall, public opinion is only one, and far from the most important, of the many factors influencing the Kremlin's decisions about foreign policy in general, and possible military escalations in particular. Even democratically elected political leaders have been known to launch politically unpopular wars, not to mention Russia's increasingly repressive autocracy.

Keeping this in mind, any additional international escalation would almost certainly incur political costs for Putin based on current public opinion trends. In the long run, as socioeconomic problems worsen, these considerations will limit the Kremlin's policy discretion and capacity for further escalation. As long as international sanctions contribute to the worsening socio-economic situation in Russia, the Kremlin will face increasing domestic constraints.

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Guns and Glory: A Dualistic Perspective on Resurgent Militarism in Russia

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Abstract

An increasing number of Russian youth and children are engaged in both the glorification of past wars and in military training. Is Russia devolving into a war machine, or is there more to the story? This chapter examines the key factors underpinning the ongoing militarization of Russia, including such aspects as military recruitment issues, youth socialization, regime legitimization and nation building. Without an understanding of the complex driving forces behind Russian militarism, the author argues, we cannot adequately estimate its implications. Towards the end, the chapter also considers the years to come and the likelihood of the policy to successfully alter the dispositions and worldview of Russian youth.

Once more, the Russian officialdom has again fallen in love with its military. Military history is widely celebrated on special occasions as well as in regular school classes. New monuments and museums are being built, and military themes are becoming more popular in schools and in extracurricular activities. Unlike in the Soviet Union, preschoolers are now included in public parades, complete with uniforms and sometimes replica weapons and toy equipment. A number of schools and kindergartens are also supervised by local military units, resulting in a steady stream of militaristic content aimed at Russia's youngest and most vulnerable citizens. At the same time, military youth training has been increased, largely advanced through the same platforms of so-called military-patriotic education: DOSAAF, military-patriotic clubs, and secondary schools.

This essay will explore *why* Russia came to embrace its military in this fashion. Is Russia devolving into a mobilized war-camp, or is there more to the story? Along the way, I will also address the critical issue of societal support for this policy. Is it likely to outlast Putin?

To comprehend the significance of the military in the Russian mind, I contend that we must consider both historical and contemporary factors.

It is not difficult to argue that Russia's embrace of all things military stems in part from its domestic security perceptions, military recruitment challenges, and the international situation. Furthermore, I will argue that in Russian patriotic discourse the military is portrayed as a positive social force, a champion of Russian values, and an embodiment of the nation. Influential elites view the armed forces as a defensive bulwark not only against military threats, but also against psychological operations, perceived alien values, and perceived moral degradation. In other words, military patriotic education is regarded a tool for protecting and enhancing the unity of the Russian peoples in the face of the threats of globalization (Bækken 2019). From my dualistic perspective, the Russian military has two main tools to its disposal: guns for operations and defence, and glory for purposes of identity construction and social cohesion.

For presentation purposes, I propose a symmetric taxonomy of the key factors explaining the resurgence of military-patriotic policy (*Figure 1*). My figure does not include military patriotism as a foreign policy tool, though observers have noted a potential for its exploitation in this regard. For instance, some are concerned about its capacity to shape the narrative frameworks of other countries, to motivate volunteers to fight as Russian proxies, and to shape pro-Russian identities in the occupied regions of Ukraine. Yet, I find the potential uses abroad less important to explain the strong domestic growth of military patriotic policy. As a result, they fall outside of the framework I propose in this essay.

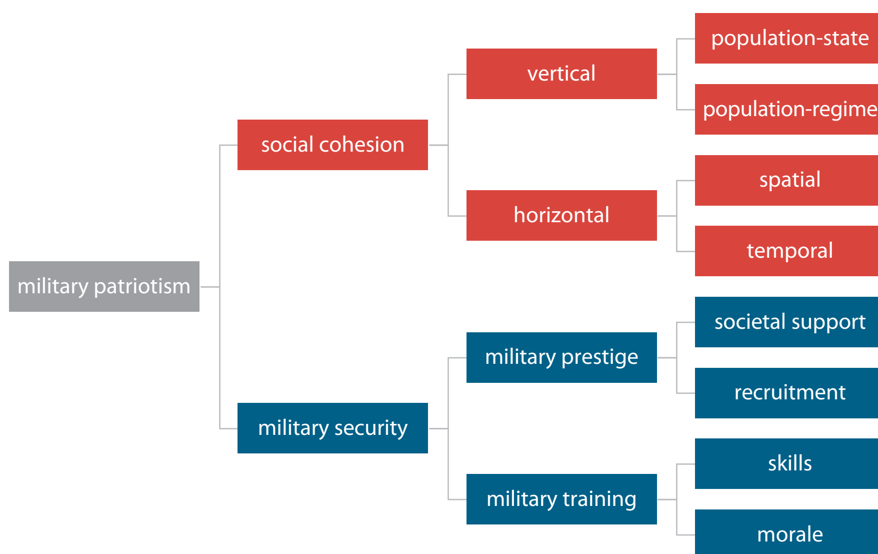

Figure 1: Key factors explaining resurgent military patriotic policy in Russia

A Return to Tradition

Russian militarism is nothing new, and we could go back further if we wanted. Suffice it to say, the Soviet Union was extremely militaristic. This is well known in terms of its economy and industrial output, but it is also true in terms of the role of war and the army in official identity policy. Although the Soviet armed forces maintained a Marxist-Leninist façade and even became a key symbol of the Soviet Union both home and broad, it was also a carrier of tradition and historical continuity. From the 1960s, patriotic education became more important than ever. Leonid Brezhnev declared the 1945 victory over Nazi Germany to be the greatest achievement of Soviet socialism, and military patriotic values soon aspired to become a "cornerstone of the official Soviet ethos" (Simes 1981, 141). Until the upheavals in the late 1980s, military patriotism was a core component of official identity policy.

Much changed in the late 1980s and early 1990s for both the armed forces and the ideological foundation of the state. When subjected to an extremely challenging situation, the once great army became an example of *terpeniye* – the quiet suffering traditionally regarded as a reflection of the Russian soul. At the time, the ultra-nationalist writer Aleksandr Prokhanov argued that the military represented "the core of Russian society and state, a core that will carry the state's tradition throughout the upcoming crises and will serve as the basis of its restoration in the future" (Rumer 1994, 10). Despite its flaws and problems, the military has served as an identity anchor for a troubled nation.

Despite a dramatic throwback during the years of attempted democratization, military patriotic education was never completely eradicated. It was kept within the Ministry of Defence, for example, and grassroots initiatives sporadically promoted the old ideas of military traditions, socially conservative values, and the importance (and honor) of military service.. As the social and economic crisis deepened, the state too sought refuge in its militaristic tradition. In the late Yeltsin era, military parades were reinstated, presidential decrees supported patriotic education, and initiatives to develop a state program of patriotic education were institutionalized through a specialized Duma commission. Most importantly, this resurgence of military patriotism was *not* motivated by a desire to glorify Russian greatness or military prowess. Rather, it was a desperate attempt to dig Russia out of the proverbial muck.

When Putin entered the main stage of Russian politics, things continued to develop in the same direction, gradually picking up speed. The first state program of patriotic education was launched in 2001, followed by an associated official "concept" in 2003. In the next decade, the state programs were continued and expanded, all the while military parades increased in size and the state took on an active and confrontational position in memory politics.

Around 2012, the policy became more pervasive. Faced with economic stagnation and growing discontent, the Kremlin strategists took its famous populist turn, shifting its core base of legitimacy away from the urban middle class to more conservative-minded peoples in the periphery. Official and public discourse veered towards social conservativism, Russian exceptionalism, and traditional values. Militaristic traditions were also refocused, and state platforms and new laws were developed to co-opt, expand, and streamline military patriotic initiatives. In conclusion, the political leadership brought the military back into the core of Russian official identity policy and made military patriotism a key strategy of legitimation. So far, there has been no turning back.

Around 2016, several new projects were realized. Park Patriot was established outside Moscow, later crowned with the enormous cathedral of the armed Forces. Rosmolodezh', the state youth agency, took over the responsibility for implementing the ever more ambitious state patriotic education programs, which had now become "mother programs" for plethora of similar local, regional, or sectoral programs. To expand and streamline military patriotic clubs, the authorities set up the "military patriotic youth movement" Yunarmiya. Today, Yunarmiya is one of the main engines of youth militarization in Russia, co-opting smaller military patriotic clubs under its red banner and giving the armed forces more traction within the schooling system. The organization exemplifies the aforementioned duality: jointly administered by the Ministries of Culture, Education, and Defence, respectively, it stands with one leg within the schooling system and one within the armed forces – to the presumed benefit of both, as we shall soon see.

Who will Benefit from this Militaristic Surge?

Military patriotism is meant to benefit the armed forces. Even before the Russian state took on the idea of an official state program of patriotic education, military officers were eagerly discussing the possibility. In their arguments, they emphasized dramatic recruitment challenges as well as what they saw as the overall deplorable conditions of contemporary youth. All subsequent state programs have stressed instilling a willingness to serve the state an as a main objective, and self-sacrifice is promoted as a fundamental value.

The gap between abstract support for the armed forces and a lack of willingness to actually serve in practice is an old and well-known challenge to Russian military recruitment. Yunarmiya works in much closer cooperation with the armed forces than clubs have done previously. In addition, by Yunarmiya's integration with the educational system, the armed forces gain a valuable point of entry into the lives of millions of Russian children. In this sense, Yunarmiya is an attempt to translate some of the abstract support into more useful forms.

The Russian Ministry of Defence has argued that the modern solider requires time to learn the intricacies of advanced military equipment. To that end, the prospective soldiers would benefit from knowing the fundamentals prior to the draft. The increased emphasis on military training is thus partially compensating for the training lost when the terms of service were reduced between 2008 and 2012. DOSAAF and Yunarmiya training is mostly very basic, but the fact that the ministry sets up detailed training plans for Yunarmiya summer camps still speaks to its military relevance. Yunarmiya does not amount to a reserve force, as some alarmists claim, but it serves to build base competence as suggested above.

The armed forces clearly require recruits with a broader skillset than what military training alone can provide. Yunarmiya arranges specialized courses ranging from technical sciences to military journalism, and has its own system of evaluating skills and motivations through competition. As a result, it could serve as an excellent recruitment tool for the military universities. Training in skills or values such as discipline, fighting morale, and group loyalty is also important to the armed forces. The 2018 (re)establishment of a political directorate within the military reflects the military value of political-ideological work. Finally, it is important to note that patriotic education is also carried out within the armed forces itself.

The other major source of motivation for patriotic education is quite different. Policymakers here stress how military themes can be used to benefit society. They argue that learning about military life will provide children with a moral compass and prepare them to deal with the personal challenges life will throw at them. Military history, moreover, provides a central narrative around which they want Russian youth to understand the origins and soul of their nation. We can see in the military patriotic discourse that traditional military values may serve a template for *Russianness*. In some ways, military patriotism is also viewed as social policy – taking troubled kids off the street, so to speak. For instance, the juvenile justice system occasionally sends offenders to Yunarmiya for rehabilitative purposes – as a way of instilling discipline and shape them into "real men." According to reports, the country's many orphanages contribute to boost Yunarmiya's membership figures. While some critics would see this as an opportunistic way to increase membership from above without parental consent, supporters argue that Yunarmiya is the ideal playground and upbringing facility for children in difficult circumstances.

As means for nation building (or nation maintenance), military patriotism provides a number of attractive attributes. For the last decade, Russian economic growth has been meagre, while democratic institutions have been further weakened. As a result, the need for alternative sources of legitimacy and state support has been intensified, which could also explain the resurgence of military patriotism. The basic idea is that the Russian military embodies the nation, serving as a powerful symbol of statehood and common history for a number of peoples. Not only does Russia's history as a militaristic state lend credence to the idea. In addition, the military as a (supra-) national symbol would in theory serve to unify Russia as inheritor of an empire. Patriotism is juxtaposed to nationalism in official rhetoric, with the goal of providing a common set of ideas around which all ethnicities can rally. While many observers of Russia have emphasized the growing influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, the country obviously contains people of many confessions. The military in its essence is related to statehood rather than ethnicity or religion, and this is an important asset for identity formation policy. This is true even if patriotic policy is occasionally infused with ethno-nationalistic tropes in practice.

A selective approach to history is an important component of military patriotism, which also makes sense from the perspective of nation building or nation maintenance. From the outset of his presidency, Putin has stated

his desire for Russia to unite under his leadership. In other to strengthen internal cohesion, he suggested Russia should draw strength from its past, which had largely been a subject of shame since the late 1980s. It was time, Putin declared, to focus on the positive and *useful* aspects of Russian history. However, the recent history of dramatic upheavals and civil war is difficult to shape into a useful narrative of a strong and eternal unity. Periods of orchestrated state-sanctioned terror, hunger, and deportations, moreover, do not make the task any easier. A strong focus on military history, however, largely evades many of these pitfalls. According to the state-promoted narrative, whatever the regime the ancestors fought for, they heroically defended the Fatherland and their native soil against aggressors.

Without a doubt, Russia's history of war is fraught with controversy. As a part of a complex historical period, the history of the Great Patriotic War had many aspects that were neither great nor patriotic. It was a time of heroism and sacrifice, but also of draconian state measures and large-scale deportations, of mismanagement, unnecessary mass death, disunity, and collaboration. As two historians put it: "Seldom did a country and a regime do both so poorly and so well in the same conflict" (Riasanovsky and Steinberg 2011, 497). In order to reforge this story into a one of singular glory and unity, the state has invested significant resources and kept the story of the war on increasingly tight leash. It has been sacralized and securitized by means of rituals, rhetoric, and law, and the official story has been repeated in public *ad nauseam*. Patriotic education is an integral part of this development – following a script of highly selective war commemoration that combined technical aspects with epic stories – collectively forgetting most contentious issues.

Since the 1960s, the focus on the Great Patriotic War has served as generational glue as well. A key idea behind the intensification of commemorative action under Brezhnev was to transmit the memory of the Great War to the generation who had been born in its wake. Today, few remain who actually witnessed the war. Still, patriotic discourse strongly reflects the efforts of a generation of fathers trying to tame what they see as unruly sons –by teaching them the lessons from this war. Thus, military patriotism is not only a tool of cohesion building across the Russian lands, but just as much a way to build generational cohesion. As we soon shall see, this is perhaps its most difficult challenge.

We can see that the search for cohesion via militaristic tropes has both a horizontal and a vertical dimension. Horizontally, the regime seeks to establish a common base for Russian identity, while vertically, the regime seeks to

strengthen the bonds between the general population and the Russian *state* and incumbent *regime*, respectively. The relevant policy documents continue to repeat how the patriot's duty is to support the state above all else. In terms of generating regime support, Yunarmiya is once again a case in point. In notable contrast to the clubs it normally replaces, Yunarmiya is recognized by its striking red banners, distinct uniforms, and frequent public appearances. Photos and quotations of Putin and Shoigu appear frequently in the Yunarmiya's media outlets, and a photo of Putin reportedly has become standard inventory in the "Yunarmiya rooms" established in schools (for documentation and discussion of this and other details, see Alava 2021). In a broader sense, the political regime may benefit from the conflation of military and civilian values inherent in militaristic policy. Traditional military values such as discipline, hierarchy, collectivism, and self-sacrifice may be a useful basis for civilian identity from the perspective of Russia's authoritarian leaders.

Is Russia's Love for its Military Real and Lasting?

It would be wise to inquire as to who pushed for this policy and who has benefitted from it. Military leaders started to carve out a role for themselves as the primary shield against "Western values" as early as the 1990s. Since 2012, the Kremlin has pushed conservatism and traditional values to the forefront of the public discussion and significantly expanded the military exposure in Russian society. At the same time, the idea that soldiers may serve as a moral compass and a symbol of Russianness is not only a story told by military personnel about themselves (with varying degree of state support). Neither is it merely one of Putin's instruments to bolster his legitimacy and maintain power. Political narratives, myths, and symbols always need a real social basis in order to be internalized by the population.

In 2018, I conducted a survey in ten locations around Russia in collaboration with ROMIR to assess the support for militaristic policy (for a more in-depth exploration of this survey and the related argument, see Bækken 2021). The average response indicates a general alignment with militaristic policies, but not overwhelmingly so. For instance, about two thirds of the respondents agree that Russia needs a military partaking in "educational processes, parades, mass media etc." Only 15 percent of those polled disagree with this notion, with the remainder undecided. Three quarters of the

population agree that the army constitutes "an inseparable part of Russian national self-consciousness." In general, the same respondents who wants a strong military presence in Russia for purposes of military security are also those who believe the military can provide positive role models for their children.

A recent survey conducted by Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud supports this image (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2021). The survey not only confirmed that Russians trust their army more than other state institutions (which was well documented and expected). More strikingly, Russians regard the armed forces as one of the most credible public authorities on moral and ethical issues. In the survey, the armed forces were ranked slightly higher than the presidency and comfortably higher than the Russian Orthodox Church. Among self-declared Orthodox believers, trust in the church is considerably higher, but the military has the strength to reach out to other groups as well. Around three-quarters of the population reports trusting the armed forces on ethical issues, which is an impressive figure in a society where political institutions are widely distrusted. The trust put in the military is obviously related to what it *is,* but it is also to what it is *not* – its assumed distance from cynical and self-interested politics is probably part of why it is trusted. One of the keys to understand the higher degree of trust in the armed forces compared to other political institutions, I surmise, is the military's image as an impartial, "neutral-conservative" force in domestic politics.

So far, so good, but the militaristic bridge is far from flawless. While it may reach a wider geographically and culturally diverse audience than the church, support for the military activity on societal arenas varies across social groups. My own survey project revealed significant cleavages along the lines of gender, age, education levels, and degree of urbanization – where women, the youth, and well-educated citizens in the larger cities are the most skeptical towards militaristic policy. The generational aspect is particularly important. In comparison with the older generations, the Russian youth and young adults do not buy into the Kremlin's enemy images, and they do not find military parades and military-patriotic clubs particularly relevant, neither for moral guidance nor for national security. Thus, while militarism may consolidate regime support in the countryside, military-patriotic education appears to fall short of its ultimate goal: enlisting the youth in the militaristic project. In sum, the unequal distribution of support among different segments of the population calls into question whether it can usefully serve to unite it.

What We can Learn from the Study of Military Patriotism

I have mentioned a number of factors that, taken together, may explain Russia's preoccupation with its military in domestic politics. Despite the fact that they are all related, I contend that the factors can be meaningfully grouped into two distinct explanations, as laid out in the initial figure. First, for security reasons, a state needs to expose and "sell" its military to the population in order to recruit soldiers and specialists and to secure popular support for its operations. Second, the Russian patriotic discourse presents the military as a moral authority, a bearer of historical continuity, and an anchor for Russian self-perceptions as a multi-national civilizational project. Importantly, these two main aspects of military patriotic education have different structural explanations, characteristics, and motivations. Furthermore, each of them has the potential to have an impact on the security of Russia's neighbors. Therefore, in order to estimate the dangers of Russia's love affair with its military, one must consider the totality of this relationship.

In the military-patriotic discourse, war and death are frequently presented in terms of glory and sacrifice. Disturbingly, much suggests that the glorification of children's violent acts in wartime has also returned. According to research on Yunarmiya, there is a renewed emphasis on commemorating WWII children-combatants, and many military-patriotic songs include a declaration of readiness to fight alongside the adults. As has been stated elsewhere, the top-down imposition of mass indoctrination of militaristic ideas may result in the *normalization* of war. Society can become more tolerant of high military expenditure during peacetime and of human causalities in times of war. This will, in turn, alter the decision-making framework for political leaders when considering extreme measures.

Most trends indicate that militaristic policy will continue to expand for some time. When the patient has not responded well to its medicine thus far, Russian authorities has systematically answered by increasing the dosage. The evaluation mechanisms, moreover, prioritize quantity over quality or effect. Those who fear the current development can find solace in the relative weakness of policy implementation, combined with a lower level of support among youth despite relentless efforts to persuade them. In terms of effect, modern Russian society may be able to withstand a full-scale militarization.

We can conclude that the love affair between Russian officialdom and its military is not motivated solely by emotions. Rather, it is a conscientious

and instrumental policy imposed from above. From the inception of policy development, it was envisioned as a universal remedy – a multi-purpose tool capable of responding to several important challenges confronting Russia. It was established on the basis of an understanding of the Russian population's emotional receptivity to militaristic policy. However, as far as military patriotic education remains a bureaucratic tool, it will have limited traction with the Russian population, who have long since grown tired of politicization and propaganda.

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Russia and the Changes of World Order

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Abstract

The current international system could be described as a post-bipolar system in transition to a multipolar one. The transition means that the brief period of unipolarity that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union has passed, but a mature multipolar system has yet to emerge. The West's adaptation to the new reality of a multipolar world will most likely take some time but is necessary. This chapter will argue that a new International Concert, akin to the Concert of Europe after the Napoleonic Wars, is required. It should be founded on mutual respect for each other's interests and represent a new expression of the concept of peaceful coexistence.

The Current International Order

The present world order can be classed in different ways. Proponents of differing political views speak of the liberal world order, undermined by revisionist states; an evolving multipolar or new bipolar world in which the United States and China are the new centers (Tunsjø 2018); a world torn apart by a "clash of civilizations" (Huntington 1996); or a post-Western world, in which the growing influence of non-Western states is an undeniable and inevitable trend (Zakaria 2008).

In fact, the current international system might be described as a post-bipolar system in the process of transforming into a multipolar one. This transition means that the unipolar moment that existed for a brief period after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s has passed, but a mature multipolar system has yet to emerge. At this stage, the objective influence of the former major power center – the United States and its allies – is decreasing, while that of other potential centers is growing. China is the most obvious, but there are also others: India, Brazil, and Russia.

At the turn of the 21st century, the world entered a new period of development. The traditional bipolar system that prevailed after WWII had

disintegrated due to the self-destruction of one of its poles. One might debate why this occurred for a long time, but it is clear that the Soviet communist project was unable to compete and hence failed.

The world's first-ever bipolar system of global confrontation between the two centers of power had both positive and negative aspects. Control exercised by the two centers over large parts of the world, as well as the rules of the game they established in international relations, provoked occasional conflicts on neutral territories, and virtually any local outbreak in the Third World turned into a standoff between the two main centers, with each supporting one of the sides in the conflict. Furthermore, people living in countries and territories controlled by the Soviet center had limited freedom and had to struggle with the social abnormalities of totalitarian regimes.

But those conflicts pale in comparison to the horrors of world wars. After all, there were international rules, written and unwritten, and both the Soviet Union and the West[1] demonstrated their ability to find consensus on them (e.g., the Helsinki accords, nuclear non-proliferation agreements, and documents reducing and banning weapons of mass destruction).

The collapse of the Soviet center of power, driven by pressure and internal problems rather than conflict, was followed by the triumph of a West that had overestimated its strength. Because its leaders aspired for global control, they forfeited much of what they could otherwise have achieved.

The situation in the early 1990s was marked by the strong, if not decisive, influence of the United States and its allies on international developments. Their victory in the confrontation with the Soviet camp had made the Western political and economic model more popular. Some former Soviet associates sought to join the West, while others, including Russia itself, had elected leaders who were sincerely expressing their appreciation for the West. In terms of military capabilities, the United States and its allies were also unparalleled.

However, the disintegration of the Soviet camp did not affect other fundamental tendencies in global development processes. Non-Western centers of power such as China, India, Brazil, and others have continued to rise and become stronger. They tried to solve their problems and protect their interests, at least near their borders. Being interested in cooperation with the West, they sought no confrontation with it, because they lacked the means to do so, but at the same time, they did not share many of the West's

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[1] In this article, the West is interpreted in the political sense as the United States and its allies.

goals, to different extent and for different reasons, and were actually quite concerned about some of them.

In that situation, the United States and its allies could have adopted a balanced policy to retain, wherever possible, much of their influence through improved relations with major global powers. For example, Russia could have been integrated into the Western system to a large extent either by being admitted to NATO, as George H.W. Bush's Secretary of State James Baker had repeatedly suggested (Baker 2002), or by carrying out a flexible policy combining real assistance (a new Marshall Plan) with due respect for Moscow's interests and concerns.

This was a plausible scenario, but it required some concessions and compromises, which, however, were not compatible for achieving the ideological goals that Western politicians were pursuing with increasing zeal. Intellectuals in the United States and Europe had long been swaying towards the ideology of "democratism," a one-sided mixture of political liberalism, the concept of "fundamental human rights," enlightening secularism, and colonial theories of Western supremacy. As a result, as has frequently happened throughout history, the West tried to impose upon the world its own model as a universal solution.

The West overestimated its capabilities both politically and culturally. The world was more complex and its values more diverse than Western leaders had thought, intoxicated by their success but restricted by their ideology. The attractiveness and objective possibilities of the West were dwindling due to the economic and political rise of the non-Western centers of power and due to demographic processes. Western capitals, and especially Washington, continued to act as if "history had ended," using pressure, and even force, to assert their own vision of the world, and impose its political and economic system on other countries and regions that did not want to westernize. This policy produced chaos in Iraq, Egypt, Syria, and Ukraine.

The popularity of the Western model and ideology was based mainly on the assumption, quite common among many non-Western nations, especially after World War II, that the Western political model could secure the highest level of well-being. The rapid economic rise of China at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, and the economic and political failure of many countries where the United States and Europe had tried to impose their model of development (e.g., Russia in the 1990s, Iraq, Libya, etc.) led many to question the universal effectiveness of the Western slogans of "democratization," "market economy" and "free trade." The

Western policy of diktat and constant military intervention overseas showed that the ideology of "democratism" was often used to cover up for attempts to establish political dominance. This understanding seriously undermined Western "soft power" and at the same time added popularity to other models, primarily the "Beijing Consensus," as an alternative to the Washington one.

The West has failed to recognize that the expansion of its model has reached its cultural and civilizational limits. The Western system could be readily spread in Eastern Europe where countries tired of Soviet control sought to join Western alliances for political and cultural reasons. The system was established or restored there relatively easily (although not everywhere). However, this model is culturally much more alien to North Africa and Eurasia. Islam and Orthodoxy, which are gaining popularity in the post-Soviet space, reject Western "democratism," with its increasingly ambiguous social roles for men and women, euthanasia, surrogate motherhood, same-sex marriages, the expansion of transgender rights, critical race theory, and the like, not only for political but also for moral reasons. Additionally, they so vehemently oppose it that they are ready to fight against this perceived onslaught of sin. These forces were largely responsible for the conflict in Ukraine, where the cultural and civilizational dividing line has cut the country into two, just as growing anti-Western movements have split up the Islamic world.

Something similar happened before to Soviet totalitarian ideology and the Soviet Union's "soft power" after WWII, especially in the 1970s–1980s. Communist ideals, once popular in the world, including Europe and the United States, particularly during anti-fascist and de-colonization campaigns, had lost their luster when it became clear that the Soviet model was not working economically in the Third World, only breeding dictatorships, corruption and stagnation. The deployment of Soviet troops in Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Afghanistan in 1979 cast doubt over the sincerity of Moscow's intentions to build a better world, and altered perceptions of Soviet ideology, which began to be viewed as a smokescreen for geopolitical interests.

However, geopolitical ambitions, both in the Soviet Union and now in the West, are inextricably linked to ideological ones. All totalitarian ideologists believe that their best and most advanced political model guarantees prosperity and happiness and can be efficiently implemented with the "brotherly help" of "progressive" states (to use the Soviet political jargon),

that is, under their political supervision. This is why the goals of establishing political control over as many countries as possible and bringing them prosperity by imposing the only correct model of development are inseparable under this political framework.

The West will gradually transform. It will have to adapt to the realities of a multipolar world in the same way that it reacted to the reality of growing Soviet power after WWII. However, while "democratism" adapts to the new realities, the West is unlikely to be a source of peace and stability. On the contrary, its policies will continue to generate global conflicts, which will most often erupt in territories that border on other non-Western centers of power, each with its own set of values. The fundamental source of these conflicts will be attempts to impose the ideology of "democratism" on a people that is unwilling to accept it.

The Sino-American Confrontation

The current Sino-American confrontation is at the forefront of world politics and, naturally, attempts are being made to make sense of it in terms of various long-standing and recent political and international relations theories. The dominant view in the United States is that China is undermining an international system based on principles that emerged in part following WWII and then fully developed with the collapse of the Soviet Union. That is when the United States emerged as the world's hegemonic power, seen in the West as the guarantor of its political system. From this standpoint, the current confrontation is a contest between a legal and, therefore, a just system and a new world order promoted by China built on "a lack of transparency", "lack of democratic values," and "injustice."

The practical implication of this viewpoint is that China should be contained in every manner possible. It is based on the theory that Chinese leadership allegedly "deceived" the United States and the West over a tacit agreement, by which the United States and its Western allies would help China join the international trade system and facilitate its involvement in various international organizations on favorable terms thereby promoting its economic growth, whilst, for its part, Beijing would fit into the system on America's terms, occupying the position to which it had been assigned without encroaching on Washington's hegemony. The idea of containing China under these circumstances is based on the general theoretical and

philosophical vision of universal history widespread in the United States. It holds that sooner or later all countries shall adopt the social, political, and economic forms of the West ("democracy", a "market economy", "rule of law," etc.). According to this vision, if any country refuses to do so, it will be necessary to inhibit the strengthening of their authority so that it does not get in the way of inevitable historical processes and impede other countries from following the right path. Such countries are to be given time and incentives to correct their ways. This might be brought about by various transformations, including the change of leadership, which would get a country back to the right side of history.

These foreign policy approaches are based on more fundamental narratives. One of them is a simplified version of modernization theory. According to this theory, economic development based on free market principles inevitably leads to the formation of a middle class. At a certain stage, this class starts demanding political rights, which in turn leads to "democratization," i.e., the adoption of the Western political model (Lipset 1963, 41; Diamond, Linz, and Lipset 1989, 44–46). This Western-centric model of historical development is disseminated to the whole world and is treated as a universal pattern. The second narrative is also a simplified version of the theory of democratic peace, according to which "democratic" states (i.e., those which have adopted the Western political model) do not feud and do not fight each other; in other words, with specific regard to Washington, they refrain from undermining its role as a world hegemon, since it is the only way of ensuring the normal course of history (Doyle 1983; 1986).

This approach to Sino-American confrontation is most prevalent in the West, particularly in the United States, and it determines Washington's policy. However, it is not the only extant approach. It is only widespread amongst researchers and ideologists working within the paradigm of American imperialist messianism and the liberal and neo-liberal international relations theories based on such messianism. Certain specialists with a firmer grounding in political realism (e.g., Henry Kissinger, Ezra Vogel, and Graham Allison) argue differently. Without challenging the general Western understanding regarding the course of history, they note the necessity of considering the power realities of the modern world, which is first and foremost the growing influence of China, and advocate the pursuit of a more cautious policy, which is, in effect, the continuation of the previous course of engaging Beijing in the international system (Kissinger 2011; Pastreich 2015). In their opinion, the course of history shall still lead China

towards democratization, whilst blunt confrontation with such a powerful and proud country could result in disaster. The most vivid idea of this kind of a disaster occurring was expressed by Graham Allison in his notion of the Thucydides trap. It holds that the current confrontation is a natural consequence of the rise of a world hegemon seeking to replace the old one and that, in the majority of cases in world history, such a rise has resulted in war. In order to prevent this from happening in the nuclear age, novel ways of avoiding confrontation are required (Allison 2017).

China itself has a different way of explaining the current confrontation. The general consensus in China is that the United States is trying to maintain its position of world hegemon unlawfully. Whilst China is not vying for such a position, it should be given a more significant role in world politics in line with its great history and current power. Moreover, such a role should be given not only to China, but to all large states, in line with their importance. The Chinese refer to this hierarchical system as a multipolar world. It contrasts with the "rules-based international order," which from Beijing's point of view means equality of all in terms of their subordination to the United States.

Within this paradigm, two approaches exist at the same time. The first is based on the belief that the inevitability of globalization, the undeniable decline of the United States' economic role in the world, the economic interests of the United States, and the potential losses from a confrontation should force it to take a constructive attitude towards China's rise. In the model, it should be possible to convince the United States that China's rise is peaceful in nature. Until recently, this was the message of numerous Chinese concepts of development, such as the "peaceful rise," "harmonious development," and "harmonious world." It was the dominant approach leading up to and during the first few years of Xi Jinping's rule.

The belief that Washington was unable and unwilling to launch an active containment policy was so strong that Xi Jinping thought it possible to abandon the previous leadership's modest approach to foreign policy, based on the principle put forward by Deng Xiaoping of *taoguang yanghui* ("keep a low profile and bide your time") (Wenliang 2012). Instead, he focused on developing and implementing ambitious programs, such as the Belt and Road Initiative and Made in China 2025, as well as realizing the "Chinese dream" of becoming a great power, as well as to an active foreign policy, and an aggressive, bordering on rude, foreign policy style, dubbed "wolf warrior diplomacy." At the same time, China offered the United States a "New Type

of Great Power Relations," which envisaged a replacement of US hegemony with a policy agreed upon with China to be followed by the world's leading powers, while respecting mutual interests (Jinghan 2016).

Washington, unwilling to relinquish its supremacy, rejected this format and instituted a policy of strict containment. It is debatable to what extent the new Chinese leadership's assertiveness scared the United States and precipitated the start of this strict containment, but it is evident that it was unforeseen by Beijing and caused serious puzzlement. Supporters of the previous line expressed moderate criticism of the new course, but, in the end, the state supported the views of those advocating a hardline approach, who argued that confrontation was inevitable and measures should be taken to adapt to the situation. Nevertheless, the more moderate line did not disappear and, in the event that the hardline course failed and serious problems affected the economy, it would still be able to resurface (Lukin 2019).

Third countries allied neither with the United States nor with China tend to view the Sino-American confrontation through the prism of realpolitik, seeing it as a contest for world domination between the current hegemon and a new center of power, and often feel uncomfortable having to choose between them.

Russia

From Russia's point of view, the so-called "rules-based international system" has never existed in reality. It is a utopian construct of Western ideology that does not describe the existing world but rather an ideal world that might exist in the future as the final and perfect stage of human development. From this viewpoint, it is very similar to the utopian Communist system, which was supposed to be built but was never actualized. Therefore, Western accusations of Russia and China being revisionist countries undermining the international system are purely mythological as well.

In reality, the international system we live in is built on fundamentally different principles. It is a system, which emerged after the WWII and is based on the consensus of the victorious nations. It is centered on the United Nations and its Security Council, and its fundamental principles are the sovereignty and equality of states. It is the United States and its allies who are revising and undermining this existing system since this system limits their still superior power by formal rules enshrined in the UN Charter.

Russia, China, and other non-Western powers support it, and therefore, play a conservative, and therefore, stabilizing role.

One cannot undermine a non-existent system; one can only try to prevent its emergence in the future. Another indication of the mythological nature of such accusations is that if you ask a supporter of the "rules-based international system" narrative to name at least one foundational rule, you would never get a direct answer. This is because if a specific rule is named, it would turn out that it was not Russia or any non-Western state but the United States and their allies themselves who violated it first and in a much more direct way (be it "territorial integrity," "the right of a people to determine its own destiny," "non-use of force in international relations," etc.).

If the "rules-based international system" is actually implemented around the world, it would turn it not into a world of equal states, but instead one where some states introduce rules but do not obey them while others have to obey them but have not part in their formulation. Clearly such a system in not acceptable for major non-Western power centers. This kind of international system resembles the political principle of an ancient Chinese legalist philosophic school (*fajia*) which became the foundation of the Qin state in 221 to 206 BC, one of the most brutal centralized empires in history; "*a wise man creates laws, but a foolish man is controlled by them; a man of talent reforms rites, but a worthless man is enslaved by them*" (Yang 2014). *From this point of view, non-Western centers consider the demands of the United States and its allies that other big powers not to create their spheres of influence as a desire to turn the entire world into a monopolistic sphere of interest for the West.*

The confrontational approach of the United States and its allies is understandable. It is a manifestation of their egoistic interests of maintaining the dominant position in the international system as well as of the growing role of ideology in the Western foreign and domestic policy. However, this approach can hardly be called constructive since it is based on a fundamentally incorrect understanding of Russia's foreign policy strategy. The misinterpretation lies in that the main driving force behind it is internal, namely, a desire to maintain stability. One can argue about what kind of stability is implied: the kind that would be a necessary pre-condition for steady development of the country, as Putin's government officially claims, or the kind that would ensure that the ruling elite maintains its power and increase the holdings of the privileged few, as the opposition suggests.

Either way, because Russia values internal stability above all, it cannot afford to engage in expansionism. It is not useful for Moscow, since it may lead to a dangerous confrontation with the outside world and therefore to instability. However, permanent concessions and retreats are also dangerous since they could lead to chaos. The examples of Iraq, Libya, and Russia itself in the 1990s showed this process clearly. The resulting course is a balance between these two options.

Russia is interested in preserving the existing international order and is ready to compromise in order to maintain it. It has left behind Soviet ideological attempts to bring the entire world under its control for the purpose of creating a Communist heaven on earth. Today, Russia has no intention to conquer the world or to restore the Soviet Union. Moscow is motivated not by ideology. The main goal is to preserve stability, but it cannot be achieved by surrendering to external pressure. That is why Moscow's foreign policy is reactive. The government would argue that it is preserving Russia's territory and power potential since this policy is supported by the majority of the population. If one subscribes to the point of view of the opposition, the territory and influence outside the country's borders can be seen as an important asset of the elite, which is reluctant to lose it. For a student of international relations, it looks like a common desire of a great power to preserve its territory and sphere of interests.

As a result, the Russian authorities see a threat not only in the pro-Western opposition which, according to the official narrative, wishes to subjugate Moscow to the United States and its allies, but also in the rising Russian nationalists, who became particularly active in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 and believe in creating the "Russian world" by annexing the territories of the neighboring countries populated by ethnic Russians. The activities of both groups are perceived as undermining domestic stability, which is needed to maintain the effective control by the ruling elite of the current territory of Russia.

From this perspective of stability, it is advisable not to take active measures in any area until absolutely necessary. The West, on the other hand, unleashed an offensive by expanding its military structures all the way to the Russian border, threatening all the Moscow regime had built up there. Moreover, as much as Moscow did not want to get into a global fray through various maneuverings, it was forced to respond. From this point of view, the war in Georgia, the annexation of Crimea, and the support for pro-Russian forces in Donbass do not indicate that Putin is intent on restoring the Soviet

Union, despite whatever Western ideologues allege. Such a venture would be too dangerous, even if such aspirations existed. Moscow is simply responding blow for blow in an effort to reduce the strategic threat posed by the Western attempts to bring Ukraine into its sphere of influence.

Russia is attempting to drive the enemy from its borders, demonstrating that any further encroachment would be costly. In this struggle, both Russia and the West view international law as only part of the "myth." In fact, at issue here is the geopolitical incursion of the West, one that Russia is attempting to fend off like a weary but calculating boxer who delivers short counter punches to keep his opponent from bringing the fight in too close. Thus, Moscow's actions in Ukraine, as well as previously in Georgia, were not a well-planned step in its alleged strategy for restoring the Soviet Union or creating a Russian world as the majority of Western analysts claim, but rather reactive counterpunches aimed at neutralizing Western encroachments on its traditional sphere of influence and threats to its security.

This approach of Moscow is widely popular inside the country. This is understandable. Western attempts to impose its rules on others, reject consensual solutions, and operate in contradiction with the UN Charter have already led to destabilization of many countries: Iraq, Libya, Syria, Ukraine, and Afghanistan. This is not to suggest that the ruling regimes in those countries were ideal and could not be improved. However, these political reforms should have come from within, not from without, and should have been consistent with the local political culture. As history shows, attempts to impose alien values and norms on a society that does wish to accept them usually fail. Under the best-case scenario, the alien institutes adapt to the local political culture and change beyond all recognition, thus losing their "Western" functions (like the so-called "parliaments" and "parties" in dictatorships which do not represent civil society there, but often become part of the ruling regime). Under the worst-case scenario, the swift destruction of the old system of government results in chaos and civil wars. In either case, such attempts create new conflicts and increase tension instead of improving the international situation.

Furthermore, the United States and its allies themselves cannot be viewed as a model of free and effective society, the source of universal values, or a bastion of stability. When the international public watches unruly mobs looting shops, restaurants, and government buildings in US cities, and then high-ranking politicians and public figures call for people take a knee to honor them, it is difficult imagine that such practices will be eagerly

accepted by other societies as universal standards, even if they are imposed by force. Russian ruling elites have a good understanding of this.

As a result, neither Russia nor China are revisionist states that deliberately undermine universal rules. They merely believe that rules introduced by others should not jeopardize their country's sovereignty and stability. Under these circumstances, a Sino-Russian rapprochement is also quite logical. Moscow looks at Beijing in search of an alternative or a partial substitute to decreasing economic cooperation with Europe, as well as a brother in arms in its confrontation with the West. For China, Russia is also an important partner in its conflict with the West, as well as a vital source of some commodities, which it either cannot purchase elsewhere (such as armaments) or provide for in the required quantity (oil, natural gas, and other raw materials). Thus, both countries are motivated by similar pragmatic reasons. Some of them are natural for two large neighbors and are not dependent on the international situation, but others are the result of Western foreign policy strategy aimed at containing both Russia and China at the same time. The second factor hastens the process of the Sino-Russian rapprochement.

Conclusions

Russia's foreign policy is natural in the current international situation and will most likely continue in the near future. Even in the unlikely event of a fundamental regime change, pro-Western forces such as those seen in the 1990s type can hardly to come to power in Moscow. The existing geopolitical realities and political culture of the Russian population will not allow this to happen (Lukin 2018).

The world, however, needs some rules, and in order for a multipolar international system to be stable, these rules should be truly international, that is, acceptable to all major international actors. To that end, they should be formulated and adopted by a broad international consensus rather than by a single power center imposing it on others by force. We need a new International Concert, similar to the Concert of Europe which was based on a general accord among the Great Powers of 19th-century Europe following Napoleonic Wars and was created to maintain the European balance of power and the integrity of territorial boundaries. It should be based on mutual respect of each other's interests and represent a new manifestation of the idea of peaceful coexistence, this time between multiple centers of

power. According to such consensus, one is not required to agree with the ideas or policies of others or to refrain from criticizing them. However, one should respect the sovereignty of others and should not allow these differences to escalate to the level of a serious conflict.

Sooner or later, all major international actors are likely to recognize the necessity of such a Concert. However, the West's adaptation to the new reality of a multipolar world will probably take a rather lengthy period. If this does not happen, the world will enter a difficult time of international anarchy and struggle of all against all. Historically, the majority of the mechanisms for maintaining international security were created after a bloody international conflict: the Westphalia and Vienna systems, the League of Nations, the United Nations, etc. However, the atrocities and hardships of those international conflicts were forgotten by the third or fourth generation, resulting in the outbreak of new conflicts. In the age of nuclear weapons, the next conflict could be the last. However, it is unclear if the international community would recognize this danger and take the necessary precautions to avoid it.

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Russia's 'Frenemies': How Are They Defined?

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Abstract

Russian President Vladimir Putin refers to most foreign nations as "partners" of Russia. That applies not only to those foreign nations that have friendly or neutral relations with Russia, but also to those that are actively unfriendly to it. This paper suggests that the "frenemies" term is the most adequate way to translate the notion of "partners" used by Putin as described above, and it seeks a definition of the term that will aid in understanding contemporary Russian foreign policy. It looks for historical analogues for such a relationship between Russia and Western nations during the thaw, when Nikita Khrushchev was the Prime Minister of the Soviet Union. It emphasizes the role of global challenges such as climate change and water scarcity as factors in preventing Russia and many of its "frenemies" from completely isolating themselves from one other. It cites the texts of Russia's Foreign Policy Concepts adopted between 1993 and 2016 as evidence that "frenemies" had been losing their strategic importance for Russian foreign policy during that period. It points at the fact that the concept of Russia plays an important role in domestic politics of "frenemy" nations. It explains why the Russian elite is losing concern about not having many international allies (although Russia has a few of them) with Russia's "turn to east;" outside of the West, according to this paper, alliances are not typical of international politics in general.

Introduction

Russia's relations with most Western nations are at their lowest point since the end of the Cold War. At the same time, Russian President Vladimir Putin and members of his administration have not publicly named any Western nation as an "enemy" of Russia. Instead, Putin and his team members prefer to refer to Western nations as "partners" (*partnery* in Russian) of

Russia. When blaming Western nations for the ongoing arms race in Europe, Putin uses the notion of "partners."

For example, in response to Western criticism of the "West-2021" joint military exercises of Russian and Belarussian armed forces, which took place in September 2021, Putin stated that "our partners, in fact, themselves are destroying all the agreements that were reached earlier, including on confidence-building measures in Europe" (TASS 2021). Putin does not limit this notion of "partners" to Western nations only; he often employs it when talking about Russia's competitors among OPEC countries (cf. RIA 2021). The best way to translate this Putin's notion of "partners" into English would be "frenemies," a term most often used in business relations, which has, at the same time, found its way into the discourse on international politics.

Snyder (2007: 1) famously suggested that international politics "involves an interplay of conflict and cooperation." It is difficult to imagine a pair of nations cooperating with each other on all issues without being at odds on a single issue. Similarly, it is difficult to imagine a pair of nations that are at odds with each other on every issue being unable to reach an agreement on at least one.

As a result, no single country divides all other countries into only two categories: "friends" and "enemies." Wendt (1999: 260), who grounded his typology into "role relationships governing the use of violence between Self and Other," distinguished three kinds of such roles: "friendship," "enmity" and "rivalry." A more complex typology would have provided a greater variety of such roles. However, the purpose of this short contribution is not to propose a complex typology of role relationships that dominate the Russian foreign policy discourse. Instead, it seeks to highlight the ambivalence of Russian foreign policy, ambivalence being defined as "the possibility of assigning an object or an event to more than one category" (Baumann 1991: 3), such as "friend" and "enemy." Due to such ambivalence, Russia (and, as this contribution will demonstrate, not only Russia) perceives many other countries as neither "friends" nor "enemies," but as "frenemies."

Russia's attitude toward a "frenemy" can shift overnight. One example is Russia's relations with the Czech Republic in 2021. In February, former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis announced that his country was considering to start using Russia's Sputnik V Coronavirus vaccine before it received approval by the European Medicines Agency (Shotter 2021). In March, the Czech Ministry of Industry and Trade allowed the Russian state-owned nuclear energy company Rosatom (along with a few companies from other

countries) to participate in a pre-qualification round for a tender to supply a new unit for the Dukovany nuclear power plant (WNN 2021). However, in April, the Czech Cabinet accused Russian intelligence officers of causing an explosion at a weapons depot and expelled 18 Russian diplomats from the country (Higgins 2021). Thus, the Czech government excluded Rosatom from the tender bidding process to supply a new unit for the Dukovany nuclear power plant, and it stopped considering possible use of Russia's Sputnik V Coronavirus vaccine. That did not help: Babis' party lost the October parliamentary elections to a coalition of center-right parties, and Petr Fiala replaced Babis as Prime Minister in November 2021.

In response, Russia not only expelled 20 Czech diplomats, but also added the Czech Republic to its list of "unfriendly states" (Kolotova 2021). Before the Russian-Czech conflict, the list did not exist, because Russia had only one "unfriendly state," namely the United States. Currently, the list includes two states: the U.S. and the Czech Republic, but more Russia's "frenemies" might find themselves on the list, of their relations with Russia turn worse. Diplomatic missions of the states on the list are not allowed to hire locals at all (in the case of the United States) or not allowed to hire more than a certain number of locals (19 in the case of the Czech Republic). Using the Czech case as a starting point, this chapter will assess five issues critical to understanding Putin's notion of "partners" or "frenemies."

First, it will recall Khrushchev's thaw, when the United States and the Soviet Union were labeled "frenemies" for the first time. Second, it will point to the complexity of contemporary international relations, in which no state can avoid collaborating with other states on a variety of issues; this contribution will look at water politics and climate politics as examples of such issues. Third, it will investigate how various Western states lost their strategic significance in Russia's foreign policy. Fourth, it will attempt to comprehend Russia's role in domestic politics of its "frenemies." Fifth, it will explain why Russia is unconcerned about having too many "frenemies" around and too few true "friends," if any, in its midst.

"Frenemies" of the Cold War Times

The term "frenemies" has been used in the United States since at least the nineteenth century. After the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, American journalist Walter Winchell applied it to the relations between the United

States and the Soviet Union. "Howz about calling Russians our frenemies," Winchell asked (Zimmer 2019), thus signaling the start of the thaw in US-Soviet relations in the late 1950s, which ended with the U2 incident of 1960.

For the Soviet Union, the thaw meant the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of 1956, which denounced the Joseph Stalin's cult of personality and heralded the end of the so-called Great Purge; in post-Soviet Russia Communists began the rehabilitation of Joseph Stalin on the 40th anniversary of the Congress (Murarka 1996). For the Soviet-US relations, the thaw meant that Soviet Prime Minister Nikita Khrushchev could visit the United States, although President Eisenhower failed to reciprocate the visit before the thaw ended.

For the Baltic Sea Region, the thaw meant that Finland, which had to coordinate its foreign policy with the Soviet Union, could join the Nordic Council, thus giving "a rare opportunity for institutionalized international cooperation" (Tiilikainen 2008: 221). For Western Europe, it meant the unification of Austria, which had been declared neutral, and neutrality remained popular among Austrians even after the Cold War ended (Bischof, Pelinka, and Wodak 2001).

Sometimes, the thaw had an adverse effect. The United States and the Soviet Union were unable to reach a compromise on the German question. In 1955, West Germany was admitted into NATO, prompting the formation of the Warsaw Pact. After the end of the thaw, the Second Berlin Crisis resulted in the construction of the Berlin Wall. The thaw could have ended four years earlier, in 1956, when Soviet troops invaded Hungary with the aim to prevent the country's exit from the Warsaw Pact, even though the Soviet Union refrained from military intervention and reached a compromise with Poland at the same time (Kramer 1998). Besides reasons of international politics that prevented Hungary from exiting the Warsaw Pact, the invasion of Hungary was also rooted in the domestic affairs of the Soviet Union; Imre Nagy, Hungarian Prime Minister from 1953 to 1955 and during the revolution of 1956, was an ally of Soviet Stalin-era strongmen Lavrentiy Beria and Georgy Malenkov, who opposed Khrushchev's rise to power. The removal of Nagy from power in Hungary was an element of Khrushchev's struggle for power in the Soviet Union itself. However, the United States failed to act in response to the Soviet invasion in Hungary, thus extending the thaw until 1960.

In the Middle East, the Suez Crisis of 1956 resulted in former empires, Britain and France, losing influence over Egypt and other Middle Eastern

countries, as well as the Third World in general, signaling an important shift toward further decolonization. After Suez, the United States came to replace the European powers in the Middle East. McCauley (1981) compared the Suez crisis to the crisis in Eastern Europe, which resulted in Soviet invasion of Hungary: the former crisis began with the US allies, Britain and France, defying the United States, whereas the latter crisis began with Soviet allies, Hungary and Poland, defying the Soviet Union.

In the Far East, the rivalry between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China began. In the Far East, the Soviet Union and Japan signed the 1956 accord, an important milestone towards a peace treaty between the two. Following in the footsteps of Austria, the then-popular Socialist Party of Japan called for the country to be declared neutral (Stockwin 1962). However, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party of Japan concluded the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security with the United States in 1960, which ensured a peace treaty between the Soviet Union/Russia and Japan has never been concluded based on the 1956 declaration. To conclude, Soviet-US "frenmity" had a strong impact on international relations in many parts of the world in 1950s.

"Frenemies" in Times of Water Scarcity and Climate Change

The term "frenemies" was most recently applied to international politics during the Democratic Presidential Debate in the United States in October 2019. In his attempt to underline the need for international cooperation as the only way out of the ongoing climate crisis, candidate Tom Steyer declared himself experienced in working "with our allies and our frenemies around the world" (Zimmer 2019). The United States cannot help cooperating with Russia, fourth biggest emitter of greenhouse gas, on climate despite disagreements on other issues. Similarly, Russia cannot help cooperating with biggest emitters of greenhouse gas, including the United States, on climate, neither can it help cooperating with its neighbors, such as Estonia, on shared river basins in times when water scarcity is a vital international issue.

Despite numerous sharp disagreements on an array of issues, neither Russia nor its Western "frenemies" can stop cooperating on others. One such issue is the deepening climate crisis, which Steyer highlighted. Water scarcity is another such issue. Cooperation in transboundary water management is crucial in contemporary Russian-Estonian relations. In his

inaugural speech, Alar Karis, the President of Estonia since October 2021, cited "common efforts to protect the environment of Lake Peipus" undertaken by Russia and Estonia as example of "relations and channels of communication with… neighbors [that] are critical to Estonia" (Karis 2021).

Since 2004, Russia has pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and thus combat climate change. The ratification of the Kyoto protocol by Russia that year enabled the protocol to enter into force early the following year. In 2015, Putin attended the COP21/CMP11 summit in Paris, which aimed to break international isolation of Russia as a result of the conflict between Russia and the West over Ukraine, which began in 2014. Even though Putin has not attended any COP summits since then, more Russian top officials were convinced that for Russia "the consequences [of climate change] will be especially dramatic, for its economy and environment, and for its standing as a great power in the rest of the world" (Gustafson 2021: 1).

In 2021, Russia adopted its strategy aimed at carbon neutrality by 2060, which includes its strategy at international climate negotiations. According to Likhacheva (2021), it is supported by three pillars. First, Russia wishes to have nuclear energy recognized as climate neutral. Second, Russia seeks international climate negotiations to start focusing on absorbing of greenhouse gas emissions rather than cutting them. Third, Russia seeks to harmonize accounting principles and approaches that are critical to the formation of an international carbon credits market.

Unlike international cooperation on climate, which is dependent on the outcomes of multilateral negotiations, international cooperation in transboundary water management takes place on a bi- or trilateral basis in separate transboundary river basins. To achieve Sustainable Development Goal 6, clean water and sanitation, states must work in all transboundary river basins by 2030. Water scarcity "produces international cooperation by confronting states and transnational groups with tasks that require collaboration" (Homer-Dixon 1999: 5).

Russia, which has more neighbors than any other country on the planet, has established cooperation in transboundary river basins with most of its neighbors, though it is still far from establishing such cooperation with all of them (Lanko and Nechiporuk 2021). In the Baltic Sea Region, Russia has established such cooperation with Norway, Finland, Estonia, and Belarus, although formal arrangements with Latvia and Belarus over Daugava and with Lithuania and Belarus over Nemunas are still missing. Making trilateral formal arrangements (Russia-Belarus-Latvia over Daugava and

Russia-Belarus-Lithuania over Nemunas) appears to be more complicated than the bilateral arrangements that Russia has reached with its neighbors mentioned above. So far, the only trilateral arrangement over a shared water basin that Russia has is the Russian-Finnish-Norwegian agreement over Pasvik. At the same time, one may expect Russia and Belarus to make every effort in the future to reach such agreements with "frenemies" Latvia and Lithuania over Daugava and Nemunas respectively.

"Frenemies" Losing Strategic Significance for Russia's Foreign Policy

Sometimes Russia's "frenemies" are great powers, such as the United States. However, most of Russia's "frenemies" do not have strategic significance in terms of Russia's foreign policy. When a "friend" becomes an "enemy" overnight, it requires a reconsideration of foreign policy strategy if the former "friend" was strategic in nature. On the contrary, if a "friend," which has no strategic significance, becomes an "enemy" overnight, or if an "enemy," which does not have strategic significance, becomes a "friend," it does not require reconsidering strategic foundations of a country's foreign policy. Instead, that country can carry on with "business as usual." It is assumed that countries with strategic significance in terms of Russia's foreign policy are mentioned in Russian Foreign Policy Concept by the name. The Russian Foreign Policy Concept is one of public strategic documents useful in understanding Russia's foreign policy strategy, along with Russia's National Security Strategy, Military Doctrine and Public Safety Concept (Pavlov 2017: 292).

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has rewritten its Foreign Policy Concept five times. The 1993 Concept mentioned all Baltic Sea States by their names except for Iceland: it mentioned Germany, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden among the countries of Western Europe, and it mentioned Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland among countries of Eastern Europe, which were of strategic importance for Russian foreign policy in early 1990s (Russian Federation 1993). Surprisingly, the paper mentioned Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as "newly independent states of Eastern Europe," alongside Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova, and it mentioned Denmark and other Nordic countries as "Baltic States." The 2000 Concept mentioned Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania; it suggested that Russia's relations with the

three Baltic nations have "good prospects" (Russian Federation 2000). It made no mention of the Nordic countries or Poland, but it did make mention of Germany alongside other great European powers such as the United Kingdom, France, and Italy. Belarus was also mentioned in the context of its "union" with Russia.

The 2008 concept mentioned Germany and Belarus, but not Poland (Russian Federation 2008). It referred to all three Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Out of the Nordic countries, it mentioned Finland and Norway, Russia's immediate neighbors in the European North, in the positive context, but it did not mention Sweden or Denmark, because the context of relations between each of those countries and Russia was not at all positive in late 2000s. The 2013 Concept mentioned Germany alongside France, Italy, and the Netherlands, as well as Belarus alongside Kazakhstan (Russian Federation 2013). However, it did not mention Poland, any of the Nordic countries or any of the Baltic States, although it mentioned the Council of Baltic Sea States, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, and the Northern Dimension. Similarly, the 2016 post-Crimea Concept mentioned Germany and Belarus, but not Poland or any of the Nordic or Baltic States (Russian Federation 2016). In comparison to the early twenty-first century, the Nordic countries and the Baltic States lost their strategic significance for Russia's foreign policy in the 2010s, adding them to the list of Russia's "frenemies," with whom relations can change from positive to negative and back overnight. Although it is possible to explain why a particular Western country lost its strategic importance to Russia at particular time, in general, the 2010s saw Western countries losing their strategic importance to Russia as Asian countries gained importance in this paradigm, a process known as Russia's "turn to the East."

Russia as Important Factor of Domestic Politics in "Frenemy" States

Since 2016, many of Russia's Western "frenemies" have accused it of interference in domestic elections; they have introduced sanctions against certain Russian nationals and sectors of Russia's economy in retaliation. In the United States, the importance of the debate over Russian political interference has grown significantly during the Trump administration (Keating and Schmitt 2021). Simultaneously, Russia has accused some of its Western "frenemies" of interfering in Russian domestic politics and has

passed national legislation aimed at limiting foreign interference, such as the "foreign agents" law of 2012, which significantly influenced previously existing funding opportunities for non-profits in Russia (Javeline and Lindemann-Komarova 2020).

However, neither Russia, nor any of its Western "frenemies", including the United States, have acknowledged that foreign interference played a decisive role in elections results or that any incumbent (or former, for example, ex-President Trump) elected official was elected with foreign help. As a result, election meddling will not be discussed as an important factor in domestic politics of any state in this contribution.

Instead, the emphasis of this chapter will be on identity consideration, which makes the very name of a "frenemy" state or group of states an important element of debates preceding elections or major political decisions. In Russian identity considerations, Europe has played such a role. For at least three centuries, Russians have actively debated whether their country is European, and if it is not, whether they should strike to make their country European (Stent 2007). As a result, whatever happens in Europe immediately begins to play an important role in Russian debates preceding elections or important political decisions, regardless of whether Europeans themselves wanted to disseminate that information to Russia with the intention of influencing Russia's domestic politics or not.

Putin's famous quote, in which he justifies the government's oppression of those in Russia who call for participation in unauthorized rallies by saying, "we do not want it like in Paris," referring to French President Emmanuel Macron's consideration of declaring a state of emergency amid "yellow vests" protests just a few days before Putin said it (RBC 2018).

Similarly, the very name of Russia plays an important role in the debates preceding elections or important political decisions in Russia's "frenemy" states. That primarily pertains to Russia's "frenemies" among post-Communist countries, as well as European and North American countries. In Asia, the Russian question does not play a significant role in domestic debates, except for Japan, which has a territorial dispute with Russia, and as a result, Japanese public opinion on Russia is similar to that of the United States.

For example, at the end of 2020 (Huang 2020), 71 percent of Japanese perceived Russia negatively (71 percent of Americans perceived Russia negatively at that same time), while only 18 percent of Japanese perceived Russia positively (compared to 19 percent of Americans). In Europe and North America, Russia plays an important role in domestic debates in both large

and small countries, from the United States to Estonia. An example from the latter country is the election ad filmed by ex-Prime Minister Taavi Rõivas, in which he poses at the Ämari Air Force base, a key component of Estonia's anti-Russian defense, ahead of 2015 parliamentary election (Teder 2014). That is typical for most of Russia's "frenemy" countries: public opinion in those countries is overwhelmingly negatively, and Russia plays an important role in domestic political debates there.

Russia Has Too Many "Frenemies" and Too Few "Friends," But Does It Worry?

Thirty years after collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's most important partners are post-Soviet states. In 2015, Russia and four other post-Soviet countries, namely Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, established the Eurasian Economic Union. However, that does not mean that there are no conflicts among these five countries. Russia, a net exporter of fossil fuels, and Belarus, a net importer of them, have been at odds over prices on various energy commodities since the early twenty-first century (Garbe, Hett, Lindner 2011).

For Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, patronage is not only a central of both states' domestic politics (Junisbai and Junisbai 2019) but also of their bilateral relations. In early twenty-first century, Kazakhstan served as Kyrgyzstan's patron, which resulted in conflicts between the two at any time, for example, in 2017, when Kyrgyzstan's newly elected president attempted to resist Kazakhstan's patronage. Finally, Armenia remains loyal to the Eurasian Economic Union. However, challenges such as the 2020 war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh have prompted both Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev to appeal to not only Russia, but also to Western audiences, albeit with varying degrees of success (Niyazova, Niyazov 2021).

The Eurasian Economic Union benefits the economies of all member states (Ryaboshapka, Mozoleva, Mozolev 2021); thus, it is unlikely that Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, or Kyrgyzstan would leave that regional integration union in the short run, quitting the group of Russia's "friends" and joining into the group of "frenemies." Similarly, it is unlikely that Armenia or Belarus would exit the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO),

a defensive alliance comprised of those two countries and Russia, as well as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

The likelihood of the latter three countries leaving the CSTO has decreased as a result of the Western withdrawal from Afghanistan, which has caused instability in Central Asia, thus prompting the nations of the region to tighten their security ties to Russia. At the same time, there are "centrifugal forces pulling nations away from each other" in the CSTO (Krivopalov 2021). The Russian elite are concerned about those "centrifugal forces." These concerns were among main reasons that pushed Russia to unequivocally support Alexander Lukashenko amid domestic political crisis in Belarus in 2020–2021. Simultaneously, Russia's "turn to east" (Khudoley, Lanko 2018) has forced Russia to learn from the East, including learn not to fear a lack of allies.

In 2017, Putin unveiled a monument to Russian Emperor Alexander III, with an inscription on its pedestal that states that "Russia has only two allies: its army and its navy". The statement is frequently attributed to that emperor, who reigned from 1881 to 1894, although historians have no proof that he said it (Aptekar' 2018). Alexander III ruled Russia during the nineteenth century's "turn to East," which resulted from the Crimean War of 1853–1856, in which Russia opposed most Western nations. The history of international relations in the twentieth century demonstrated that efforts to form Western-style military alliances outside of the West, such as the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, were futile during the Cold War (Acharya 2011).

In the early twenty-first century, Schweller (2004: 160) criticized neorealism as a theory of international relations by quoting Kalevi Holsti, who famously wrote, "Alliances, such a common feature of the European diplomatic landscape since the seventeenth century, are notable by their absence in most areas of the Third World." As Russia moves further away from Europe, it values alliances that are solely characteristic of Europe less and less.

Conclusions

Russia does not have many true allies. At the same time, Russia is not isolated. It maintains active relations with many nations around the world, some of which are friendly to Russia, albeit temporarily, the majority is neutral, and some are actively unfriendly. The Russian elite do not treat nations from

the latter group as "enemies" or "rivals." Instead, Putin himself and other representatives of Russian elite frequently refer to them as "partners," the notion that can be most adequately translated into English as "frenemies." Russia's relations with its "frenemies" resemble those between the Soviet Union and Western nations during the Khrushchev thaw. However, unlike in mid-twentieth century, Russia not only maintains and develops relations with the "frenemies," but they also are destined to maintain and develop relations with Russia in the face of global challenges such as climate change and water scarcity, which cannot be adequately addressed without Russia's contribution.

"Frenemies" do not have a strategic importance for Russian foreign policy; thus, their balancing between pragmatic cooperation with Russia and vehement opposition to it does not cause Russia to reconsider the core principles of its foreign policy. Characteristic of the "frenemies" is that the notion that Russia plays an important role in their domestic politics and political actors in those countries frequently accuse Russia of meddling in their domestic affairs, although none of them has so far recognized that Russian meddling made a decisive impact on the outcome of the elections. This applies to both small nations like the Baltic States and great powers like as the United States. The Russian elite is less concerned about the country's lack of true allies outside of the Eurasian Economic Union and of the Collective Security Treaty Organization during Russia's "turn away from the West" and simultaneous "turn to the East," because alliances, which are characteristic of international politics in the West, are absent outside of it. Non-Western countries, including Russia, do not seek long-term alliances, but this does not prevent them from cooperating with other countries in the short run regarding economic and security matters without building formal alliances.

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COVID-19 and a New Russian Foreign Policy Debate

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has sparked a new foreign policy debate in Russia that appears to be markedly different from previous hegemonic discourse. First, there is now room for future-oriented narratives of non-confrontational scenarios of liberal international order transformations. Additionally, Russian policymakers are eager to resurrect the long-dead or ineffective values of multilateralism and interdependence. This chapter will argue that the COVID-19 crisis highlighted a broader issue with Russia's foreign policy, namely the growing role of biopolitical concerns. Russian foreign policy has lost momentum, as when it comes to dealing with international technocracy, Russia's hard power resources become ineffective.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has sparked a new foreign policy debate in Russia that appears to be significantly distinct from the previous hegemonic discourse established after the annexation of Crimea, which was followed by a deep crisis of relations with the West. The post-2014 politico-academic consensus was grounded in the almost uniform interpretation of Russia's performance in international affairs as a robust leadership sustained by military force, conducive to the ultimate emancipation of Russia from the normative constrains of the Western-centric world order. The concepts of national interests, unilateralism, spheres of influence, and geopolitical realism were key in the discursive construction and justification of Russia's great power ambitions and securitization of the whole spectrum of relations with the European Union and NATO, as well as with neighbors such as Ukraine and Georgia.

Two major changes have occurred as a result of the pandemic crisis's two years. First, they opened up an ample space for future-oriented narratives of non-confrontational scenarios of transformations of the liberal international order. The ubiquitous glorification of Russian military force

and the political will to apply it at its own discretion have given way to a slew of more nuanced and cautious assessments of Russia's role and resources in world politics largely shaped by the anti-pandemic crisis management. Undoubtedly, the new Russian debate has inherited the pivotal argument of the decay of the Western-centric system of international relations from the post-Crimean consensus, yet this point acquired new tonality and new contexts in 2020–2021.

Secondly, the contemporary Russian narratives became less unified and more fragmented, thus leaving more space for a plurality of approaches, appraisals, and predictions. This new pluralism fosters political debate and expands the spectrum of Russia's alternative futures.

In this chapter, I will look into these two trends and explain how they recast Russian mainstream foreign policy narratives that are important elements of what might be a dubbed meaning-making and discourse-producing machine that serves the purpose of regime legitimacy and survival. My empirical base mainly consists of reports and other materials published in 2020 and 2021 by four Russian leading foreign policy think tanks: the Council on Defense and Security Policy, the Russian Foreign Affairs Council, the Valdai Club, and the Moscow Carnegie Center. Additionally, I use some recent academic papers whose Russian authors explore COVID-related topics from different scholarly perspectives.

The New Rhetorical Landscape: from Consensus to Dissensus

Russia's geopolitical narratives under the Putin's presidency are grounded in a de facto spheres-of-influence approach and 'red lines' reasoning preventing 'extra-regional powers' from intervening in areas that Russia considers its 'near abroad.' Putin's vision of power requires more freedom of choice with less ideological values while leaving the concept of national interests as broad and imprecise as possible. In Putin's Russia, sovereignty is not a purely legal concept; it rather denotes a family-type of power, based more on a biological and physical imperative of loyalty and belongingness to a national community.

Sovereignty always implies bordering and self-other distinctions (othering), as it is grounded not only in top-down control and repressions and also in practices of voluntary self-control and self-censorship existing deep in society. Putin's sovereignty envisions inevitable geopolitical transgressions,

since Russia thinks of itself not as a classical nation state but rather as 'a state-civilization', a center of the 'Russian world,' or a Moscow-patronized 'Eurasia.' Politics is therefore reduced to a battlefield where big 'animal states' fight for their 'living territory.' This geopolitical agenda has its effects for trans-border relations: the Kremlin perceives EU-driven attempts to support contacts between civil societies and non-governmental organizations as signs of undue political intervention in the country's sovereign affairs.

The COVID-19 pandemic created preconditions for reshaping this discourse. Two points seem to be of utmost importance at this juncture. First, the crisis of the global liberal system, consensually acknowledged by the bulk of Russian experts, is increasingly interpreted as a quandary rather than as a celebration of Moscow's foreign policy strategy. As Timofei Bordachev asserted, "it would be good if the collapse of the world liberal order does not end up with a war. It is unlikely that a new global order will be better and fairer: the strong ones … are facing problems of such a scale that their resolution leaves little chances for taking care of rights and sentiments of the weak ones" (Bordachev 2020a). Further fragmentation of the field of international relations (YouTube 2020), the crisis of global solidarity, and new forms of cleavages between rich and poor countries (YouTube 2021) are commonly cited as major problems to address in a post-pandemic world.

A new order-to-come, as most of Russian experts appear to agree upon, is likely to become bipolar, with the competition between China and the United States at its core, which represents more a challenge than a relief to Russia's international standing. There is a strong feeling in the Russian expert community that some neighboring countries – particularly in Central Asia and the South Caucasus – might find themselves under stronger Chinese influence due to the pandemic (Gabuev 2020). As for Russia itself, "in order not to fall into China's lap … Moscow must start fostering its relations with the other major economic and financial players in Greater Eurasia – the European Union countries, India, and Japan" (Trenin 2020).

However, as a group of the Moscow Carnegie Center experts say, "Russia failed to provide the model of efficiency in the post-Soviet space. Former Soviet republics, Russia's nominal allies, and even Russia-friendly populations in the neighbourhood have not found in Russia either an example to emulate or the main source of support. The coronavirus has undermined Russia's claim to be the most effective power in its neighbourhood" (Trenin, Rumer, and Weiss 2020). The disagreements between Moscow and Minsk over tackling the first wave of the pandemic in spring 2020 were illustrative

of the state of affairs within the Eurasian Economic Union (Shraibman 2020). By the same token, the financial repercussions of the crisis might become a serious blow to the Eurasian integration project, as well as BRICS, a loose alliance of five non-Western "raising powers" that, in the opinion of a Russian pro-Kremlin analyst, failed to show leadership in anti-crisis management and may face fragmentation and loss of political relevance in the future (Suslov 2020).

Second, COVID-19 spurred an epistemic shift in Russian foreign policy that, as a 2021 Valdai Club report assumes, needs to face a new reality of the collapsing post-1991 world order and the new attempts to rebuild stability and justice on different grounds (Barabanov et al., 2021). However, to be up to this ambitious and far-reaching task, Russian foreign policy must reach beyond the Schmittian worldview in which sovereign power, security, and geopolitics are the primary political categories. In the COVID-shaped world, Russia had to face a drastically different reality, where security is existential rather than military, where geopolitics can only play a secondary role, and where sovereignty cannot be used for destroying opponents, either physically or economically. Everything that the Russian officialdom has been investing its resources in for years – territorial expansion, interference into domestic affairs of other countries, military buildup, and the fake news industry – lost its unquestionable relevance since 2020. In this explicitly un-Schmittian world, Russia must deal not only with traditional nation states and their elites, but also with international and global organizations – World Health Organization (WHO), European Medicines Agency (EMA) – which cannot be tackled from the traditional position of force, invaded, or corrupted.

Against this backdrop, many elements of Russian foreign policy, as seen from the COVID-19 perspective, nowadays look much less important, making some Russian authors "only wonder why they used to be that meaningful earlier" (Bordachev 2020b). "For the leader of a country that sought to revise the world order in its favor, Putin's advantage lay in showing that he had tackled the crisis more successfully than his Western counterparts… But ultimately Russia has not managed to make geopolitical use of the pandemic crisis" (Baunov 2020). In a more radical version of this argument formulated by Sergei Medvedev, Russia has lost what he metaphorically dubbed the 'third world war' – the battle against the virus that already took about one million lives in Russia and exposed the incapacity of the Russian government to effectively organize crisis management (Medvedev 2021).

Of course, COVID-19 was a major factor that reshaped foreign policies of all the affected countries, but in the case of Russia the pandemic opened a pathway to a paradigmatic change from a self-inflicted isolation to attempts of restructuring the discourse along the lines of what was marginalized or sidelined in the last decade – global policy coordination, inclusiveness and openness to networking diplomacy. This shift has a practical explication: it is the self-perception of Russia's weakness that stands behind Russia's inclination to accept some principles of liberal internationalism as part of its foreign policy. The encounter with the Real – something that one cannot control or remodel, along the lines of Jacques Lacan's and Slavoj Žižek's thinking – has conditioned this reversal in the Russian mainstream discourse from the ridiculed denial of the relevance of globalization and the idea of international community to an acceptance of and appeals to global norms, rules, and principles.

For example, Valentina Matvienko, chair of the Federation Council, has directly referred to the global economic interdependence and "true multilateralism" in her plea for a universal response to the pandemic. Of course, this rhetoric was largely meant to justify Russia's proposals for "green corridors" and a moratorium on sanctions during the pandemic, but still, the change of wording is quite remarkable. The same goes for the former president Dmitry Medvedev who in his current capacity of deputy head of the Security Council exposed his vision of crisis management as grounded in universal human rights as "unquestionable values" that should help overcoming a "global crisis of trust" (Medvedev 2020). Despite the fact that the WHO did not register the Sputnik V vaccine, Medvedev has often referred to this global organization as a proper platform wherein constructive policy coordination and dialogue between multiple actors should take place (Medvedev 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has spurred a keen interest among Russian think-tankers and academics in experience sharing and learning from crisis management practices of other countries (YouTube 2020b). It also refocused to Russia's attention on the EU environmental agenda, which was particularly highlighted by Karaganov and Suslov as a potentially effective and beneficial policy terrain for rebuilding Russia's relations with its European partners: the two co-authors acknowledged the importance of "joint protection of environment and countering new global challenges, including pandemics; promotion of a new developmental philosophy grounded in the preservation of ecological sphere and the human being as such, and oriented

towards enhancing moral and physical health of the population rather than towards stimulation of consumption" (Karaganov and Suslov 2020).

Importantly, in the eyes of the most pragmatic Russian experts, the environmental agenda is not a normative but rather a managerial issue. As the two above-mentioned authors suggested, this agenda should be implemented primarily through a "promotion of Russia's image of a green country" under the presumption that "these measures are relatively inexpensive and potentially beneficial." The proposed policy alterations are mostly driven by a technocratic logic of image making and policy administration; "Rossotrudnichestvo should be transformed from a low-efficient institution busy with organizing cultural events and seminars abroad into the main coordinator of Russian bilateral humanitarian aid to foreign countries."

In the meantime, of course, the shift towards a more cooperative foreign policy goes hand in hand with the discussion on potential advantages that Russia can reap as a result of the changes brought about by COVID-19 in world politics. On the one hand, some analysts expect that "the shocking toll of the pandemic on the US undermines its status as the leader of an international system that is supposed to value human life first and foremost. It also is decidedly at odds with America's position as the world's richest and most scientifically and technologically advanced country" (Trenin, Rumer, and Weiss 2020).

Besides, the growing concentration of the United State on China might create some more space and freedom of maneuvering for Russia (Timofeev 2020). As Kortunov assumes, due to COVID-19 Russia will cease to be a central point of Western countries' political agendas and an object of different types of pressure; by the same token, Western governments and institutions are likely to lower their assistance programs for the "global South", which might create additional niches for Russian foreign policy in the Middle East, South Asia and Africa (Kortunov 2020). This type of thinking seems to be harmonious with the broader and earlier re-orientation of Russian foreign policy towards non-Western regions where the Moscow-driven vaccine diplomacy was the most successful (Burlinova, Ivanchenko, and Chagina 2021).

On the other hand, as a member of the Federation Council Alexei Pushkov claimed, Russia is interested in transforming the nascent bipolar structure of world politics into a United States – China – Russia triangle, with the Moscow – Beijing axis serving the purpose of balancing and containing US attempts to restore its hegemony. "US failure on the pandemic crisis

management makes it more confrontational and aggressive towards China, but even US allies don't support American anti-Chinese rhetoric. As for Russia, we are unequivocally on the Chinese side, because China is a victim of the virus, and because China is tremendously important for us in economic terms. Since the start of the pandemic Russia and China became closer to each other despite the border closure by the Russian initiative. Starting from February 2020 Russia helped China a lot in information sharing and medical expertise," Pushkov averred (YouTube 2020c).

This example demonstrates the limitations for a more depoliticized type of discourse, with its references to universal norms and global connectivity, which we have identified earlier. Politically accentuated motives are still deeply embedded in the Russian narrative where one can easily find, for instance, assertions that "Chinese and Korean experiences of crisis management are more successful than American and European ones" (YouTube 2020d). Even the acceptance of the Western environmentalist "green discourse" does not purify Russian foreign policy thinking from the frequent references to Russian exceptionality: "Russia's mission in this regard looks like salvation of the earth from both nuclear catastrophe and ecological disaster" (Karaganov and Suslov 2020).

A Crack in Consensus?

The COVID-19 emergency became a stronger factor of differentiation within the Russian community of think-tankers than other events, such as the proxy war s in Ukraine or the military operation in Syria. As mentioned above, the anticipation of substantial changes in world politics as an upshot of COVID-19 became a major element in the new Russian foreign policy debate. However, this position is not universally shared; for example, as Fiodor Lukianov deems, "all constructs previously clashing with each other – such as democracy versus authoritarianism, liberal versus traditional values, or dissimilar priorities in understanding human rights – will not only survive, but are to become more in demand" (Lukianov 2020).

These contradistinctions extend to the debate over national sovereignty. In the words of the head of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Federation Council, when it comes to vaccination, all national solutions are illusory, and the only recipe is a trans-national mechanism of policy regulation coordination among producers and national governments (YouTube 2021b).

However, a program director of the Valdai Club argues that due to the pandemic, the state's preponderance over business and civil society became a political value (YouTube 2020e). In another Valdai Club publication, its authors claim that COVID-19 increased global demand for conservative values such as religion, the nation, the state, and patriotism (Paren'kov 2020). This opinion is shared by other analysts: "The pandemic has risen the value of state sovereignties. It made clear that nobody but states is capable of providing populations with vital services and bearing responsibility for people's lives and well-being. In countries badly affected by coronavirus, one may see the growth of patriotic sentiments. The bulk of crisis management is taking place on the national level. This is consequential in the sense that external domination will be increasingly rebuffed for the sake of free-handed domestic and security policies" (Suslov 2020).

Within the framework of this debate, dissimilar attitudes to the European Union are apparent. On the one hand, many voices in Russian expert circles see the European Union as a weakened entity with decreasing economic capabilities, which may even question the survivability of the Eurozone. Nonetheless, others would disagree; "COVID-19 became a 'moment of truth' for Europe, and reinvigorated the European integration," while other global players such as China will be badly hit by the pandemic and may experience growing domestic tensions (Arbatova 2020).

The limits of Russian foreign policy adventurism are another matter of divergent interpretations. On the one hand, from an economic perspective, the dramatic pressures on the Russian budget caused by COVID-19 will prevent Russia from taking international risks and conducting a foreign policy above its financial capabilities and resources (Isaev and Zakharov 2020). Many experts expect Russia to suffer more from the consequences of the pandemic, which makes the maintenance of Russian military presence in the Middle East, Africa, or Latin America less popular in the society and perceived as redundant. Yet on the other hand, some analysts are of opinion that even under the heavy pressure of economic constraints, Russia will not phase out its foreign policy adventurism and abandon its global ambitions (Russian Foreign …2020).

One of critical elements of this Russian debate is an explicit interest in the twin concepts of biopolitics and biopower. Again, they are interpreted quite differently. On the one hand, these categories are understood as a coercive toolkit aimed at disciplining and controlling populations across the globe through a type of "medical totalitarianism" that equally affects democracies

and non-democracies. In a similar way, biopower is approached as "violent medicalization" sustained by commercial interests of large producers of medicines (Burlyak 2020, 20–23), which ultimately makes the world more chaotic and turbulent in the long run (Veklenko and Popov 2020). In this world, civil societies might be marginalized, but interaction between states might grow (Fadeev 2021). Some authors prefer a more pessimistic concept of necropolitics (Moroz 2020) in which the "administration of death" rather than enhancement of life would be the key category.

In the meantime, other academic voices perceive biopolitics as a positive and rational set of instruments ultimately conducive to a networked society, global governance, and the proliferation of "smart power" (Zhelnin 2021). Some of Russian authors use this biopolitical prism for boosting the legitimacy of liberal democracy (Mishchiscina and Kostomarov 2020) and challenging nation-centric biopolitical solutions (Kravchenko 2020). Other scholars explore the coronavirus crisis as a media object infused with political meanings (Gradinari and Chubanov 2021) that are instrumental for a new debate on freedom and unfreedom on a global scale (Manichkin 2021).

In the adjacent terrain of environment protection and climate neutrality, Russian versions and interpretations significantly vary from one another. One group of analysts – exemplified by Alexander Baunov from the Moscow Carnegie Center – posits that the climate change debates offer an opportunity for Russia and the West to start bridging the old political and normative gaps (Baunov 2021). Yet Dmitry Trenin from the same think tank believes that Russia's attempts to use the climate change agenda as a springboard to a new cooperation with the West is a delusion: "the reasons for the confrontation with the US and alienation from Europe will not disappear in the environment of cooperation on climate" (Trenin 2021).

Conclusion: Why Does This Matter?

COVID-19 has created new transformational opportunities for Russian foreign policy discourse that could lead to its greater sensitivity to and engagement with the principles and rules that resonate with the Western model of international society. Many Russian speakers are eager to reanimate the values of multilateralism and interdependence, which have otherwise been declared dead or inefficient.

However, a major source of contention deeply embedded in Russian narratives on international relations is their hybrid and eclectic nature conducive to multiple discursive dislocations and an explicit lack of coherence and consistency. A good example of this is the simultaneous acceptance of the European "green" agenda that implies an enhanced focus on the supranational mechanisms of decision-making and the remaining emphasis on national sovereignty as the major and uncompromised principle of Russian statehood.

This hybridity reveals Russia's controversial attempts to distance from Westernization and Europeanization by means of instrumentally using Western political concepts. In particular, the Russian mainstream discourse built in the recent decade in staunch opposition to the Western hegemony now has to increasingly borrow from the Western discourses on environment, green economy, and climate change, as well as from the Western debate on biopolitics and biopower.

The COVID-19 crisis exposed a broader problem of the adaptation of Russia's foreign policy to the growing role of biopolitical concerns and policies shaping significant segments of the international agenda as opposed to geopolitical ones. In the last couple of decades, Russia militarized and securitized its foreign policy through force projection, troop deployment, annexations, and different forms of hostile incursions into domestic affairs of other countries, which – particularly after the 2014 annexation of Crimea – temporarily consolidated both domestic public opinion and foreign policy community.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic de-actualized the importance of those resources that Russia has been investing in under Putin's leadership. In the absence of a clearly identifiable enemy – be it a foreign "unfriendly country," an international "undesirable organization," or a "foreign agent" exemplifying the conspiratorial mythology of a "fifth column" – Russian foreign policy has lost its transgressive momentum and started readjusting to the realities on the ground. A similar re-adaptation occurred a few year ago when Russia was sanctioned for the widespread use of state-sponsored doping and banned from participation in major international sportive events under the national banner.

The official reaction, which was relatively mild and non-confrontational, has demonstrated that Russian hard power resources become useless when it comes to dealing with international technocracy, be it the World Anti-Doping Agency and International Olympic Committee or the WHO and

EMA. The further biopoliticization and environmentalization of the global agenda in sports, medicine, or the ecological terrain is likely to strengthen those voices among Russian think-tankers, professional analysts, and opinion makers who advocate for restraint and accommodation rather than for force projection and further self-detachment from the West.

Of course, the trends unfolding within Russian expert discourses cannot be easily and directly translated into diplomatic actions, particularly given the almost consensually understood spontaneity and collision of different rationalities in Russian foreign policy decision-making. However, should for whatever reason the Kremlin prefer to pursue a new cycle of aggressive policy, it might not enjoy any more a level of support comparable with the proverbial "Crimean consensus." This conclusion is fully applicable to the Kremlin's ultimatum to the West in December 2021; our analysis shows that the language of military blackmail towards the United States and NATO, paralleled by disregard of the EU, is far from being consensually shared in the broader Russian politico-expert or academic community. The secretive nature of the Kremlin's foreign and security policy is not big news, yet in this specific case, it lucidly shows all of the limitations of its rationality and a precarious political calculus.

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Section II – Power Dynamics and Perceptions

Neopluralism and Russian Politics: Between Chaos and Control

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Abstract

The Russian political system today exhibits an unusual combination of pluralism and regime management of political processes. The paradox can also be seen as part of the ongoing conflict between chaos and control. Exaggerated control is a reaction to this underlying condition of heterarchy. This chapter argues that the concept of heterarchy helps to explain why decision-making is unable to overcome inertia and remains vulnerable to the power of societal interests within Russia. The Russian state wields overwhelming coercive power, but it lacks the classic Weberian monopoly of force. While there is a power hierarchy in Russia, it is better theorized as part of a conglomeration of power systems.

The fundamental paradox of Russian politics is well known. The contrast between the rhetoric of the strong state and effective leadership runs into the intractable issues of recalcitrant groups that resist governmental activism when it suits them, and which can on occasion bend government policy to their will, accompanied by leadership that appears to be both strong and weak at the same time (Frye 2021; Wilson 2021). Strong leadership is a response to this enduring problem of governance, taking the form of exaggerated executive power in the form of the presidency. This in turn is both cause and consequence of further problems of accountability and responsibility, accompanied by arbitrary actions that run against the principles of the constitutional matrix in which the presidency is embedded. The problem is deeper than the 'bad governance' syndrome identified by Gel'man (Gel'man 2017; 2021). Since that model stresses the volitional element – the rational behavior of power-seeking venal elites and leaders. That is undoubtedly an important factor, but the problem is more structural. This means that the problem of effective governance and rational administration in Russia,

whatever the regime type, is faced by a set of enduring issues. The Russian polity today exhibits a peculiar combination of pluralism and regime management of political processes. The pluralistic aspects have long been noted, typically construed as the attributes of a 'weak state' or 'weak strongman.' This paradoxical combination of pluralism and constraints can also be seen as part of the continuing tension between chaos and control, in which the two processes feed on each other, resulting in governance and historical stalemate.

Heterarchy, Neopluralism, and the Dual State

In an earlier article, I suggested that Russian governance is a dynamic combination of horizontal and vertical factors, accompanied by a tension between formal and informal practices (Sakwa 2021). I argued that the concept of heterarchy is a useful way of getting a handle on the issues involved. Heterarchy denotes the way that elements of an organization are not necessarily hierarchical but can be ranked in a number of different ways (Crumley 1995). In the social sciences, heterarchies are defined as networks in which elements share the same 'horizontal' position of power and authority, with each hypothetically playing an equal role. The existence of heterarchy is not incompatible with the existence of hierarchy; indeed, hierarchies are usually composed of heterarchical sub-units and vice versa. If any given pair of items can be related in two or more ways, the inherent pluralism of any given social system is accentuated. Instead of reducing a state or social system to certain predominant features, including a typology of characteristics or a developmental pattern that is linear or even teleological, the social subject becomes multivalent and complex. Whereas the hierarchical approach ranks agency in terms of the greater (more powerful) at the top reducing to the less powerful at the bottom, heterarchy gives greater weight to the subjectivity of elements whose actorness may strengthen or diminish as the dynamics of interaction change. The heterarchical model thus rejects totalizing and teleological approaches and instead emphasizes the partiality of any particular viewpoint, and thus privileges complexity and contradiction.

Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari applied the paradigm to their 'Capitalism and Schizophrenia' project (1972–1980) though deployment of the concepts of deterritorialization and rhizome. A rhizome in biology is a continuously growing horizontal underground root that puts out shoots and

stems at intervals, and for Deleuze and Guattari, this entailed the rejection of the classic tree model of rooted thought and agency and instead sought to apprehend multiplicities. For them the rhizome is an assemblage comprising multiple elements yet creating some sort of non-totalized whole. To centered systems, the authors proposed non-centered 'finite networks of automata in which communication runs from any neighbor to any other … unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 17, 21). Their 'thousand plateaus' can be connected in endlessly creative ways, and so can the social actors in post-communist Russia. They stress that if an element of the rhizome is disrupted, it will resurrect itself, a feature that the liberal approach to modernity finds hard to incorporate into progressive models of development. Elements of traditionalism are resurrected at the level of political thought while in society apparently archaic social behaviors remain prevalent.

The concept of heterarchy has been applied particularly fruitfully in international studies (reviewed by Lenco 2014) in which the non-binary post-structural methodology shifted the terms of debate away from discussion of the relative merits of realist or liberal approaches towards examination of the structural shifts in international affairs. Belmonte and Cerny (Belmonte and Cerny 2021) argue that heterarchism represents a paradigm shift in world politics, analyzing 'the coexistence and conflict between differently structured micro and meso quasi-hierarchies that compete and overlap not only across borders but also across economic-financial sectors and social groupings, leading to a process of restructuration that empowers strategically situated agents in multimodal competing institutions with overlapping jurisdictions.' They reject the traditional state-centrism in international relations and stress the dialectics of fragmentation and multiple actors.

How can the model be best applied to Russia today? One of the complementary features of heterarchy is the transformation of our understanding of pluralism. In the classical approach developed by Robert Dahl (Dahl 1961), interest groups constrain executive power while guaranteeing pluralism in society. This spawned a vast literature from the 1970s in political sociology examining the pluralistic features of contemporary capitalist society. Interest in the subject ebbed as the neoliberal era took hold, with less emphasis on autonomous social subjects and greater focus on market relations, the casualization of labor, and greater precarity in society as a whole (Standing 2021). While neo-corporatist structures waned in significance, even the classical instruments of liberal democracy interacted with the state in new ways.

Colin Crouch (Crouch 2004) categorized this as 'postdemocracy' while Peter Mair (Mair 2013) talked of 'ruling the void.' Phil Cerny describes the qualitative transformation of traditional interest groups as 'neopluralism' (Cerny 2010). He analyses how transnational webs of power have transformed the way that classic sectoral or value interest groups and NGOs interact and challenge the pre-eminence of the state (McFarland 2004; 2007).

Heterarchy everywhere questions classical hierarchical Weberian representations of the state as well as customary notions of political pluralism. This has particular relevance to Russia because of the distinctive legacy of Soviet rule and the peculiarity of the 'transition' thereafter. The institutions of representative democracy and constitutionalism have been created, yet the political valance of these institutions is less substantive than classical theories of pluralism would suggest. Dmitry Furman (Furman 2008) began to develop a descriptive analysis in his idea of 'imitative democracy,' yet he was short of a developed theory of the phenomenon. Institutions without weight and processes lacking meaning are very much a feature of postmodern polities, yet in Russia, the phenomenon has a specific etiology. The deprivation of the autonomy of pluralist institutions was at the heart of Vladimir Lenin's concept of trade unions and other social organization as 'transmission belts' for the values of the Bolshevik Party. Institutions gained weight not as subjects in themselves but as instruments of some anterior and external purpose. This rendered them instruments of regime action rather than autonomous agents.

In post-communist Russia, this desubjectivization process has been perpetuated in new forms. The party-state has given way to the regime-state. The dual state model identifies the tension between the two principles of order-making, the constitutional state, and the administrative regime (R. Sakwa 2010; 2011). In the former institutions act as autonomous agents of an organic whole, whereas in the latter they are part of mechanical administrative mechanism. The contrast has a long history. In the late nineteenth century, Walter Bagehot, the Economist's commentator on British politics, distinguished between 'efficient' institutions, those which actually run a country, and 'dignified' institutions, which are largely decorative when it comes to making the hard choices. Ernst Fraenkel (Fraenkel 2006) famously applied the model to Nazi Germany, in which he described the combination of the regular application of law and the 'emergency' powers enjoyed by Hitler's regime. This model of 'double government' has been applied with particular force to the United States, where Glennon (Glennon 2016)

distinguishes between 'Madisonian' institutions (Congress, the presidency and associated processes), and the 'Trumanite' state, devised during the Cold War but which still effectively rules today, ensuring that despite the change of presidents, security policy (and the associated expenditures) remains substantially the same.

The theory of dual institutionalism applies with particular force to contemporary Russia and helps explain the operation of neopluralism. The constitutional state operates in parallel with an administrative regime but with the two symbiotically tied together. The administrative regime gains its legitimacy from claiming to operate according to constitutional principles in defense of effective state power, but at the same time, it subverts the principles of genuine constitutionalism by managing elections and the political process as a whole. The constitutional state is entwined and in part over-shadowed by an administrative regime. A 'regime' in political theory governs in a self-willed manner, and while not necessarily opposed to democratic governance, it stands above the normal constraints and accountability mechanisms of democracy. By contrast, the constitutional state is rooted in law and statute to advance a certain idea of the general public good. It is regulated by impartial norms and managed by a disinterested bureaucracy. In Russia, this Weberian ideal has been subverted by the emergence of an administrative regime, which draws its legitimacy from claiming to apply the principles of the constitutional state and derives its authority from its representation of the common good but in practice exercises power in ways that subvert the impartial and universal application of constitutional rules. The polity and the state effectively became the property of the regime, and increasingly of the leader himself.

A system has been created in which the political authorities stand outside the constraints of the constitutional state, although drawing on its legal, coercive, and disciplinary resources to maintain their rule. This should not lead to simplified notions of 'autocracy', in which the polity is governed by the unmediated will of the leader. Russia's enormous diversity of interests, value communities, and actors means that it is certainly correct to talk of the 'paradigmatic pluralism' of the Russian political sphere (Chebankova 2017; 2020). However, the mechanical quality of interactions between the ensembles that comprise the polity undermines organic integration. Manual management means that mechanical forms of stability management predominate. The dual state voids constitutional institutions of the autonomy and actorness that would embed them in a functioning political organism.

Neopluralism means that the interactions between them have an equally mimetic character. This is more than the privatization of governance condemned by critics of the neoliberal state but a qualitative transformation of social and political relationships.

Heterarchy represents a new form of social order and political system in which the processes described constitute a type of governance and social order. The structure of the political sphere generates the duality of the polity, and it has done so since at least the mid-1990s. Constitutional procedures largely manage formal political competition (however much abused in practice); however, the regime also manages the neopluralism represented by Russia's sociological and political agents, to which we now turn.

Agency and Neopluralism

The Russian political sphere is deeply plural, but this is not a polyarchy of the classical sort. Dahl (Dahl 1971) describes polyarchy as a form of rule in which power is distributed between multiple agencies, accompanied by a set of rules that ensures democratic governance. In Russia, the various clusters comprising the rhizomes have a surprising ability to self-perpetuate, self-regulate, and even to influence policymaking, although not in the classical manner of direct, organized, and transparent political interventions. Public policy is shaped by interactions cascading within and between agents, although with the president as the ultimate arbiter.

In part, this is volitional, but above all, it is structural. We can identify three levels in the Russian polity: the macro, where four major ideological-interest factions of Russian post-communism are located; the meso, comprising the various corporate, regional, and institutional groups as well as social organizations; and the micro, the personalities and networks at the heart of the dominant constellation of power (R. Sakwa 2020). Boris Yeltsin and Putin devised similar strategies to deal with this recalcitrant but non-politically articulated pluralism. Their common response was to accentuate the regime features of the dual state and thereby maintain the much-coveted stability. However, rather than allowing pluralism formal political expression, including open contestation in elections, the trend was towards the imitation of pluralism, thus creating today's neopluralism.

In Putin's case, his increasingly ramified control mechanisms reproduced features of the late Soviet 'stability system,' which in the end proved far from

stable. The regime-state is designed to constrain the socio-political reality of heterarchy, but 'Hobbesian' mechanical stability impedes the development of more organic and adaptive 'Lockean' forms of political integration and societal management (Shlapentokh 2007; Medvedev 2019). The Lockean approach seeks to integrate the pluralistic elements of society into the polity, whereas the Hobbesian approach assumes the need for some sort of force standing outside of society, denoted as the Leviathan, to impose order (Lewis 2020). Lockeans embrace heterarchy, whereas Hobbesians fear it. However, in a 'stabilocracy,' the contradiction between chaos and control is not resolved, and in Russia today, it has become constitutive of the polity.

The forces comprising the three levels are crosscutting, meaning that individuals can be located simultaneously in more than one and are not limited to a single vertical matrix. This interlocking co-location endows the current Russian polity with its double-bottomed character as well as its extraordinary stability. By the same token, it renders the system brittle and vulnerable to disintegration. By definition, mechanical integration is less resilient than organic forms of integration. However, while a particular regime may disintegrate, the underlying culture and sociological realities of power endure. In the 'Russian system' (*sistema*), the operational codes endure, despite leadership and even systemic changes. The repeated collapse of regimes demonstrates that stability is fragile and reflects the fundamental problem that endures to this day: the absence of a Gramscian 'historical bloc' that can become hegemonic to ensure that its worldview becomes the common sense of the epoch (R. Sakwa 2020). For poststructuralists like Deleuze and Guattari, of course, such integration is repressive and constraining, but in terms of classic state building, it is essential and emancipatory.

The three levels of Russian neopluralism can be summarized as follows. At the macro level, four major ideational-factional blocs shape Russian political society, each with its perspective on how Russia should be governed. Each is internally divided, but they share interests, ideological perspectives, and in some cases, a professional commonality that render them distinctive and coherent. First, the views of the liberal bloc are far more influential than the paltry proportion of votes won in recent elections. The bloc is divided between economic liberals, focusing on macroeconomic stability; legal constitutionalists, the inheritors of Boris Chicherin's statism; and radicals, who look to the West for inspiration. They are challenged by the second group, the *okhraniteli-siloviki* (those working in or affiliated with the security apparatus). They consider themselves responsible for 'guarding' Russia from

domestic and foreign enemies, part of Russia's long 'guardianship' (*okhranitel'*) tradition (Ivanov 2007). They view Russia as a besieged fortress, and it is their sacred duty to defend the country from internal and external enemies (Cherkesov 2004, 6). Pursuing a sacred duty to defend 'fortress Russia,' they have also claimed certain privileges, including personal enrichment (Yablokov 2018). The group is deeply factionalized, and some have used their privileged status for personal enrichment and merge with the criminal world to create a 'third state' distinct from the regime and the constitutional state (Galeotti 2018). The military is naturally part of this bloc, but they are committed to defending the state rather than the regime, and hence they have become more of a classic interest group rather than remaining a neo-pluralist shadow institution – the fate of the *okhraniteli-siloviki*. In his third term, particularly after Crimea reunification in March 2014, Putin (Putin 2015) adopted some of the language of this faction.

Third, the diverse bloc of neo-traditionalists ranges from monarchists, neo-imperialists, and neo-Stalinists to Russian nationalists to moderate conservatives.(Robinson 2019) The use of the term 'traditionalist' highlights the backward-looking character of this group, seeking the model of Russia's future in representations of the past, while the 'neo' prefix means that the traditionalism is adapted to present-day concerns — although the strain represented by Alexander Dugin taps into a deeper well of traditionalism (Teitelbaum 2020). Neo-traditionalists defend Russian exceptionalism (hence become nationalists, even when they reject the concept) and assert statism at home and great power concerns abroad. The main platform for the bloc since 2012 has been the Izborsky Club, founded to preserve Russia's 'national and spiritual identity' and to provide an intellectual alternative to liberalism. With the onset of the so-called 'Russian Spring' in early 2014, some even dreamed of bringing the Donbas insurgency to Moscow to sweep out the liberals and even the pragmatic Putin (Kolstø 2016). Putin soon cut them back to size and squeezed the genie of Russian neo-nationalism back into the bottle. The neo-traditionalist bid for hegemony was thwarted, and they are now once again just one among the four factions.

Eurasianists comprise the fourth category, in part overlapping in personnel and views with the neo-traditionalists, and many of them participate in the work of the Izborsky Club. However, there is an important distinction. Neo-traditionalists are critical of the West, but the reference point for their modernization agenda and cultural matrix remains essentially European. They wish to overcome the stigma of backwardness to make Russia a great

power, but within the framework of a Western hierarchy of power and values (Zarakol 2011; Morozov 2015). By contrast, the ontology of the Eurasianists is rooted in a foundational anti-Westernism (Bassin and Pozo 2016). They have devised a whole ideology explaining why Russia and what they call 'Romano-Germanic' civilization are incompatible. Although torn by divisions, they are united in the view that there is a cardinal incompatibility between Russia and the West (Bassin 2016). Thinkers such as Dugin maintain the earlier uncompromising hostility accompanied by much speculation on geopolitics, the coming apocalypse, and Heideggerian notions of the existential exhaustion of Western civilization (Clover 2016). Dugin has never been an advisor to the Kremlin and he can only dream of the success of the Bannonite alt-right in Trumpian America.

None of these four paradigms has become hegemonic and together they represent the heterarchical character of contemporary Russian society. The Putin leadership draws strength from all of the blocs but is dependent on none. This also applies to the *siloviki*, despite his background in the security services, and thus refutes the view of him as an instrument of *silovik* revenge (Felshtinsky and Pribylovsky 2012). Competing groups and ideas are kept in permanent balance. Putin acts as the arbiter between the macro-factions, which involves mediating between elite groups and institutions. Each contributes to policymaking and the political process in general, but none can capture the state or impose its own line as that of the regime. The macro-factional balancing system ensures that they cannot turn on each other, and coercion is kept to a minimum. The liberal faction is ensconced in the management of macroeconomic affairs, but elsewhere its influence has waned as other groups gained the initiative.

The meso-level is where interest groups and institutions compete. This is the sphere where elite analysis and governance studies come into their own (Colton and Holmes 2006; Hale 2015). Competing economic interests and patron-client relations fight to impose their preferences, while the regime-state struggles to maintain its autonomy, with Putin the supreme arbiter. Informal networks and the regime-state interact but the power of decision remains with the Kremlin. Regime power is buttressed by network relations with corporations, which include law enforcement agencies and the regions. The network of state-owned companies such as Gazprom, Rostec, Rosneft, Roskosmos, Russian Post, Rostelekom, and Russian Railways is complemented by over a thousand state-owned joint stock companies and over 17,000 unitary enterprises as well as politically dependent corporations

such as AFK Sistema, Lukoil, Metalloinvest, Novolipetsk Steel (NLMK), Norilsk Nickel, Sibur, Surgutneftegaz, Trasnmasholding and the Urals Mining Metallurgical Company (UMMC). These companies exercise direct power in the regions, potentially turning Russia into a 'federation of corporations' (Luzin 2019). The idea is exaggerated but highlights the multiplicity of 'verticals'. It underscores the importance of meso-level analysis to understand the dynamics of Russian politics and to locate that level in relation to others.

The micro-level encompasses elite contestation and practices of administrative control. In a heterarchical system, factionalism, and group dynamics operate at crosscutting levels. Beneath the veneer of monolithic unity, the system is highly personalized and torn by factional conflict, especially among the security services. For the regime, the central goal throughout is to constrain intra-elite conflict. Some individuals, such as Igor Sechin at the head of Rostech, sit at the intersection of business, the security apparatus, and politics and thus wield an outsized influence in all three spheres. An alternative network is centered Sergei Chemezov at the head of Rostec, established in 2007 and now encompassing some 700 enterprises, while the political section of the Presidential Administration managed by Sergei Kirienko applies the regime's extensive administrative resources. The character of these and other individuals is important, but even in their absence the systemic characteristics are reproduced. No sooner is one group disbanded or someone dismissed than another rhizomatically takes their place.

The composition of the Putin elite has evolved over time, accompanied by changes in its status. The mechanisms of control have become more intrusive, including the 'nationalization of the elites' and 'deoffshorization' to impose tougher regulations on foreign asset holdings for politicians and other office holders. Harsh methods of administrative management raise the question of whether the ruling group in Russia can be called an elite in the traditional sense, denoting some sort of stable and self-reproducing ruling class. Purges and repression against the elite, typically conducted in the guise of anti-corruption campaigns, have turned it into a neo-nomenklatura (Petrov 2019). The basic drive was 'the centre's struggle to restore control over the regional elites and systematic work to weaken them and fit them into a single party of the federal and regional bureaucracy' (Kynev 2019). In keeping with the weak/strong dichotomy, Putin still has to struggle to convert policy statements into action. This is reflected, for example, in regular complaints in his annual address (poslanie) to the Federal Assembly about the unjustified imprisonment of businesspeople in economic disputes (Putin

2015; 2019; Krylova, Deane, and Shelly 2021). The result is a stultifying political atmosphere and the continued under-development of the small and medium business sector.

The Putin phenomenon is a sophisticated mechanism to manage complex relationships, and one should be less surprised when it sometimes fails but that it works at all. At the micro-level, Putin achieved an extraordinary level of elite coherence. He positioned himself as the arbiter of elite and corporate disputes, with connections to all the major elite factions who trust him to respect their interests. No faction gets all that it wants, but all get something from remaining loyal to the system. However, the enduring fear of defection reinforces the struggle to hierarchy, colloquially termed the 'vertical of power.' The system ensures a relative balance between leadership and elite interests. This mutually restraining model prevents radical policy initiatives such as structural economic reform, but it also impedes an excess of hard authoritarianism. However, there is some evidence that since at least autumn 2019, the relative equilibrium has been disrupted, and a shadowy group of hardliners drawn from the security apparatus have seized the initiative and moved to intensify the managerial and repressive aspects of regime governance.

Conclusion

The tension between chaos and control defines the post-communist Russian polity and informs much analysis of the system (Hale 2015; Zygar' 2016; Taylor 2018). Exaggerated control is the response to an underlying condition of heterarchy. The failure to create self-sustaining mechanisms of organic political coordination through the institutions of the constitutional state (the Lockean approach) intensifies the elements of directed management to achieve mechanical stability through the administrative regime (the Hobbesian response to political disaggregation). Heterarchy helps explain why decision-making in a system that prides itself on restoring the managerial capacity of the state is unable to overcome inertia and remains prey to the power of societal interests, the problem that Carl Schmitt believed confronted in Weimar Germany.

The heterarchical approach gives greater conceptual depth to the problem of 'chaos,' while allowing a more complex analysis of mechanisms of 'control.' Fear of rampant heterarchy reinforces the systemic reinforcement

of hierarchy (the power *vertikal'*) and reflects the failure of post-communist democratic institutions to become the agency of political integration and instead accentuates the role of an actor standing outside of these constitutional instruments. The heterarchy-hierarchy relationship provides insights into how Russia is governed and helps explain why such a system emerged in the first place.

The traditional institutions of the nation state are no longer the site of political actions as they once were, changing the character of agency as a whole and precipitating neopluralism. The administrative regime gained relative autonomy but thereby became prey to powerful social forces. Putin released the administrative regime from the more overt of these constraints, but this does not mean that it was freed from all limitations. Instead, Putin became the faction manager, balancing interests and elite groups, ensuring that they all had a stake in the system but not allowing any to predominate. For Deleuze and Guattari, deterritorialization, with weakened links between territory and power, is always accompanied by reterritorialization, the displacement of power to other locations. The Russian state enjoys the overwhelming preponderance of coercive power, but it does not have the classic Weberian monopoly of force. Two wars have been fought since 1991 to deny Chechnya's independence, yet in a rhizomatic manner, the republic remains an extra-constitutional enclave. While a power hierarchy exists in Russia, it is better theorized as part of a conglomeration of power systems. The classic Weberian conception of the modern state was always an ideal type but contemporary Russia requires innovative political conceptualization.

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The Russian Outlook: Ideas, Voices, and Directions

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Abstract

In response to the massive global upheavals caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia has attempted to adapt to structural shifts in international and domestic order while retaining virtually all of its practices and discourses. This chapter will argue that this demonstrates Russia's belief in its own self-myths. Despite many global shifts, Russia remains in the same situation as it was prior to the pandemic, reliant on reviving its great power status. While, Russia will be able to keep its military capabilities on par with the US and China, at least in terms of lower-level regional conflicts, such a situation is likely to last only a decade or two. Nevertheless, Russia's elites have aligned themselves against all those who would deny them this great power status.

Over two years ago, Anton Barbashin and Alexander Graef of the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center positioned the Russian global outlook in relation to the most influential foreign policy think tanks (Barbashin and Graef 2019). Focusing on the SVOP, the Valdai Club, and the RIAC, they find that "even the most critical [of the think tanks] are [not] questioning the fundamentals of the Kremlin's foreign policy." While each think tank could forward its own nuanced perspective on either the situation in Ukraine, the potential deepening of ties with China, or other issues central to the Russian foreign policy outlook, Moscow remained firm in its previous decisions and related narratives. In this sense, what could be offered by these think tanks was instead a glimpse inside the mechanisms gently affecting Russian foreign policy production instead of direction for future developments. To understand Russia, one must look to the center, to Putin and those around him, rather than to the periphery, to dissenting or aberrant opinions.

However, the world described by Barbashin and Graef in 2019 predated the massive global upheavals caused by the COVID-19 pandemic response.

Russia had responded to the crisis by developing a vaccine and attempting to use health diplomacy, with varying degrees of success (Terry and Makarychev 2021; Laruelle et al. 2021). Additionally, COVID-19 was not the only paradigm-shifting event in this period. The Duma enacted constitutional reforms that have practically guaranteed Putin's rule for the next decade, Alexey Navalny was both poisoned and sent to a prison work camp, effectively quashing any centering effects on civil protest, Russia has acted as a power broker in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and Belarus' has continually been drawn closer to Russia due to its leader's own authoritarian tendencies and civil protests. There are two consistencies within this whirlwind, nevertheless: Vladimir Putin and the wider array of policy goals as pursued by the Kremlin.

Keeping this wider paradigm in mind, this chapter will argue that Russia has largely tried (successfully or otherwise) to adapt to these structural shifts in international and domestic order while at the same time not having essentially changed any of its practices or discourses. The reasons for this static position are manifold, and it is impossible to directly link a singular cause to this paradigm. Yet, this chapter will nonetheless contend that due to the personalist style of Putin's leadership, Russia has set itself in a sort of track-dependence – in a way, it has come to believe its own propaganda even on topics and issues where realities and words do not match. This track-dependence comes from the fact that the regime has hedged its internal legitimation on a perceived image of being a great global power within a multipolar world, whether or not this is the truth or the relevant policy makers actually believe this to be a possibility. In this way, to look forward is to look inward in order to understand Russia's global directions for the future.

The chapter will be structured in the following fashion. First, a brief theoretical excursus will be presented so as to situate this investigation. Then, statements from the Kremlin, Putin, and others central to foreign policy-making will be compared to empirical analyses of these foreign policy goals and projects between 2019 and 2021 through a dyadic analysis. Finally, conclusions will be drawn from the current study, including implications for the short- to medium-term as relates to Russia in the international system. As such, the goal of this chapter is to provide a synthesis of the ideas that are guiding Russian foreign policy-making, those voices – both leading and critiquing – related to these issues, and what can be said about developments related to them in the coming decades.

However, it is first necessary to clarify our theoretical approach that we will be employing in this work going forward. Primarily, this chapter looks at elite-level statements from the Russian decision-making class, making it necessary to clarify our understanding of how these elites operate within the Kremlin's extant power structure. With such a crucial point in mind, there are two ways in which we situate this understanding of the elites themselves, taken as representative parts of the productive structure of foreign policy making.

The first of the theories that are informative in this analysis is the operational code framework. This approach considers the beliefs, prejudices, and personal interests of the decision-makers as the most vital in understanding foreign policy decisions (Leites 2007; Walker and Schafer 2010). The operational code framework, while also helpful as a theoretical frame, can only act as an addendum in that while it would be more crucial to fix the preferences, cognitive foundations, and beliefs of all of the relevant policymakers for Russia, it remains an impossibility to detangle such personal beliefs from actual decisions and statements made regarding the events and issues that will be analyzed in this chapter. As such, it is an assumption of this analysis that decisions made in regards to foreign policy reflect such personal interests, beliefs, and prejudices.

The second point here that informs our brief analysis are the two related concepts of adaptation and learning in foreign policy. Theoretically, these two concepts are interconnected in that they explain decision-makers evolution over time or in response to certain unexpected events. In this situation, adaptation signifies no change in behavior or attitude and instead a flexibility to any changed circumstances. While the peripheral actions may change, adaptive strategies tend to bend back toward the status quo. Conversely, learning means that changes from transformations in structural conditions are assimilated and in fact will inform further decisions after the crises in question are over or replaced by others. Together, the operational code and adaptation and learning provide a holistic theoretical understanding as to why the Russian foreign policy would make such statements.

In order to explore the main debates in Russian foreign policy, we will be analyzing statements made and documents released by all those others central in and representative of the decision making process (i.e., the aforementioned elites), discussing the implied logics and issue linkages from their statements. Similarly, we will compare these findings with competing analyses from policy-related and academic analyses of the same events and

issues. In more simple terms, we will be comparing the Kremlin's statements about its own beliefs and capabilities against policy-related and academic prognoses for Russia's current stead and its stead in the coming years, drawing our conclusions from this paradigm.

The main limitations to our current analysis are its chronological brevity and the paucity of its predictive power for the future, both near and far. Nevertheless, as the authors recognize these limitations, it is our intention that this chapter raises the questions on such issues, namely what exactly differs between these elite-level prognoses on the one hand and policy-grounded and scholarly analyses on the other. In turn, those divergences that we raise – and the implicit questions behind them – can be explained by following the discussions and debates within the other chapters of this volume.

The Frontiers of Foreign Policy: Friends in China, Enemies in Ukraine

On the issue of relations with China, the Russian policy elite and international Russia scholars share opinions and perspectives. State security documents have already directly stated that China is an amicable partner in counterbalancing against hegemonic Euroatlantic institutions ("Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 30.11.2016 г. № 640" 2016; "Указ Президента Российской Федерации От 02.07.2021 № 400" 2021). This rapprochement is due to common worries and a commonly perceived enemy (Lukin and Novikov 2021) and was consequently asserted in such a forthright way. In such a scenario, Europe – and consequently the European Union – would be relegated to a peripheral peninsula of this wider Eurasia project (Diesen 2021). Nevertheless, Russia has undercut such region-building with China such as the SCO by creating its own parallel institutional frameworks, which often function solely to maintain Soviet spheres of influence and economic dependence (Šćepanović 2021). As such, the academic view on a Russo-Chinese relationship is rather mixed, as while there is the hypothetical possibility of deeper cooperation, it seems that most organizational formats in which the two countries participate are either defunct or exist solely as a bloc to counter the West. Inversely, when looking at mid-to-long-term prospects, Russia would become relegated to the role of a junior partner in whatever relationship it would have with China.

These Sino-Russian considerations also overlap with one realm of the Russian 'Near Abroad,' namely Central Asia. Central Asia is mostly spoken about in the context of bilateral diplomacy, where the ties between such countries of the Near Abroad are expected to maintain the status quo of the past decades. Russian cultural soft power among the Central Asian elites has been cited as the most deciding factor in continuing these connections (Serra-Massansalvador 2021). However, with the infrastructure incentives – as well as new elite personal connections that are made and exploited through the Belt and Road Project – it is yet to be seen whether Russia would continue in Central Asia by relying on historically contingent ties or instead by forging these alliances on an alternative basis (Bayramov 2021). The recent US withdrawal from Afghanistan and, consequently, from the region does, however, seem to have inspired a Russian response, such as the fortification of Russian bases in Tajikistan, to strengthen these existing ties rather than solely depending on them to remain in place ("Лавров Заявил, Что РФ Готова Использовать Базу в Таджикистане Для Защиты Союзников" 2021).

The second of the topics of focus here is the role of Ukraine in Russian foreign policy. It has been argued that the Kremlin's deployment of great power rhetoric, imagery, and policy has been counterproductive in the post-Soviet region, especially Ukraine (Busygina and Filippov 2021). Nevertheless, this prognosis runs in direct opposition to the actions actually followed by Russia in this period. Red lines, spheres of influence, and other such rhetoric relating Ukraine to a secondary role in international relations has undergirded current policy. To this point, Putin has stated, "Why should I meet with [Ukraine President Volodymyr] Zelenskyy if he has given up his country to full external control? Vital issues for Ukraine are not resolved in Kyiv, but in Washington and partly in Berlin and Paris. What is there to discuss? I'm not refusing (to meet him), I just need to understand what to talk about" ("Putin Discusses Ukraine, Black Sea Spat, Vaccines with Public" 2021). Putin succinctly reproduces the great power rhetoric that informs Russian foreign policy. By denying any agency to Ukraine as a sovereign state in its own right, he asserts that only great powers – i.e., the United States and 'partly' Germany and France – can engage in any discussions or foreign policy decisions on third countries such as Ukraine. This logic was once again deployed regarding the November and December 2021 buildup of military forces along the Russia-Ukraine border in the barbs reciprocated

between Blinken and Lavrov ("Views Collide as Blinken, Lavrov Discuss Ukraine" 2021).

The Nexus of Domestic Politics and International Relations

However, the formation of these strategic relations does not occur in a vacuum, and as noted by scholars (McFaul 2020), these domestic considerations inevitably affect the rollout of these policies. This process is most clear for Russia in the realms of demography, the opposition, and the economy. At the same time, the Kremlin's 'soft' or 'dark' power can be seen as a substratum of foreign policy formulation and implementation, as while they are not spoken about in direct terms, they nonetheless run parallel to the active implementation of such policies elsewhere.

The two interrelated issues of demography and the economy should first be interrogated. Regarding the post-COVID Russian economy, it can be said to be returning to something akin to normality, but as Chief of the Central Bank, Elvira Nabiullina, put it succinctly: "We have very hot inflation and high inflation expectations. At first it seemed like it would be temporary. But now we don't think so" (Cordell 2021). Inflation is a systemic condition. However, paired with the effects of sanctions on taxation and industrialization (Anisimov, Kolotkina, and Yagofarova 2021) as well as those from counter-sanctions (Bělín and Hanousek 2021), the Russian economy is poised to remain in such a stagnant position for at least the near future. From this economic malaise, it is clear that the changing demographic situation within Russia will not be for its overall benefit. Instead, such demographic changes will provide many challenges that the state and bureaucratic apparatus will have to deal with, which will already be in a delicate situation due to economic issues. The aging population, a shifting ethnic balance, and growing discontent amongst the youth poses issues for the future (White 2021).

However, regarding the last of these trends, the overall question of the opposition in Russia seems to have led to a resolute answer with the jailing of Alexei Navalny through the complete control of the organizational environment (Semenov 2021). Nevertheless, the Kremlin's treatment of its own domestic opposition is defended not from the realm of norms or values but by comparing such treatment with perceived international practice. From the press conference after the 2021 Geneva Summit with President Biden, Putin responded in characteristic *tu quoque* fashion to concerns regarding

the treatment of the Russian opposition, glibly stating, "As for who is killing whom or are throwing them in jail, people came to the U.S. Congress with political demands… Over 400 people had criminal charges placed on them. They face prison sentences of up to 28, maybe even 25 years. They're being called domestic terrorists" (Swanson 2021). The logic is explicit here: who are you to judge us?

Thus, the almost-all-but-answered question of opposition leads us then to the issue of who or what exactly is being opposed – Vladimir Putin and his role within the Russian power structure. Despite mediocre socioeconomic performance (Wilson 2021), Putin, as both executive and symbolic head of the Russia system as it stands now, links the entirety of the system together. It is he who balances the different factions who vie for the influence of who would fill his role after his retirement from office, and considering post-Soviet trends more likely, it is most likely that he would run for office once more (Gould-Davies 2021). However, Putin has not declared anything directly on who could act in such a place, remaining diplomatically aloof. To this point, Putin has stated, "On the one hand, they say a holy place is never empty and that there are no irreplaceable people… On the other hand, my responsibility is to give recommendations to people who will run for president. It happens in all countries in the world, I don't know any exception" ("Putin Discusses Ukraine, Black Sea Spat, Vaccines with Public" 2021)

Conclusions and Implications

A 2021 report by Chatham House ("Myths and Misconceptions in the Debate on Russia" 2021) expounded upon a list of fourteen or so 'myths' in the Western debates on Russia by presenting each 'myth' in a dialectical fashion – first presenting the 'myth,' then the supposed reality, and then, finally the synthesis of actual policy-related considerations that arise from such a disconnect. However, does a myth still continue to be a myth even if it is believed to be a reality? If Russia believes such myths about itself – even if such myths represent only one flank of occidental discussions – such myths are equally productive in the decision-making process, even more so than material conditions and empirical facts at times. This chapter has indicated that at least on the elite-level stratum of official statements and speeches – barring what these men and women actually believe themselves – Russia believes its own myths.

While such predictions are in fact not completely novel, our approach and situation of Russia discourses and outlooks through the COVID-19 crisis allow it to have more predictive power. Russia wasted a good crisis if this crisis were meant to reposition Russian policy in another direction – but this wasted opportunity did not come from a lack of trying. Despite vaccine diplomacy and other such initiatives to resituate itself in the international arena, Russia finds itself in the same position that it was in the pre-pandemic world – with the same outlooks, the same prospects, and making many of the same types of statements. Many of the scholars quoted in this chapter hint at the coming crisis for Russia and for the world more broadly. It remains to be seen if these answers to these crises will also be more of the same.

Taking these points all together, as per 2022, 2023, and beyond, what does this situation imply? For the meantime, Russia will be able to maintain its military capacities on par with the United States and China at least in relation to lower-level regional conflicts. However, such a situation is likely only to hold for the next decade or two, as the Russian military infrastructure continues to age and the number of conscripts continues to plummet vis-a-vis overall demographic trends. Barring comparable or even more marked demographic and economic declines in the EU, the United States, and in China, such a relative relegation would be unacceptable for the current regime. Thus, by engaging with the world based on an image of international relations that assumes great power status despite concerning demographic and economic trends, Russia's elites have positioned themselves in opposition to all of those who would deny them that status. Such a paradigm explains both the current escalation over Ukraine as well as Sino-Russia cooperation; one party denies the great power status while the other obliges such claims.

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On Russian Hostile Narratives
From Defining Them to Hunting Them Down

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Abstract

Nowadays, Russia is actively participating in information and propaganda warfare against Western countries. Hostile narratives that evolve within a framework of strategic narratives are a soft power tool that is extensively used to promote the state's own interests and influence others both on domestic and international levels. For this reason, identifying and understanding Russian hostile narratives is of a crucial importance in order to counter them. However, not all that glitters is gold – and not all seemingly hostile Russian narratives are intended as such. Different interpretations of historical events or linguistic terms may affect the nature of a narrative and create a situation wherein one side of the political dialogue perceives a certain narrative as a hostile one while the other presents it as a defensive idea.

Introduction: Defining Hostile Narratives

Narratives are accounts of series of related events that shape the way people understand the world around them. There are master narratives[1] or metanarratives that describe the overall "story" of an event or occurrence. Master narratives are deeply embedded in a culture, as they provide a pattern for cultural life and social structure and create framework for communication about what people are expected to do in certain situations (Halverson, Corman, and Goodall 2011, 7). They condition the ways different ideological groups think, feel, act, and what they believe in. Master narratives are the base from which all other stories branch out, including strategic narratives. Miskimmon et al. have called strategic narratives "the intersection of communication and power" and define them as the "tools that political actors employ to promote their interests, values, and aspirations for international

[1] The term *grand narrative* or *master narrative* was first introduced by a French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard in his 1979 work "The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge."

order by managing expectations and altering the discursive environment" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2017).

Hostile narratives evolve within the framework of strategic narratives. They target feelings and emotions and touch upon specific vulnerabilities. Hostile narratives are made of true and false information, where the narration of facts counts more than the facts themselves. Hostile narratives, organised by themes, are primarily based on social issues and are shared across platforms in order to enhance their viral spread. Topics are presented to reinforce community and cultural pride. Most of the content used to build hostile narratives is not always objectively false. Much of it is not even classifiable as hate speech but is intended to reinforce tribalism, to polarize and divide, and is specifically designed to exploit social fractures, creating a distorted perception of reality by eroding the trust in media, institutions, and eventually democracy itself (Flore 2020, 5).

Current strategic narratives, including hostile ones, are the means of soft power. In the 21st century, every major state has a soft power strategy (Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin 2014, 7). The Russian Federation is of no exception.[2] For years, Moscow has invested in creating and disseminating strategic narratives that are classified as hostile from Western point of view. The brightest example of such a hostile Russian narrative is the "West against Russia" narrative. It has its roots in the Cold War, when the powerful legacy of information warfare with the West in general and the United States in particular was seeded.

In the Soviet era, both domestic and international propaganda narratives portrayed capitalism as the enemy of the people and the Soviet system as the champion of humanity (Oates and Steiner 2018). At the end of 20th century, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, relations between Western countries and Russia started to ameliorate and Russia hoped to become a part of the West (Романова 2011, 57). That period was marked by a downward trend in anti-Western narratives, but after Vladimir Putin became the president of Russian Federation, the state became more nationalistic and antagonistic toward the West and NATO[3], and anti-Western narratives raised their heads once again.

Drafted in 2000, the federal budget of Russian Federation for 2001 allocated 200 million roubles for information warfare (Liik 2000). At the

[2] Since 2013, soft power has been officially mentioned in Russian Foreign Policy Concept.

[3] Vladimir Putin´s speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference explicitly expressed that.

same time, several independent Russian media outlets, including the well-respected TV channel NTV, were acquired by Gazprom-Media – a subsidiary of Gazprom, Russia's largest state-owned enterprise. Gaining control of Russian media helped Vladimir Putin in securing the stability of his regime and using the media as a tool for political control and propaganda distribution. In fact, in July 2020, a member of the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation, Artem Kiryanov, proposed that Russia should create an official Ministry of Propaganda ("В ОП России заявили о необходимости создать министерство пропаганды" 2020). The same idea was already announced a year earlier by a representative of Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), Boris Chernyshov ("В Общественной Палате Предложили Создать Министерство Пропаганды [The Need to Create a Ministry of Propaganda Was Stated in the Civic Chamber]" 2020), but neither his colleagues in parliament nor Kiryanov´s colleagues in the Civic Chamber supported that idea. Nevertheless, the fact remains that such announcements clearly state the importance of the role of the propaganda war in current Russia.

From Disinformation Campaigns to Hostile Narratives

Disinformation – false information that is deliberately spread to deceive – is a subset of propaganda. Its plausibility is ensured by an artificially created context in which disinformation is deliberately disseminated. Successful propaganda should prepare the audience to embrace the message of the propaganda. The objective of the propagandist is not the theoretical truth but the fact that the audience will accept the message and change its behaviour accordingly as these are the two consecutive goals of propaganda: to make people first think and then act in the desired way (Priimägi 2015).

During the Soviet era, political warfare, including disinformation and propaganda programs, was called *active measures*.[4] These active measures were conducted by KGB and included manipulation and media control, written or oral disinformation, clandestine radio broadcasting in order to create a favorable environment for advancing Moscow´s views and international objectives worldwide (Boghardt 2009, 1). Modern Russian strategic narratives reflect aspects of Soviet-era narrative strategies but have evolved with communication technology and globalization (Oates and Steiner 2018,

[4] In Russian: активные мероприятия (*aktivnye meropriyatiya*).

3). Russia is actively taking part in informational warfare and its anti-Western propaganda is currently produced in three ways: state-funded global social media networks, control of Western media outlets, and direct lobbying of Western society (Ajir and Vailliant 2018, 70). Now, Moscow has powerful tools at its disposal to construct and disseminate narratives (Hinck, Robert, and Cooley 2018, 24). The disinformation campaigns of the past times have evolved into more complex hostile narratives.

In recent years, Russia´s disinformation system operates by blending state-sponsored propaganda with sustained social media engagement with targeted audiences. Disinformation campaigns rely less on false news and more on problematic content. Russian news outlets have taken a more cautious approach, giving support to controversial stories but not necessarily contributing themselves by adding false claims. In fact, influencing public beliefs can be based even on scientific facts. This method consists of taking authentic and independent scientific research and selecting them by presenting only the evidence in favor of a preferred position. Using such a strategy, selective sharing can be effective in influencing what an audience of non-experts comes to believe are scientific facts. In this way, the conductors of hostile narratives can use grains of truth to give an impression of uncertainty or even convince people of false claims (Flore 2020).

Does Hostile Always Mean Hostile?

Without a doubt, Russia is actively participating in information warfare and producing propaganda and hostile narratives for neighboring and Western countries in order to promote its own interests. Besides hostile narratives, Russia has many other narratives that branch out from the state´s master narratives and appear because of cultural and historical reasons. These narratives are not meant to be hostile from Russian perspective. They are just narratives that are inherent to the state and to the people living in that state, and even though some of them may seem hostile for the West, they solely represent a different perception of one or another event.

Different perceptions and interpretations of certain events can be seen as a hostile narrative that need to be fought against. However, one should bear in mind that some master narratives, and strategic narratives that branch out of them, are affected by the interpretation of historical events – i.e., by historical narratives. Historical narratives that are deeply imbedded in

particular countries can be radically divergent among these countries, e.g., Russian and Western narratives about the Second World War and defining its initiators, victors, and villains. Contrasting historical narratives can be major obstacles in the way of establishing productive dialogues between adversaries.

Different narratives can be explained by the fact that even when talking about the very same subject or event, different countries focus on different objects. If we look at mainstream narratives concerning NATO then, NATO has been the foundation of stability in Europe since the Second World War for Germany, but Russia sees NATO as an instrument for the US domination of Europe, building upon an alleged US exceptionalism (Albers 2020, 31). Moreover, even though Russian NATO narratives seem hostile for the West, one should understand that it is how Moscow sees NATO from its own perspective within the framework of Russian national master narrative on its relations with the West – not being intentionally hostile but rather being defensive.

The Case of "Russophobia"

Of course, having different views on some major historical events and formulating its narratives accordingly does not change the fact that the Russian Federation actively takes part in propaganda war and creates narratives that without any doubt can be classified as strategic anti-Western narratives. Even if these narratives do not say directly aloud that the "West is bad," they are tailored in such way that they cast doubt on what the West is saying and undermine Western credibility. The "Russophobia" narrative can be seen as one such example.

The term *Russophobia* was introduced into political discourse already in 19th century by Russian poet and diplomat Fyodor Tyutchev, who used it to characterize European opposition to Russia. Currently, Russophobia is seen as a form of intolerance towards ethnic Russians, Russian-speaking ethnic groups, and the Russian state in general. The struggle against Russophobia is an instrument that therefore can be universally applied (Darczewska and Zochowski 2015). Attacking Russophobes is seen as a way of protecting Russian society both in domestic and international contexts and can be used to justify hostile activities. For example, the Russian administration has

justified the annexation of Crimea as having prevented Russophobes from carrying out ethnic cleansing (Кривякина 2014).

The term *Russophobic* is often used by the editors of a Russian soft power tool – a state-controlled website Inosmi.ru, which was established in 2001 in order to select, translate, and publish foreign – mostly Western – media reports on Russia. Each translated article is preceded by the editor´s comments regarding the translation of an article and hence it expresses the Russian elite opinion. The term *Russophobic* is often used by Inosmi.ru editors to comment on critical opinions expressed in the original articles that are translated and published on that site. It is done in order to devalue Western critique and cast doubt on what the Western author is saying. In fact, other emotionally charged terms such as the *Kremlin´s "occupation" of Europe* are also frequently used in the translations on the website, attempting to demonstrate that the use of such terms is the norm in Western media, even if such terms do not appear in the original article (Lanko 2021).

The Linguistic Factor in Political Storytelling

The importance of using specific words, terms, and linguistic expressions – the importance of the linguistic factor – cannot be underestimated in world politics in general and in the construction of a state´s narrative in particular. Language can be a source of contradictions in international communication; it can be an instrument of power and political, ideological, and socio-psychological influence. Language is currently an important instrument of soft power, and it becomes an even more powerful tool concerning translations. Frequently, reactions of one country to statements that were made in another country are actually reactions to the information as it was provided in translation (Schäffner 2004). Word selection affects the perception of a message and may have an impact on text reception. Strategic keywords can be used to achieve specific political aims. The word choice in the context of politically sensitive issues can have specific effects on international policy-making. All of this can be easily operationalized in promoting hostile narratives. Previous examples of Inosmi.ru vividly illustrate this.

As already mentioned, the content used to build hostile narratives is not always objectively false (Flore 2020, 13). The way the facts are narrated sometimes count more than the facts themselves. Moreover, when talking about translations, it is the usage of a term that can channel people's thoughts in a

particular direction. It can apply to both the words of common parlance and to specific terms. For example, one of the most important Western military-political concepts – *deterrence* – does not have one unambiguous equivalent in Russian language (Veebel, Vihmand, and Ploom 2020).

Mostly it is translated to Russian as *sderzhivaniye*, but is also sometimes referred to as *ustrasheniye*, *prinuzhdayushcheye sderzhivaniye*, *politika ustrasheniya*, *uderzhaniye,* and other terms. *Sderzhivaniye* and *ustrasheniye* are the two most common Russian equivalents of Western *deterrence*. However, in Russian, these two words are not synonyms. Each word has its own specific meaning and connotation that accompanies it. *Sderzhivaniye* literally means *containment*, *restraining,* or *holding back* while *ustrasheniye* means *intimidation* or *frightening*. When describing its own policies, Russia uses primarily more peaceful term *sderzhivaniye*, but when Western thought is described, then the more aggressive term *ustrasheniye* is often used. Using a term that is directly related to generating fear when talking about Western actions can directly amplify the hostility of "West against Russia" narrative.

Nevertheless, the linguistic situation itself is in fact not that unambiguous. It may seem that using more peaceful term to describe its own actions and more aggressive one to describe the actions of an adversary perfectly illustrates Russian policy of conducting hostile narratives. What can look like a hostile activity may sometimes actually turn out to highlight different socio-political or ideological structures and concepts. In the mind of Russian Federation, the Russian analogue of Western concept of strategic deterrence – the concept of *strategicheskoye sderzivaniye*[5] – evolves within the framework of a defensive concept of national security. Western concept of deterrence, on the contrary, is seen as an expansionary-offensive concept that ensures the advancement of the international interests of the United States (Печатнов 2016, 29). That division explains the possible reason of the difference in the use of terminology when talking about Russia´s own and Western actions.

However, since the Russian concept of *strategicheskoye sderzivaniye* suggests that all its actions are defensive or reactive, that its intention is only to restrain adversary and not to conduct offensive operation, it may give Russia the impression that it is acting defensively no matter what it is doing. Moreover, as Kristen Ven Bruusgard observes, this terminology may deceive

5 In English the word-for-word translation of "*strategicheskoye sderzivaniye*" is "strategic containment", but is also often translated as "strategic deterrence", which does not though reflect the way Russians see the nature of that Russian concept.

Russian leadership into thinking that their actions are merely responding to perceived aggression (Ven Bruusgaard 2016, 20).

Hunting Down Hostile Narratives

Different interpretation of historical events or linguistic terms do not change the fact that the Russian ruling elite promotes a specific set of strategic narratives to influence the way that its actions are perceived worldwide in order to influence public opinion abroad, to promote the Russian vision of the international system, and to strengthen its legitimacy at home. These narratives often challenge Western narratives and are seen as hostile from the Western point of view. This situation leads to a need to detect, study, and counter Russian hostile political storytelling.

Understanding Russian narratives, including historical ones, should help better understand the West's current adversary. Identifying Russian hostile narratives should help in countering them. In order to do that, several surveys and studies have been conducted. Some of them help to better understand each other and find gaps and overlaps in contested narratives. Some of them are supposed to detect the hostile narratives in order to counter them.

Such studies use different methodologies. One of the methods used is the mediative dialogue approach (for example, see Burlinova et al. 2019, 64) that creates a space for in-depth dialogue, which, rather than consisting in a mere exchange of statements, focuses on learning about the other side's point of view. It is guided by an appreciation of each participant´s perspective and the acknowledgement that each actor has the right to speak and be heard. Furthermore, facilitators have to step back from their own perspective and be willing to understand another participant's view while being aware that being willing to understand does not mean that they have to agree with the participant (Albers 2020, 9). The results of the discussions are then organized into a consensus paper. Such a method helps to deepen the understanding of the participant's perspectives, lets the participants freely express their opinions, and is then used in studies that aim to investigate competing (sometimes hostile) narratives in order to find their gaps, overlaps, and possible blind spots. Such studies aim to improve understanding between Russia and the West and eliminate impediments on their way to productive dialogue.

There is another type of study that maps Russian hostile narratives. Their aim is to identify the key narratives and explore audience perceptions and attitudes surrounding these narratives. That is done by organizing focus group discussions (e.g., groups of participants of a certain age, nationality, or residency). Such discussions are usually based on previously prepared questionnaires, and after the discussions have been conducted, the transcriptions of the answers are analysed by qualitative analysis software to facilitate analysis by topics and associated narratives, drawing out rhetorical and attitudinal patterns. The findings of such studies should provide deeply nuanced audience-centric understanding of the key topics and narratives. On the basis of such studies, reports are written and recommendations are given that should help counter Russian hostile narratives.

Such studies are often authorized and funded by Western governments, ministries of defence and foreign affairs that analogically to Russian Federation are engaged in information warfare and have their own tools of soft power. Hunting down hostile narratives and countering them is without a doubt an activity that should profit the West, but the main complication in hunting hostile narratives is to understand where these narratives would be located and what should be expected to appear.

Next to watching for narratives, there is also the possibility to engage in reverse engineering by defining the most probable hostile narratives for certain groups and areas and control for proof of their existence. Nevertheless, such an approach has its dangers. Once the expected evolving hostile narratives are defined and designed, it may be disappointing if during a costly survey no evidence that prove their existence are found or if it reveals that they do not exist at all. That might motivate survey suppliers to manipulate the results of the study by interpreting the results in a way that is more favorable to them.

Nevertheless, there is another scenario that could be much more disturbing. Such surveys can be used to create fictive hostile narratives as a cover to promote one's own interests or just to create a plausible reason to counterstrike Russian initiatives. In the field of hybrid warfare and information war, numerous harmless or accidental actions and connections can be seen and interpreted as opponents′ hostile plan. Causality and connection can be even more convincing if empirical examples and statistics are accompanied with semi-scientific theoretical models introduced as starting point do not necessitate debate. Interviews and questionnaires can be conducted to guide participants' thoughts and responses in needed direction.

Transcriptions that are analyzed are often translations that can be created using equivalent words and synonyms that emphasize the desired connotations. As a result, fictive narratives may be created that shape how the West sees and understands the world around it. Since narratives employed at one level may affect narratives at another level and thus constrain future policy choices and behavior, it is crucial that the models and institutions that aim to detect and identify Russian hostile narratives are trustworthy and straightforward. Otherwise, fictive hostile Russian narratives can create grounds for even stronger confrontation and actions taken that will only worsen already very precarious relations between the Russian Federation and the Western countries.

In Conclusion

In recent years, the Russian Federation has been an active participant in information warfare, tailoring its propaganda production and creating hostile narratives to promote its interests. The West has put much effort into identifying, understanding, and countering these hostile narratives. Nevertheless, in order to really understand the position of the adversary, one should decenter personally subjective interpretations in order to try gain a fuller comprehension of this adversary's perspective.

Seeing the world from this other perspective and thereby realizing that not all that glitters is gold and not all is hostile that seems hostile will help to better understand the adversary, drawing a line between intentionally hostile narratives and narratives that just represent different perception of certain events. Such an understanding will also help to better distribute resources and fight against the narratives that truly represent potential risks to Western well-being.

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Section III – Russian-Baltic Relations

Weaponization of Information in the Baltic States:
How Resilient are Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia?

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Abstract

The three Baltic states are continuing to fortify their resilience in the face of Russian and other external hostile information operations and interference in the strengthening of democratic processes on multiple fronts. This chapter focuses on the hybrid threats posed to one of society's dimensions: the informational domain. Russia's actions erode the European security architecture, increasing the likelihood of further deterioration in relations and further violations of international law and international security order. The Baltic states face the same challenges as other democratic regimes around the world. A comprehensive defense system against information campaigns and hostile strategic narratives that threaten all three Baltic States is required.

Introduction

The contemporary security environment is volatile. The sources of potential threats can come from both state and non-state actors, and their intensity and emergence may vary. Opinion leaders are increasingly sharing their opinion on the situation as lines between war and peacetime become increasingly blurred. Within these tendencies, hybrid threats and hybrid warfare plays an increasingly important role. The common types of hybrid attacks are malign information campaigns (propaganda, disinformation, fake news, and so on), cyber-attacks, attempts of economic influence, symbolic gestures based on the elements of either historical memory or certain dimensions of identity, corruption, and many others.

The purpose of this article is not to contribute to the theoretical debates about the content of the concept, nor is it to cover all characteristics and dimensions of hybrid threats. This article focuses on the hybrid threats posed toward one of the dimension of societal life: the informational domain, which supports key pillars of democracy, such as media freedom and

human rights. It will center on resilience against Russian weaponization of the informational domain in the Baltic states, which is seen as one of Russia's principal tools of hybrid warfare against the Baltic states (Nymann 2021, 200; Congressional Research Centre 2020: 15; Stoicescu 2021).

Information warfare, which causes increasing harm effects to democracies, state functionality, and social cohesion by disseminating disinformation and organizing other information manipulations, renders a number of democratic regimes incapable of countering these threats. The goal of malign information campaigns is to reach those groups of societies that are the most vulnerable and impacted by different conspiracy theories, disinformation, or alternative versions of reality. With its differentiated information dimensions, information bubbles, societal divisions over vaccination, political preferences, attitudes towards either conservative or liberal values, and other current political and non-political issues, the current environment provides a space for the adversary to use advantages for further distracting actions. These circumstances cannot be distinguished by analyzing the state's vulnerabilities in the face of alleged hostile informational or other hybrid attacks. For this reason, the article will provide an overview of the levels of resilience to Russian-led hybrid threats in the Baltic informational space, based on two key indicators: media and online space resilience and democratic regime strength.

The Russian Threat

Russia is not the first or only country to employ hybrid warfare methods against other states. Foreign interference with a toolkit similar to Russia's is used by other state and non-state actors worldwide (Nemr and Gangware 2019, 2; Pomerantsev 2020, 90; Kalniete and Pildegovičs 2021, 23). In this case, the difference between other actors and Russia is the importance of these malign information campaigns as part of the larger context of geopolitical rivalry. EU and NATO member states in Europe are facing efforts to create divisions both within EU countries and between Europe and United States in order to reduce US presence in Europe, especially on its Eastern Flank (Dunay and Roloff 2017, 2; CSIS 2020, 1). This political schism, and eventually a geopolitical void, can then be filled with Russian influence.

In the past, the Baltic states have already been at the forefront of Russia's aggressive information campaigns. They have experienced the negative

consequences of malign information campaigns on their political stability, state functionality, and social cohesion. The Kremlin has long used hybrid attacks to target Baltic states and their societies, with the clear aim of reestablishing and maintaining the Baltics within its sphere of influence. As a result, there is no need to emphasize the fact that information warfare has long been a part of the daily security agenda in the Baltic states and the wider Baltic region.

Russian-speaking minorities, in particular (but not exclusively) are targeted to become victims of these activities. For strengthening the influence over the Russian-speaking audiences, especially in Latvia and Estonia, Russia is carrying out information operations through various media channels. These operations range from Russian State television channels and different platforms which extend the messages transmitted from there, to social media, the entertainment industry, and the commercial and non-governmental actors involved in promotion of state-crafted discourses or specific narratives.

The messages conveyed through these different channels are customized to the specifics of the target groups and targets. These informational campaigns can become smaller elements of larger strategic narratives for the purposes of influencing a target country politically. They may change over time and may be adapted to the contemporary contexts or political interests. At the same time, these different strategies have the same features regarding their communication of messages. Kremlin communicators shape the early narratives, repeat the narratives, and employ a wide range of channels for repeating them (CSIS 2020, 3). New forms and innovative approaches allow Russia to be one-step ahead of the target country's strategic communicators, which are mainly engaged in reactive activities.

There are three main objectives of the Kremlin's hostile information operations in the Baltic state. First, they seek to create tensions between different societal groups in these societies (i.e., ethnic groups, linguistic communities, regions, and others). Second, they look to create cleavages between the states and their inhabitants. Third, they aim to create divisions between the Baltic states and their Western allies. On the other hand, to understand the Russian approach, it must be considered that the Kremlin often does not even support the same interpretation of the reality that is offered for Russian domestic audiences. The aim might be simply to spread confusion, obfuscate any trust in the informational environment, and reduce trust towards the existing regime in a target country.

Russia's intervention in Ukraine in 2014 acted as a wake-up call, which demonstrated unpreparedness and vulnerability of the West to these threats (Keršanskas 2021, 7; Kalniete and Pildegovičs 2021, 23). Nevertheless, even after this event, the following responses from the West might be insufficient, as the situation has become more complex and dangerous since 2014. Russian aggression evolves to take on new and intolerable forms, which leads to mainly reactive activity from Baltic states and the West in general. The Baltic states and their Western partners must adapt to the new challenges of the adversaries, starting from the usage of migration warfare up to the newly developed styles of propaganda and international pressure. They must find an adequate and timely response. Otherwise, not only their specific political or economic interests, but also more generally their democratic political regimes and alliances overall can come under threat.

Consequently, the article seeks to answer questions regarding certain vulnerabilities of the Baltic States against a specific form of Kremlin hybrid threats: different types of information operations. This case study supports contemporary measures taken by all three states, highlights their shortcomings, and offers recommendations for further deterrence strategies against these types of threats. At the same time, this article does not aim to cover all fields of Stratcom or the fight against and prevention of hostile information attacks from the Russian Federation. It is rather a cross-section of the dimensions that the author believes are the most crucial to be improved right now.

Building Resilience against Malign Information

Societal resilience is highly interrelated with governance, capacity of institutions, social order, and their cohesion (Dunnay and Roloff 2017, 3). Building resilience is one of the biggest challenges for the state, which governmental and non-governmental agencies are facing due to the various reasons. First, crises and disasters, as well as other similar threats, are unpredictable, different in scope and intensity, which means that it is challenging or even impossible to be completely ready for them, while at the same time, the acknowledgement of the any type of threats is an important part of a security agenda.

Thus, in this case, in order to deal with the hybrid threats, including the ones in information space, nations must identify the importance of

developing societal resilience against these threats. Second, countries face challenges with resource allocation while simultaneously dealing with limited state budgets. Third, it is not possible to reach desirable results only with short-term solutions, especially when it comes to the any type of hybrid threats. There is no single tool available to counter them. Nevertheless, there is much work to be done on a daily basis, such as the promotion of lifelong education in such areas as media literacy, critical thinking, and many others. Looking at information resilience building only from the perspective of strengthening media literacy and critical thinking is archaic. The current multifaceted informational environment, with its different types of manipulation offered by technology, makes these two preventive activities are far from enough. Thus, governments must not only think about innovative methods for message production but for instant resilience and social cohesion, where interpersonal trust and trust in the state's social institutions are the main keys.

The Baltic states went through Soviet occupation and have certain elements of resilience based on their shared national experiences and historical memory. However, this cannot be considered to be sufficient for the state's resistance against the number of modern threats. At the same time, there are a number of pieces of evidence for increasing political will to strengthen this resilience in all three Baltic states. A number of legislative acts has been passed as institutional networks and policy coordination mechanisms have been established. Many governmental, private, and societal initiatives in the fight against Russian malign information campaigns even serve as an example of good practices for many partners in the Western hemisphere. Nevertheless, the Baltic states must be practically ready to implement these policies and offset the negative informational campaigns.

Here, the most important is the level of private and public trust in governmental institutions and policies. Even though Baltic societies have a strong historical memory of more than one hundred years of statehood and a feeling of being endangered (as is characteristic of small states), as well as an instinct to organize sharply around the question of the survival of the nation, a lack of trust towards any social institution, especially governmental institutions, and political regime as such, is an existential challenge. Conversely, a free media has been seen as the voice of the people. Thus, informational campaigns in former Soviet territories are more efficient than some government policies.

Measurement of Societal Sentiments

One of the most important challenges in countering information threats is the measurement of their impact. This applies both to the effects of malignant information and to strengthening resilience (Kerškanskas 2021, 13). Public opinion polls demonstrate societal trends, and in combination with information space, monitoring these results are often used as the basis for information threat assessment. The measurements that are used are quantitative and have certain limitations in any case. Solutions might be longitudinal studies, which are rather the exception than the reality of Baltic social research agenda.

The most topical issue discussed in the context of societal sentiments in Baltics is significant minorities of Russian speakers in Latvia and Estonia. As a result, both are seen as the most vulnerable to Russian subversion. A popular concern is the hidden potential of using Russian-speaking minority for the influencing domestic politics and instrumentalizing it for international pressures and manipulations.

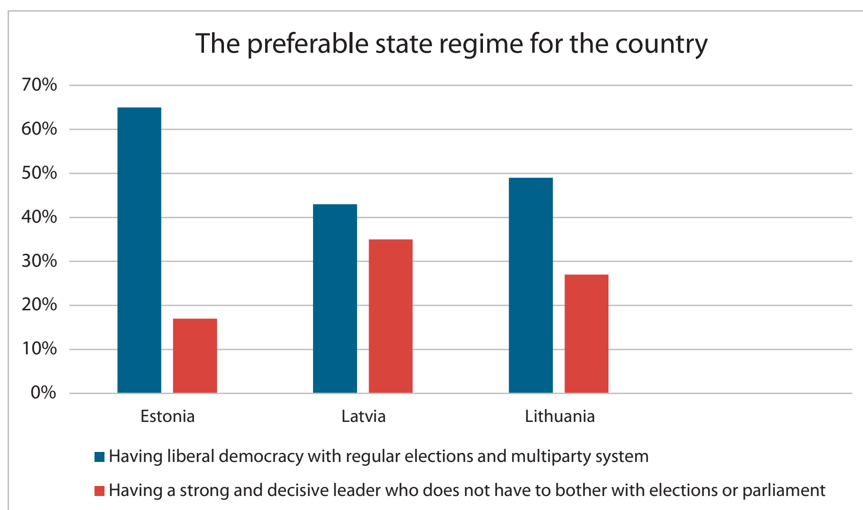
Some of researchers insist that with the increasing integration of Russian speakers in Latvian society and the living standards they enjoy, Russia loses its support in attempts to destabilize the country (Radin 2017, vii). Others still believe in the latent potential of destabilization, which might be used as soon as Russia makes a serious attempt to do so. However, in the light of integration policies as well as generational change, fragmentation based on linguistic affiliation is gradually diminishing.

Another dimension of this analysis is the impact of Russian informational narratives on Baltic societies. The main measurements taken into account when analyzing vulnerabilities are the numbers of bots, cyborgs, and other interruptions in social media, exposing disinformation and propaganda, as well as the analysis of the peculiarities of media use or self-assessments of media literacy and critical thinking. This is a relevant field of analysis and requires serious attention, as Russian resources will always allow for a more comprehensive and better resourced approach, and therefore campaigns against any and all of the Baltic States would be more highly coordinated. This is the reason why these informational narratives have been well received by both the Baltic Russian-speakers and their respective nations.

Important background factors such as people's attitudes towards the existing political system and their satisfaction with the functioning of the political elite or trust to the elite or interpersonal trust in general are less

frequently analyzed. It is often forgotten that "the trust is foundation for the foundation for the legitimacy of public institutions and a functioning democratic system. It is crucial for maintaining political participation and social cohesion" (OECD, 2021). Accordingly, this lack of trust is exactly what is instrumentalized by the Russian Federation when relations continue to deteriorate.

Another parallel factor extremely important for the analysis of these vulnerabilities is the rate of societal satisfaction with the current regime. Statistics demonstrate that there is still a long way for building support for democratic values in Baltic states at the level of more established European democracies. Inhabitants of Baltic states still have robust sentiments about having "strong" leaders who do not have to answer to elections or the parliament.



(Adapted from Globsec, 2020: 13)

Latvian society has demonstrated the most robust sentiments about "strong" leadership. Around half of the inhabitants of Latvia are not satisfied with the existing political regime, which sounds an alarming signal regarding further democratic developments. Other surveys also show similar public sentiment. Only 37 percent of respondents gave positive evaluation about the ways in which democracy operates in Latvia (SKDS, 06.2021). This can

be explained by a growing crisis of confidence in the government and its decisions. According to Eurostat, 23 percent of Latvians tend to trust their government while and 77 percent do. The trust in parliament is even lower; 21 percent tend not to trust it (Eurostat, Winter 2020/2021).

At the same time, it must be emphasized that the COVID-19 pandemic has not significantly increased this gap between government and society, which means that it is a systematic problem. Members of society feel excluded from the political process. According to Latvian Social Polling Results, around 80 percent of respondents did not see any possibility to influence the functioning of Latvian government or parliament in June 2021 (SKDS, 06. 2021).

The result of this communication gap is not just the presence of malign informational campaigns in the Baltic States but also weak communication between public and private sectors. Thus, the public has difficulty understanding current strategic communication of the government. The messages they hear are diverse and are conveyed in technocratic and scientific language that is difficult for publics to understand.

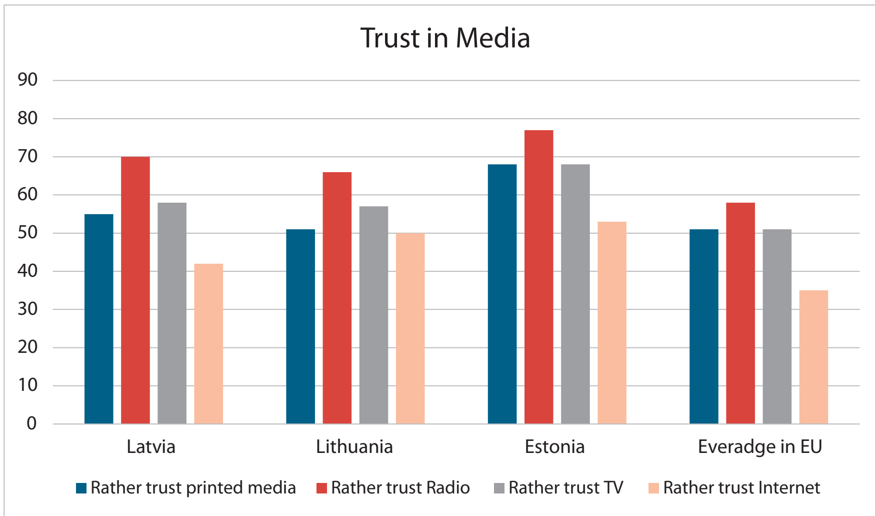
Therefore, society sees neither a clear plan for the ruling political elite to successfully emerge from the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic nor a long-term strategy for the country's development. People, especially in the rural regions, feel left alone with their own problems. Belarus's use of migration as a tool of hybrid warfare has only deepened fears and uncertainty about the future. As a result, the most important social actor that people are willing to rely on is social networks consisting of family and close friends (Ozoliņa, Reinholde, and Struberga 2021).

In Estonia, 47 percent of respondents are not satisfied with how democracy works in their country, while 42 percent are satisfied (Globsec 2020, 13). According to Eurostat, 53 percent of Estonians tend to trust the government while 47 percent do not. The level of distrust correlates with dissatisfaction with the political regime. Trust in parliament is even lower, as 57 percent of the population tends not to trust it (Eurostat, Winter 2020/2021). Besides, 56 percent of Estonian respondents have expressed confidence that EU dictates to Estonia what to do without Estonia having a chance to influence it. 33 percent of Estonians think NATO is unwilling and/or incapable to defend Estonia military because Russia is stronger than NATO and a third of Estonians believe that the real reason of NATO presence in Estonia is to provoke Russia (Globsec, 2020).

In Lithuania, only 32 percent of the population is satisfied with how democracy works in their country (Globsec 2020, 13). According to Eurostat, 44 percent of Lithuanians tend to trust the government while 56 percent do not. This level of distrust correlates with the dissatisfaction with political regime. Trust in parliament is even lower, with 73 percent of Lithuanians tending not to trust it (Eurostat Winter 2020/2021).

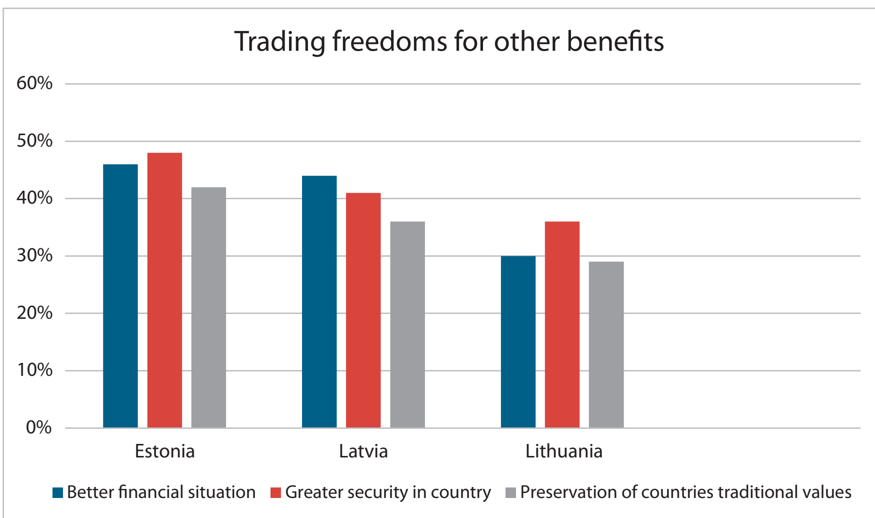
Another dimension of public trust that is critically important for the sustainability of democracy and resilience of society to external malign information operations is trust in media. Free media is described as the sector that promotes awareness and transparency, holds elites accountable, and guards freedom of expression (Trappel and Tales 2021, 11). Historically, journalists were a significant part of the intellectuals who facilitated the freedom movement in Baltics during the last years of the Soviet Union. The newly established free media enjoyed considerable public trust, and since then, democracies have gone through a democratic consolidation processes, meaning that the media has had a chance to develop in line with Western trends. What is the attitude of the people of the Baltic States towards the media today, when the traditional media around the world are experiencing a certain deterioration of public trust?

Public trust in the media in all three Baltic States is considered to be higher than the average in the European Union. It is an important indicator that demonstrates the continuing reliance of the population on the media as a fourth power. Thus, the media has a potential to support democratic regimes and monitor, detect, and inform the population regarding hostile activities in information space, as well as to promote the reestablishment of trust between political elites and societies. On the contrary, it does not mean that media should lose the role of a watchdog. Media, especially new media, has the potential to facilitate community building by identifying like-minded people, finding common causes and solutions to societal problems and challenges (Owen 2018). New media is not only a great platform for politicians to get popular support during election time but might be used inversely by voters to be heard as well as for politicians to find support and trust for certain policies.



(Adapted from Eurobarometer 94, 2021)

When it comes to the readiness of Baltic societies to trade their democratic rights and freedoms, the situation is no better than that of trust in the ruling political elite. Interestingly, Estonians, who are generally more satisfied with the functioning of democracy in the country, are more willing to sell fundamental democratic freedoms for economic and other benefits at the same time.



(Adapted from Globsec, 2020: 25)

This type of social trend confirms the shortcomings in the maturity of all three Baltic democracies, which are considered significant vulnerabilities. The scope of this problem was illustrated by the failure to respond to the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic and the 'infodemic' as a reaction to the health situation. The absence of effective governmental communication that would not leave much space for false and manipulative information has illustrated lack of high- level robust and synchronized strategic communication systems in all three Baltic States.

As a result, these statistics demonstrate significant windows of opportunity for Russian narratives. The establishment of these hostile narratives, sentiments, and orientations can serve as entrenched anchors for Russian influence if the Baltic governments do not reconsider their ability to strengthen the people's confidence in their work, support for democratic processes, and support to democratic values as a basis for the development of liberal democracy.

Lessons to be Learned

The international community has long sought to find a dialogue with Russia through economic, political, and other means to reduce its hostile activities in the immediate neighborhood and beyond. Although Europe, including the Baltic States, has tried to show maximum strategic patience and searched for some sort of lasting reconciliation, this policy has not produced the necessary results. Russia's activities erode the European security architecture and increase further deterioration of relations and likelihood of further transgressions of international law and international security order.

Today, when the transatlantic community is finally ready to acknowledge its defeat in the fight for a friendly dialogue with Russia, it has helped realize that the Kremlin's geopolitical strategy based on a zero sum calculations that exclude the possibility of a liberal understanding of the positive impact of economic cooperation on strengthening political cooperation and peace. The fact that the Kremlin sees democracies in its neighborhood as a threat must also be considered. Democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and other values that unite Europe are seen as the ultimate threat to the Kremlin's leadership. Malign informational campaigns and elements of broader strategic narratives are cheap and increasingly efficient ways to fight these ostensibly adverse values by Kremlin outside of Russia.

The three Baltic states continue to strengthen their resilience against Russian and other external hostile information operations and interference

in strengthening of democratic processes at several dimensions. However, there are number of challenges to be overcome, especially when it comes to the vulnerabilities related to institutional trust and trust in decision-makers who represent public interests. Moreover, national and European legislative and institutional systems should be enhanced to reduce the number of opportunities for hostile actors to exploit the values of the democratic regimes against regimes themselves by using democratic freedoms such as freedom of expression. No less important is a need to pay even more attention to the shortcomings of the slow rate of adaption to new informational threats.

The Baltic states are facing similar challenges as other democratic regimes worldwide. However due to their shared Soviet heritage and lack of experience, there are shortcomings in building the bridges of trust between population and political elite. Official communication strategies should be better coordinated, especially against informational campaigns from social media that brings together exchanges from informal family and friend networks and malign informational sources with the Kremlin's financial backing. Moreover, strategic communication by national governmental and EU or NATO structures must become simpler and more comprehensible by all cohorts of society, not just by the elites, educated, or the wealthy who can grasp technocratic and bureaucratic narratives.

There is a salient need to establish a comprehensive defense system against informational campaigns and hostile strategic narratives that threaten all three Baltic States and their national structures. Such pan-Baltic initiatives and an active engagement with the public and private realms on the national level are keys for strong societal resilience. The media and civilian society can become a crucial actor, which support the democratic regimes via different types of citizen empowerment- be it education or involvement in decision-making during a peacetime, as well as a potential to take a leadership over identification of vulnerable groups and other important support functions during the crisis.

To achieve this, international cooperation should be widened in order to define the sources of hostile information operations and the funding for such activities. EU member states are doing a lot on national levels, but a deepening of international cooperation would deliver better results. There is a need for more proactive cooperation within NATO, the European Union, Eastern Partnership countries, and other like-minded partners.

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Russia between its Past and its Future

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Abstract

Russian security policy has drastically evolved in the last three decades. Russian security policy appears to be angry and vindictive, with an emphasis on "correcting historical injustices". The ramifications are far-reaching for Russia itself and its neighbors, including those in the Baltic Sea Region. The risks ahead are formidable: Russia believes the West is weak and continues to drive forward, and the West thinks Russia's position is untenable. It is vital that the West recognizes what is at stake and learns to take Russia seriously. Much can be gained by recognizing the situation as soon as possible.

This year, 2021, marks the 30th anniversary of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It is worth remembering that a majority of Ukrainians, including those in Crimea, voted for independence in a referendum in December 1991.

During these last three decades, Russia's security policy has drastically evolved. Long gone are the public demands for Russia to become a "normal country," and the initial enthusiasm for the newly won freedoms of expression, religion, and the right to travel abroad. Instead, under Vladimir Putin, the political system's dynamics focus around intensified domestic repression and external hostility against the West. Russian security policy appears to be angry and vindictive, with an emphasis on "correcting historical injustices." The ramifications of this trend are far-reaching, not only for Russia itself but also for its neighbors, including those in the Baltic Sea Region. The reasons for this development are numerous and complex, but above all, they originate from imperial legacies, both the Imperial Russian and the Soviet. The disintegrational factors that caused the dissolution of the Soviet Union are still at work, and at present, the Russian Federation is currently displaying the unmistakable signs of these imperial phantom pains (Billié 2014).

In order to get a clearer understanding of the development of Russian security policy, it is useful to analyze some of the more recent events and to trace the historic roots of a Russia in search of a national identity. The focal

points in this chapter are the modifications of the Constitution in 2020, the recently revised National Security Strategy, and the Nuclear Weapons Policy, published for the first time in 2020.

The Constitutional Legacy

The amended Constitution was ratified on 1 July 2020, following a rather complicated process that included a referendum held over three days due to the pandemic ("Konstitutsiia Rossiiskoi Federatsii" 2021). The first two chapters of the Constitution were unaffected, while chapters three through eight were subject to revision. Much can be made about the legitimacy of the process itself, but that is not the point here. Instead, what were the most significant changes, and what did they mean?

First, the reforms were made to strengthen the role of the President and allow Vladimir Putin to run for re-election in 2024. Should he decide to stand for election then, and re-election in 2030, he could theoretically become president until 2036, retiring at the age of 84 years old. In other words, a president for life. At the same time, the amendments mean that no successor will be able to stay in office as long as Putin has. Should he decide to stand down and become a senator in the Federation Council (upper house), his immunity from prosecution is secured.

Furthermore, the ideological features of the amended text are the most essential, and there are a few noteworthy ones, not least the added clauses in article 67. Here, it is stated that Russia is a successor state to the Soviet Union, and that Russia is "united by a thousand-year history, and keeper of the memory of its ancestors, who have given to us the ideals and the faith in God." According to the document, the Russian Federation also "provides protection of the historical truth. To belittle the value of the heroic deeds of the people is not allowed." In the same paragraph, it says that the state creates possibilities for the children to be "educated in patriotism, public spirit (*grazhdanstvennost'*), and respect for the elderly."

In other words, religion, history, and patriotism are now a part of the Constitution, which directly contradicts the first chapter. There it is stipulated that "no ideology may be established as state or obligatory one" (Article 13.2), and that "The Russian Federation is a secular state. No religion may be established as a state or obligatory one" (Article 14). These themes are not new. The Russian Orthodox Church has held the position of *primus inter*

pares for a long time (Persson 2014). The fact that patriotism is enshrined in the Constitution reveals the political leadership's will to promote this concept as a kind of quasi-ideology.

The efforts of the state to control historiography have several forms over almost fifteen years. In 2009, a presidential commission was created to combat "the falsification of history." It was a short-lived experiment, and the commission was disbanded – ironically enough – in 2012, officially called the "Year of Russian History." However, now it is occurring again. In 2021, an Interdepartmental Commission for Historical Education was established under the aegis of the Presidential Administration ("Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii Ot 30.07.2021 г. № 442, O Mezhvedomstvennoi Komissii Po Istoricheskomu Prosveshcheniiu, [On the Interdepartmental Commission for Historical Education]" 2021). Vladimir Medinskii, Presidential Aide, former Minister of Culture and Head of the Russian Military-Historical Society, is leading the Commission, which also includes representatives from the security and intelligence services, Ministry of Defence, and Foreign Ministry. The Presidium of the Commission includes Chief of Foreign Intelligence (SVR) Sergei Naryshkin, who is also the Head of Russian Historical Society ("Pervoe Zasedanie Mezhvedomstvennoi Komissii Po Istoricheskomu Prosveshcheniiu, [First Meeting of the Interdepartmental Commission for Historical Education]" 2021).

The aim of the Commission is said to be twofold: "to create among the citizens of Russia, especially the youth, a solid base of ideas about the past of the country and to counteract against systemic attempts to falsify Russian history, undertaken from abroad."

Here it is critical to recognize that history and historiography of Russia have become a security policy tool in the confrontation with the West, as well as in the suppression of the opposition at home. According to the Criminal Code of Russia, it is illegal to "spread lies about the Soviet Union during the Second World War," and to spread material that expresses "lack of respect for society and the Days of Military Glory in connection to the defense of the Fatherland." Recently, the law was amended to include the criminalization of the distribution of false information about the veterans of the Great Patriotic War ("Usilena Ugolovnaia Otvetstvennost Za Rabilitatsiiu Natsizma, [Law on Tougher Criminal Punishment for Rehabilitating Nazism]" 2021). This amendment coincided with the trials against Aleksei Navalny, resulting in convictions for this "crime" ("Russia "Crime Against History"" 2021).

The point is that it is not academic scholars who argue in seminars about what constitutes a falsehood or disrespect – it is the judges in Russian courtrooms. Furthermore, the implications of this development for the countries in Russia's neighborhood are evident.

The revised Constitution now stipulates that the Russian Federation will ensure "peaceful coexistence" (Article 79). This nostalgic term from the Soviet era reflects the political leadership's need and willingness to delve into the Soviet legacy in order to forge a national identity.

Consequently, the political leadership treats the Constitution as yet another instrument of power. This is something that has happened before, first during the initial efforts during Nicholas II in 1905 with the October Manifesto and subsequently during the Soviet Union. The purpose of the Soviet Constitution was written to serve the Communist Party. It was more of an ideological and political instrument rather than the foundation of rule of law. The problems illustrate a deep, mutual distrust between rulers and subjects in Russia. During the Soviet period, people were exposed to the power of the state, its abuse and arbitrariness. The current changes reflect this authoritarian spirit – again. The changes in the Russian Constitution are yet another step away from the Western liberal view where the law is used to protect people from power. The law is used to protect the power (the tsar, the Communist leadership, the president) from the subjects (Persson 2009).

The National Security Strategy Looks to the Past

The National Security Strategy (NSS) was revised in July 2021, replacing the previous one from 2015 ("Strategiia Natsionalnoi Bezopasnosti RF" 2021). This document is the most important strategy document, according to the Law on Strategic Planning. It is a useful document because it spells out the priorities regarding Russian national interests and national security. Much of what is mentioned in the NSS is not executed, but it does speak to the direction in which Russia is headed — at least in terms of political will.

It covers a variety of prioritized sectors, such as living standard and health issues, defense, information space, environment, Russian spiritual and moral values, and strategic stability.

Russia is prepared for a long-term conflict with the West. The importance of military force to achieve geopolitical aims is increasing (§34). There is an increased risk armed conflicts escalating into local and regional wars,

including those involving nuclear powers. Space and information space are being named as "new spheres of warfare" (§17). The Internet and international IT companies are said to spread "false information." The youth in Russia, according to the NSS, is threatened by "destructive influence."

All the paragraphs from the previous NSS regarding cooperation with United States and NATO in order to keep the strategic stability are gone as are the formulations about cooperation with the European Union. The foreign policy section has been cut from 20 paragraphs to seven. The anti-western rhetoric has become louder, and there are formulations about "unfriendly states" and the West's attempt to "preserve its hegemony." At the same time, the NSS states that the Western, liberal model is in crisis, and at the same time, the West is trying to undermine traditional values, distort world history, revise the opinions on the role and place of Russia in it, and rehabilitate fascism (§19). All references to Ukraine are excluded except for the paragraph that stipulates that Russia wants to strengthen the ties between the Belarusian and Ukrainian peoples. For Russia, protests against election fraud in Belarus were organized by the West and not a result of a domestic dissatisfaction with President Lukashenko or falsified election results. All this is being done to damage Russia and its relations with its traditional allies.

There are numerous threats facing Russia. The missile defense and NATO at the borders of Russia are such threats, as it was in the previous NSS. The United States is planning to deploy medium-range missiles in Europe and in the Pacific Region, which threatens strategic stability (§36). In order to secure the country's defense, the Russian Armed Forces and other troops are assigned fourteen priorities (§40). Among the most important are: to improve military planning in the Russian Federation so that interrelated political, military, military-technical, diplomatic, economic, information and other measures can be developed and implemented. The holistic view of conflict, war, and the ways to counter threats, is characteristic of Russian military strategy.

Furthermore, the so-called "Westernization" (*vesternizatsiia*) of culture is viewed as a threat to Russian sovereignty. Traditional Russian spiritual, moral and cultural-historical values are – allegedly – under active attack by the United States and its allies, as well as by transnational corporations, foreign non-profit non-governmental, religious, extremist, and terrorist organizations (§87).

So what are these values that are being attacked? Several aspects are said to be characteristic, among them patriotism, service to the Fatherland and responsibility for its fate, priority of the spiritual over the material, collectivism, historical memory and the continuity of generations, and the unity of the peoples of Russia (§91). These are ideals, obviously, but as Dmitrii Trenin at Carnegie Foundation has pointed out, "the main problem of contemporary Russia is that the ruling elite only rarely share these values and, according to public opinion polls, does not have the minimum moral authority to lead the society" (Trenin 2021).

Again, at the same time, it claims that the gap between the generations is widening (§86). This should perhaps be an issue of concern for Russia's aging political leadership. This gap between generations was one of the factors contributing to the fall of the Soviet Union.

Overall, the image emerges of a Russia that – again – has turned its back from the West while simultaneously defending all of European civilization. It harkens back to the myth of Moscow as the third Rome (Persson, Vendil Pallin, and Engqvist 2020). The greatness of the Empire of the past is evoked as the preferred path forward. State control and repressions of political dissent are seen as a necessity to secure the future of Russia, while the younger generations will drive Russia to become a leading high-technological nation. It may seem like a paradox, and it echoes from the Soviet days. This emphasizes a crucial conclusion: this development challenges not only Russia but also all its neighbors.

Finally, we will examine the Nuclear Weapons Policy that was published for the first time in 2020.

Nuclear Weapons Policy – Uncertainty Codified

Over the past ten years, Russia has modernized its strategic and non-strategic nuclear forces. According to President Vladimir Putin, 86 percent of the Russian strategic nuclear triad was modernized by the end of 2020 ("Expanded Meeting of the Defence Ministry Board" 2020). The triad consists of three parts: the strategic missile forces equipped with both mobile and silo-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). They act as the main component of Russia's triad of strategic nuclear weapons. The other two are ICBMs launched from naval submarines and cruise missiles launched from the long-range bombers of the Air Force (Kjellén and Dahlqvist 2019).

Currently, Russia deploys approximately 1,570 strategic warheads: around 810 on land-based ballistic missiles, 560 on submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and 200 at heavy bomber bases (Kristensen and Korda 2020). An additional 870 strategic warheads, along with 1,870 nonstrategic warheads, are held in reserve (ibid.).

The role of nuclear weapons is defined in several doctrinal documents, such as Russia's Military Doctrine, the NSS, and in key speeches by the President. The document "On Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence" was signed by Putin on 2 June 2020 ("Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence" 2020). The existence of this document was not unknown, but it was always classified. It was mentioned briefly in 2010 (Persson 2013, 81).

What is new in this document? Initially, there is no change in the nuclear doctrine that has stayed the same since the Military Doctrine of 2000 when Russia abandoned the Soviet principle from the mid-1980s of no first use for nuclear weapons.

The document does not supersede the NSS, where it says, as it did in 2015, that Russia should maintain a sufficient nuclear deterrence capability. It does not replace the Military Doctrine from 2014, but it does provide more information regarding Russia's potential use of nuclear weapons.

When Russia may use nuclear weapons, the circumstances are listed (§19). They are as follows:

a) arrival of reliable data on a launch of ballistic missiles attacking the territory of the Russian Federation and/or its allies;
b) use of nuclear weapons or other types of weapons of mass destruction by an adversary against the Russian Federation and/or its allies;
c) attack by adversary against critical governmental or military sites of the Russian Federation, disruption of which would undermine nuclear forces response actions;
d) aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy.

It should be noted that "the very existence of the state" is a flexible expression, and that its meaning could be adapted to the situation by the political leadership. Moreover, point c) clarifies what was already known. For instance, it means that a cyberattack against the Russian political or military

leadership, if it affects Russia's ability to respond, could result in the use of nuclear weapons.

Point a) mentions only ballistic missiles and not cruise missiles. One explanation is that probably only intercontinental ballistic missiles are intended. These can be detected from afar, using satellites and radars that are part of the strategic warning system. The strategic automated systems are also more important to discover because the intended goals are precisely strategic. Therefore, Russia reserves the right to respond with its nuclear weapons of its own even before threatening intercontinental guided missiles reach their targets. It also indicates that Russia reserves the right to respond with nuclear weapons to attacks in kind with conventional charges. It is targeted against the American concept *Prompt Global Strike*. According to that concept, the United States should be equipped with the ability to strike targets anywhere in the world with conventional weapons in as little as an hour. There should be no reliance on forward-based strengths (Hedenskog and Persson 2019).

Moreover, it is explicitly stated that the adversary should not be aware of or be capable of calculating when and where Russia intends to use nuclear weapons. §15 d) notes that one of the principles of nuclear deterrence is "the unpredictability of a potential adversary to determine the scope, time and place of any deployment of forces and means of nuclear deterrence", i.e., the opponent should always remain in ignorance. This is not new or particularly Russian, but it is worth noting because it is stated so simply.

Regarding the debate over the de-escalation doctrine, no clarity is to be found in the document. To summarize, nuclear weapons play a significant role in Russia's strategic deterrence and will likely continue to do so. Non-strategic nuclear weapons will also continue to be an important part of Russia's deterrence, along with new, long-range conventional weapons systems.

Russia's nuclear weapons will be a central part of the military instrument of power in the future, both for strategic deterrence and for the defense of Russia and its coercive power. The unpredictability of the scope, location, and timing is confirmed in the document, which underlines an important, albeit not new, conclusion. This means that there will be no clear signs in advance of an upcoming conflict. The document bears elements of military offense through unpredictability, political and diplomatic coercion. Valerii Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff has pointed out that the line between defensive and offensive is getting increasingly blurred: "Through a defensive operation in certain directions, provisions are made for preventive, active

offensive actions" ("Krasnaia Zvezda" 2016). This is something that Russia's neighbor's will have to consider.

What does This Mean?

This chapter has looked at some of the tendencies and roots of the development of Russian security policy. It is a truism that all security and foreign policy begins at home. This is also true in Russia, so reform must come from within the country. This applies regardless of whether Vladimir Putin remains president or someone else succeeds him.

Currently, there are no signs of immediate change in Russian security policy, but in the long run, such change may come suddenly. Until then, it is vital to recognize that the West's actions count. Much can be gained by recognizing the situation as soon as possible. The risks ahead are formidable: Russia believes the West is weak and continues to drive forward. The West thinks that Russia's position is untenable, mainly for economic reasons. Here, there is a risk that the misunderstandings and the mistrust could continue to grow.

It is apparent that the Russian approach to security policy is holistic, involving such entities as the history of the state and the use of nuclear weapons. It is vital that the West recognizes what is at stake and learns to take Russia seriously. The Russian current viewpoint, as we have seen, is that the West is a threat just by existing and by its way of life. Here lies the dilemma: Russia wants the West to recognize its sphere of interests and authoritarian political system, but this is something that Western democracies cannot do.

Furthermore, Russia is attempting to sow uncertainty about its intentions and its actions, thereby using that doubt as an instrument of security policy. Leaving the West to speculate is a goal in and of itself, since it creates opportunities to fracture the EU and NATO.

The West requires firm, cohesive, and consistent policies across time. Anything else will be interpreted as a sign of weakness. In order to succeed, knowledge must be acquired over time. In the West, much research on Russia has been dismantled. Regardless of the security policy climate, now is the moment to rebuild and sustain.

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Countering Russian Malign Influence
Trends in Central-Eastern Europe and What the EU can learn from them

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Abstract

The Russian Federation's hostile actions against the West have been documented for several years, but Western countries are only gradually starting to take them seriously. The situation reached a climax in 2020 and 2021, with multiple revelations about Russia's unfriendly actions. The threat is more difficult to dismiss now than it was prior to the hostile occupation of Crimea and Ukraine. Without a common threat assessment of foreign malign influence, the EU and NATO may find it extremely difficult to defend against and deter malign foreign influence. This chapter contends that the Baltic and Visegrad countries can and should share their often parallel experiences with Russian and Chinese influence.

Despite the fact that the significance of the threat posed by the Russian Federation's hostile actions against the West has been widely acknowledged by the expert and security communities in most of Europe and the United States for several years, there are still significant differences in state political perceptions. While Central and Eastern European countries, particularly the Baltic states, have been warning the rest of the transatlantic community about this increasingly hostile actor in the East, many Western countries are only now becoming aware of it.

This is one of the key reasons, because the political will and resolve to confront the Russian Federation collectively has mostly been a matter of individual countries that are the most directly threatened by the Russian state. The European Union, NATO, and a majority of Western European countries have merely taken symbolic actions to dissuade Russia and impose consequences on its aggressive behavior. As a result, the Kremlin has felt free

to become increasingly assertive, with no concrete consequences for Russia's leaders and oligarchs in command of these hostile operations. In 2020 and 2021, the situation reached a climax with multiple revelations regarding Russian unfriendly actions, making this threat even more difficult to dismiss than it was before the hostile occupation of Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

First, with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian Federation launched one of its most massive and global disinformation campaigns, often providing various conspiracy theories about how the pandemic began, but more importantly, propagating the Russian Sputnik V vaccine while at the same time spreading disinformation about the safety and efficacy of Western-made vaccines. Second, the Kremlin sparked international outrage by its attempts against the most famous Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who was poisoned by the Novichok nerve agent in August 2020. Even if it failed, this assassination attempt has been largely attributed to Russian intelligence services. Navalny was eventually arrested by Russian authorities, resulting in massive protests in Russia. Despite calls of the international community for his release, Navalny remains in prison.

Finally, in April 2021, investigations showed that Russian intelligence officers were involved in the 2014 explosion of ammunition stores in the Czech Republic, which killed two Czech civilians. This assault on an EU and NATO member state's national sovereignty was preceded by the attempted assassination of Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom in 2018. Immediately following these revelations, the Czech Republic expelled 14 percent of Russian diplomatic personnel from its territory (18 people); later, Russia expelled 34 percent of Czech diplomatic personnel from its territory (20 people); and as a result of this diplomatic stand-off, Russian diplomatic personnel have been expelled from the Czech Republic.[1]

The European Union's Outward Appearance vs. Reality

In March 2021, European Council President Charles Michel warned Vladimir Putin that relations between the EU and Russia are "at a low point"(*Reuters* 2021), which may be accurate, but mostly in terms of

[1] More information about the incident can be found in a report published by European Values Center for Security Policy: ("Russian Military Attack on the Czech Territory: Details, Implications and Next Steps" 2021).

appearance. The EU has taken some steps to express its dissatisfaction, especially concerning the treatment of Alexei Navalny through the approval the Magnitsky-style Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, but it has not used it in a way that would actually force the Kremlin to consider potential losses when conducting hostile operations against Europe. In October of 2021, NATO expelled eight Russian intelligence officers from the Moscow's mission in Brussels (*BBC News* 2021a), and the EU has been dedicating more attention towards disinformation and foreign influence (for example with the new European Democracy Action Plan. However, at the same time, certain individual member states continue to appease Russia's hostile behavior, with Germany vigorously pushing and promoting the Nord Stream 2 project despite it being a major geopolitical tool in Russia's hands against Europe. The majority of Central and Eastern Europe oppose it, warning against Russia's use of this project for geopolitical blackmail.

Not even the disclosures concerning Russia's involvement in the 2014 explosions in Vrbětice, Czech Republic, have not provoked the same level of outrage from European allies as the Skripal case did back in 2018. While after the Skripal poisoning the transatlantic allies expelled 130 Russian intelligence officers from their embassies to show their support for the United Kingdom, only 8 diplomats were expelled from 5 countries to support the Czech Republic after the Vrbětice revelations. In 2020, the response to the killing of a Georgian citizen living in Berlin, Zelimkhan Khanghoshvili, was even less significant, including from the side of Germany, on whose territory the attack took place. Furthermore, the United Kingdom, one of the more vocal advocate of countering foreign malign influence, left the EU in 2020, which means that both the like-minded representatives in the European Parliament and the Council of the EU lost an important ally. The European Parliament has been one of the more outspoken advocates for more concrete action, with multiple open letters from MEPs, calls on the European Commission, and other efforts to strengthen the approach of the EU, but with little impact in practical policies.

The vast disinformation campaigns launched by the Kremlin's official outlets during the COVID-19 outbreak as well as Russia's treatment of Alexei Navalny prompted even previously silent countries to admit that Russian behavior is consistently hostile.[2] However, acknowledging this is

[2] More information about the trends in EU member states regarding their approach towards Russia before 2019 can be found here: "2018 Ranking of Countermeasures by

only the first step toward developing resilience against foreign hostile influence and push back against it, and the road ahead is long and arduous. At the moment, the agenda of defending against Russia is mostly dominated by counter-intelligence services from democratic countries. Their investigations, evidence-based findings, and even unusually public declarations reflect their understanding and commitment to combatting an enemy that operates in a hostile manner on European soil even during times of peace.

Unfortunately, major political disagreements exist among EU member states. Regional players such as the Baltic states, Sweden, or Poland, which have been warning about the Russian threat for many years, have used the last few years to build and enhance the resilience of their own democratic processes while also pressing for tougher sanctions and deterrents. While many Western countries, such as Germany or France, frequently talk about combatting disinformation or standing up to Russia, they rarely ever clean their own households.

This appears to be the primary cause for the Russian Federation's increasing boldness, such as its recent military build-up (*BBC News* 2021b) on the borders with Ukraine or the manipulation of its gas supply ("Russia Blackmailing Europe with Gas Prices to Gain Monopoly for Nord Stream 2 – Stefanishyna" 2021)"plainCitation":"("Russia Blackmailing Europe with Gas Prices to Gain Monopoly for Nord Stream 2 – Stefanishyna" 2021 to exert pressure on Europe through inflated gas prices. European allies, unfortunately, have assisted themselves in this position, as neither the EU nor NATO have ever been able to deter Russia from aggressive behavior or impose a significant cost on Russian aggression, whether conventional or hybrid. Vladimir Putin may rest assured that even the most outrageous attacks (like the attempt to assassinate Sergei Skripal or the explosion in Vrbětice) will most probably only lead to symbolic action rather than a response that would hurt the Russian regime. Without a clearer consensus amongst the EU and NATO member states, defense against hybrid threats, and foreign malign influence will continue to be prioritized by individual national governments.

the EU28 to the Kremlin's Subversion Operations" (Prague: European Values Center for Security Policy, June 13, 2018).

Baltic Defenders

Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia have long been leaders in the fight against the Kremlin's influence operations. They are among a small group of countries that expelled Russian intelligence officers from their embassies in 2021 in solidarity with the Czech Republic following the revelation of Russian involvement in Vrbětice explosions.

All three countries are well aware of the threat the Kremlin poses on the highest political levels, as indicated not only just by political statement, but also encoded in strategic documents. The Latvian National Defence Concept 2020–2024 indicates that the country's "biggest national security challenge continues to be Russia."(Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia 2020) Along with the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland, all three Baltic governments issued a joint paper in May 2020, calling for improved European-level action to counter disinformation in the aftermath of COVID-19, particularly from Russia and China ("Countries Call on EU to Tackle Disinformation More Decisively" 2020). In April 2021, the Lithuanian Seimas' Committee on Foreign Affairs even asked for Russia to be designated as a state sponsor of terrorism (Office of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chancellery of the Seimas 2021).

The Baltic countries prioritize resilience against hybrid threats in the long term, and they place a great emphasis on strategic communication and cyber security. For example, the Lithuanian Foreign Ministry has a Strategic Communication Group that publishes regular newsletters and maintains an active social media presence. In the energy sector, Lithuania is striving towards energy independence from Russia ("Lithuania to Spend €100m on Batteries in Push for Energy Independence" 2021), having reduced the proportion of Russian gas in its primary energy consumption to 19 percent (Bergmane 2020). It has also been a vocal opponent of Rosatom, Russia's state-owned nuclear energy firm, and the continued operation of its nuclear power facility in Belarus.("Lithuania Embarks on New Push to Block Belarus Nuclear Plant" 2021) Lithuania also frequently collaborates with allies to combat Russian malign influence efforts, including standing in solidarity with the United States in the aftermath of the Solarwinds hack ("Lithuania Stands in Solidarity with the United States of America on the Destabilizing Russian Activities" 2021) and launching a pilot project with the United States, the Cyber Threats Analysis Cell, at the Regional Cyber

Defence Center in Lithuania ("The United States Will Give Special Attention to the Development of Cyber Cooperation with Lithuania" 2021).

The Baltic countries actively support and participate in the NATO Stratcom Center of Excellence in Riga, the EEAS East Stratcom Task Force of the EU, and the European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Finland. Former Estonian Prime Minister Rõivas even advocated establishing a permanent finance plan for the EU Strategic Communication Task Force already in 2016, when most of the EU member states had yet to realize what a challenge disinformation could bring in the near future (Aili Vahtla 2016).

Counter-intelligence services in the Baltics have also been pioneers in exposing and countering Russian malign influence, especially with their exceptional openness and transparency in describing the modus operandi of Russian intelligence and specific incidents in the region. The Latvian State Security Service, in its annual report for 2020, highlights that "the most significant counterintelligence threat to the security of [the] country continue[s] to be posed by Russia's intelligence and security services." The security service reminds Latvians to "carefully and critically assess their contacts with foreign state and municipal institutions, state companies, higher education institutions, research institutes and high technology sectors."("Annual Report for 2020" 2020) Both the Estonian Internal Security Service (*KAPO*)("Annual Reviews" 2020) and the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service (*Välisluureamet*) ("Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service Public Report 2021" 2021) publish publicly available annual reports that detail their work to secure Estonia as well as the hostile activities of foreign and domestic actors. Russian activities are regularly recounted extensively and in detail. In its annual review 2020–2021, *KAPO* focused heavily on Russian activities. It recognized that Russia has exploited the COVID-19 pandemic "by using propaganda to improve its reputation and break the unity of the European Union and the West." It was specifically noted that Russian espionage against Estonia remained a continual and persistent threat, but that cyber had been a higher threat than usual considering that COVID-19 has limited Russian intelligence's Human Intelligence (HUMINT) operations ("Estonian Internal Security Service: Annual Review 2020–21" 2021).

Central Europe as Divided as Ever

From the Visegrad countries, Poland has long been a traditional ally in dealing with Russian malign influence, both politically and procedurally. Condemnation of Russian influence is seen across the political spectrum, eliciting criticism from the right, left, and center in Poland. In May 2020, a new version of the National Security Strategy was published that upgraded Russia to the level of "the most serious threat" and warns against the use of hybrid techniques by the Kremlin that intend "to destabilize the structures of Western states and societies and to create divisions among Allies." Aside from the effort to implement coordinated strategic communication capabilities, Poland has shared the Baltics' principled stance towards Nord Stream II, recognizing it as a project that jeopardizes European security. Despite recent concerns about Poland's potential democratic "backsliding" and rising Eurosceptic tendencies,("Poland: Top Court Ruling against EU Law Comes into Force" 2021) it can be expected that Poland's hawkish position towards Russia will not change in the near future. In relation to Russia, especially with the latest developments with Russian military build-up, Poland expressed its support for a common EU and NATO approach (Adamowski 2021). At the same time, Poland continues to be one of the most fiscally conservative countries when it comes to defense expenditures (Palowski 2021).

On the other end of the spectrum, Hungary under Viktor Orbán has been systematic in bringing Russian and also Chinese influence operations to Hungary and allowing then to operate freely from Hungarian soil against other regional allies. The foreign, security, and energy policies of the Hungarian state are diverging from those of other regional allies try as Hungary clearly seeks to attract more Russian state political and economic cooperation.

In the hypothetical middle, the Czech Republic and Slovakia have been mainly on a positive track in terms of treating Russian malign influence seriously, with ups and downs over the past several years. Slovakia has begun a new chapter following 2020 parliamentary, and the country's representation has been making the effort to integrate strategic communications capabilities into its institutions and distance itself from the politics of former Prime Minister Robert Fico. Unfortunately, Slovakia is still constrained by its struggle to distance itself from the old political guards, modernize the governmental structure, and at the same time avoid overrunning to a new type of populism. This constellation of issues makes the country slightly less

reliable in its approach towards foreign malign influence, as we observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Slovakia was one of the few Member States that decided to purchase Sputnik V vaccine without approval of the European Medicines Agency.

Since at least 2015, the Czech Republic has been more consistent in its approach towards Russia, working on recognizing Russian influence and hybrid threats as one of the key priorities and national security threats. Both the Audit of national security (2015) and the National Strategy for Countering Hybrid Interference (2021) were innovative and unique strategic documents at the time of their publication, and they continue to fight to ensure the country's sovereignty from foreign malign influence. Certain political forces in the Parliament (far-right SPD, far-left Communist party), some ministers from the ruling coalition (the populist ANO movement and social democrats) and the uncritically pro-Russian president Zeman have been major setbacks in this progress, limiting any efforts to meaningful response, even to major attacks such as the aforementioned Vrbětice case. The Czech Republic's recent elections, on the other hand, paint a brighter picture of the country's future. The most likely outcome will be a newly formed center-right government of democratic coalitions with strong anti-Russian views, which could propel the Czech Republic into the ranks of major opponents of authoritarian influence.

China Enters the Hybrid Battlefield

It has become undeniable in recent months that Russia is not the only malicious actor on the hybrid battlefield. China's aggressive diplomatic pressure, economic blackmail, and efforts of elite capture have not gone unnoticed in Central Europe. While authoritarian leaders like Orbán may welcome Chinese influence, many countries like the Czech Republic, Slovakia and more recently, Lithuania, have recognized its hostility and have started to oppose it openly.

One such example is the mayor of Prague's decision to abandon the sister city agreement with Beijing in favor of establishing a new one with Taipei, the capital of a democratic country that China continues to militarily threaten. Furthermore, the delegation led by Czech Senate President Miloš Vystrčil's to Taiwan was one of the highest-ranking European official visits to the island in many years. Lithuania has joined the flow by deciding to

exchange diplomatic missions with Taiwan, a first in the European context. Both the Czech Republic and Lithuania have received aggressive responses from China, ranging from diplomatic aggression to blackmail.

Where to Go Now?

For the EU and NATO to respond to foreign malign influence effectively, the agreement on who the malign actors are is crucial, yet in the long run, this has been difficult to achieve so far. The US administration perceives China as a security and economic threat , while for many European countries across region, it has still identified as an opportunity, especially in terms of economic cooperation, without the realization that Chinese economic influence is often more corrosive than beneficial. While the awareness that Russia presents a threat (from military to hybrid) has been more widely accepted by Europeans, the willingness to prioritize it and clearly defend against it has been more visible in Central Eastern Europe than in the West. Without a common threat assessment of foreign malign influence, and the support of member states across regions, it may be extremely difficult for the EU and NATO to defend and deter malign foreign influence in the future.

With the exception of Hungary, which has clearly distinguished itself as an ally of foreign authoritarian influence in Europe, the Baltics and the Visegrad countries could and should benefit from their often similar experience with both Russian and Chinese influence. The Central Eastern region of the EU represents a bloc of countries that clearly understands the gravity of both Russian and Chinese threats, but due to lack of sufficient cooperation and joint approach, it has been difficult so far to put forward any major decisions to defend against or deter malign influence in the EU. The Baltics and the Central European countries with their principal approach against foreign interference should form a stronger block against appeasers, including France and Germany, which currently face only little opposition in the EU. While Hungary under Viktor Orban continues to position itself as a loyal proxy of Russian and Chinese geopolitical interests, NATO and EU allies should confront it politically and isolate it diplomatically.

Especially because of its long-term inability to make effective steps to counter foreign malign influence, and the lack of consensus amongst all member states, the European Union should not be the sole platform for the Baltics and the Central European countries to find common ground and

collaborate. Because Hungary has taken the Visegrad Group hostage as a proxy of Russian and Chinese geopolitical interests, it is highly impractical to use the format as a foreign policy platform in line with NATO objectives. Regional geopolitical interest, coupled with NATO ally (the United States), are being developed within the Three Sea Initiative. From the start, its focus has been mainly on infrastructure projects, which can support needed military mobility in the region, but is likely to expand into the digital infrastructure area, such as policies on 5G and smart technologies.

The Central Eastern European defenders can now demonstrate that there are other alternatives besides conducting business with China, such as strengthening relationships with the Republic of China (Taiwan). Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and others already have increasing diplomatic and/or economic connections to Taiwan, which is not only in a good position to become an economic partner for the EU, but also possess know-how in countering foreign malign influence, emanating from its long-term hybrid conflict with China. Central Eastern Europe could also take advantage of their relationship with Taiwan and urge for its greater utilization amongst EU/NATO partners, drawing from own first-hand experience with Russian hybrid operations.

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Russian Strategic Narratives Related to Estonia
Trends from 2020–2021

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Abstract

The Russian Federation and the Kremlin administration are using asymmetric tools to put pressure on NATO and EU member states, including cyber-attacks, economic tools, and information manipulation campaigns. These instruments have made a particularly strong impression in Estonia in recent years. The current investigation is centered on Russian information manipulation and propaganda campaigns. The central questions to be answered in this study are the following: Which are the narratives associated with the Kremlin or the former Soviet Union that were purposefully created by the Kremlin administration? What is the overarching goal of these narratives or collections of narratives? Is it worthwhile to attempt to debunk these and educate their primary audience with actual facts? Which fights should we avoid because the target group has already committed to the opponent or because the narrative is harmless? Which goals are we unable to achieve with our current programs and activities? To address these central research questions, this chapter examines the most popular narratives in pro-Kremlin Estonian media from 2020 to 2021, including their central story lines and various variations.

Introduction: Aims, Methodology, and Central Questions

In recent years, the Kremlin administration has used a variety of asymmetric tools to put pressure on the member states of NATO and the EU, including cyber-attacks, economic pressure, and information manipulation campaigns. The Russian Federation's interests and capabilities in developing and deploying strategic narratives to influence public support and political preferences have expanded beyond neighboring former Soviet republics to include all major Western countries. The weaponization of strategic narratives has primarily targeted local Russian-speaking, Soviet nostalgic, or Eurosceptic groups. Russian actions have sparked active counterprograms

in NATO countries, some of which are reactive, but some of which are also pre-emptive and preventive in order to be more prepared and effective. Understanding which parts of Russian hostile strategic narratives are created universally (to be cheaper and allow for larger quantities) and which are tailor made for specific countries (to get closer to local vulnerable groups) or pinpointed against specific groups is a critical success factor for these countermeasures. Accordingly, NATO countries need to invest in simultaneous studies of the main areas of Russian propaganda activities.

The current study analyzes the nature, aims, and focus of Russian strategic narratives and also debates how effective NATO countermeasures have been in the Estonian example from January 2020 to December 2021.

There are several challenges and limitations in hunting down hostile strategic narratives. Targeting hostile narratives is like shooting moving targets. By focusing on yesterday's experience and contemporary activities, there is the risk of being outdated and overtaken already when policies are enacted in response. As a result, pre-emptive and preventive counter-narrative activities need to be targeted in front of current set of narratives to be ready and resilient in upcoming future. The main complication in hunting recent or upcoming hostile narratives is to predict what will appear and where.

On the other hand, there are risks associated with drawing invalid conclusions, particularly in the field of hybrid warfare and information warfare, where numerous harmless or unintentional actions and connections can be interpreted as part of an opponent's sophisticated plan. In this case, combined and sophisticated methodology will mostly allow the identification of hostile narratives, even when the opposing side did not create them on purpose. The reasoning or future orientation of those, on the other hand, is more difficult to define. The third difficult question is whether it is worthwhile to concentrate on debunking and countering narratives that have already reached their intended audience.

The following are the primary research questions for the study: Which are the narratives associated with the Kremlin or the former Soviet Union that were purposefully created by the Kremlin administration? What is the overarching goal of these narratives or collections of narratives? Is it worthwhile to attempt to debunk these and educate their primary audience with actual facts? Which fights should we avoid because the target group has already committed to the opponent or because the narrative is harmless? Which goals are we unable to achieve with our current programs and activities?

What are Strategic Narratives, and How Do They Affect their Target Audiences?

In the current study, I rely on a definition by Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2017), who argue that strategic narratives are stories "*by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors.*" Thus, strategic narratives could be projected to serve a variety of purposes, such as justifying state strategic objectives, explaining political responses to economic, political, or security crises/issues, forming international alliances and organizations, rallying domestic public support, and so on.

How are these narratives propagated? In this study, I interpret narrative propagation as a function of internalization of these narratives, which affects attitudes toward domestic and foreign political issues. More specifically, we refer to these manifestations as domestic (in this case, Estonian) narratives and foreign (Russian) narratives. Members of the population legitimize and eventually spread these foreign (and sometimes hostile) narratives by internalizing them to the point where they crystallize into opinions about public policy.

The audience's vulnerability varies according to the degree of crystallization and strength of opinion. In practice, some groups hold more extreme views (on a wide range of issues), while others are more malleable and open-minded. This concept is aided by segmentation analysis, which shows how combined narratives can and do resonate with (and thus spread through) different audience groups in Estonia. The key issue in fighting against hostile narratives is extremely difficult, as "nature abhors a vacuum." There is always at least one strategic narrative and one dominant narrative in society. As a result, the primary goal of a hostile foreign (exported) narrative is to replace the existing traditional domestic narrative (Veebel and Vihmand 2020).

The General of Export-Oriented Hostile Russian Strategic Narratives

The logic behind narratives, including hostile narratives, is similar to the everyday situation with bacteria: in every natural environment, there is always at least one (mostly local-domesticated) narrative and one that

dominates the playground: there is no empty space in nature as long as there is enough food or target audience. As a result, the role and goal of hostile foreign (Russian or other exported one) narrative is to replace existing traditional (mostly peaceful) domestic narratives by persuading the audience that the new one offered by Russia is more objective or offers greater benefits to specific groups (Veebel, Markus, and Vihmand 2020). Even if a hostile attacker is present, the hostile effect may not be felt if the target area or society is strong and resilient. As a result, finding a hostile aggressive narrative does not automatically prove risk or a negative effect on the target audience, because the actual effect is dependent on vulnerability and resilience. As a result, finding and countering hostile narratives may not be the most effective way to reduce harm done to target societies: in many cases, harm is done when reaching the target area, and later debunking or countering has only a limited effect.

Russian Export-Oriented Narratives against Estonia in 2020–2021

During the current study's fieldwork in 2020–2021, Russian strategic narratives were analyzed using the Exovera narrative platform in 2020 and the ZignalLabs analytical toolkit[1] in 2021. In addition, in 2020, five focus group interviews were held in Tartu, Narva, and Tallinn. The research platform for Exovera narratives [2] was used to aggregate and track various narratives about Kremlin-aligned disinformation topics in Estonian online text-based media outlets. From June 2019 to December 2020, Estonia tracked various narratives about the West (EU/US), Governance, Nationalism, NATO, and Russia. Exovera and ZignalLab's main contribution to research was their massive quantitative screening and mapping capability, as well as their ability to suggest narratives based on categories. However, both platforms continue to be subject to on how well they are adapted to local languages.

[1] See more at the Zignallabs website https://zignallabs.com/resources/

[2] See more at the Exovera website: https://exovera.com/platforms/narratives/

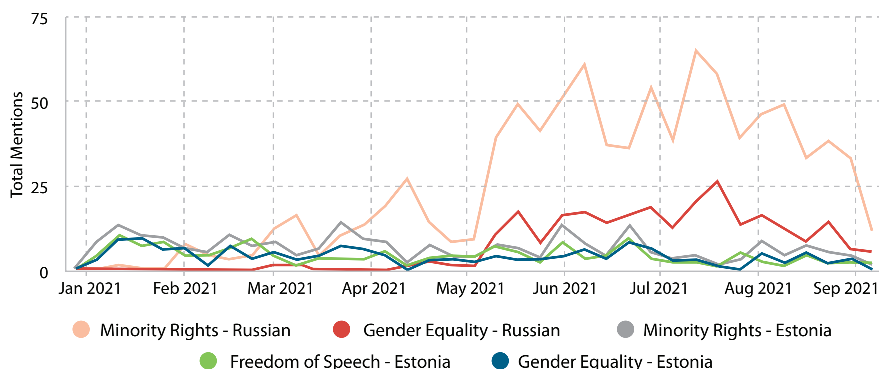

Figure 1: Activity by thematic groups in Kremlin aligned media in Estonia in 2021

Exovera discovered and classified 17 narratives in the Estonian case related to Russian interests in the Baltic States, particularly in Estonia. The five most important ones were as follows: first, "NATO as security actor is hostile relic and fragile;" second, "the West is corrupt, imperialistic, and discriminatory and in decline." The third most popular narrative was "Russia is powerful but also a victim of Western collective aggression," followed by the narrative that the "Baltic states are plagued by poor governance." Finally, the last narrative was that "Russophobia and fascism are popular social drivers in the Baltic States."

During our regular observations with the Zignallab narrative tracker platform, we discovered the four most popular pro-Kremlin narratives in Estonia in 2021.[3] The first most popular was that "West is no better than Russia; the fall of Afghanistan in 2021 is just last convincing example." Second most popular narrative was "Russia is not alone against Western coalition: Slavic brothers will follow and support them." The third most popular narrative was related with Soviet nostalgia, stating, "Life in Soviet Estonia was at least as good as or even better than life today." The Fourth narrative is related with security and escalation of relations between NATO and Russia, saying NATO is aggressive, Russia is a victim, and it represents the last hope for traditional societies.

As can be seen, some of the narratives contradict each other's central tenets; however, because the target group is not seeing them all at once, or

3 The next subchapter analyses those narratives more closely

because they are presented in different languages or geographical areas, this is not a major issue for the provider.

Validating and Debunking Hostile Narratives

According to Western standards, the majority of observed Russian narratives in Estonian media in 2020–2021 cannot withstand factual check or validation (especially the ones presented in Russian language in pro-Kremlin media). In practice, however, this is mostly unimportant to the Kremlin because strategic narratives offered by them are aimed at either vulnerable or like-minded groups expecting certain worldviews (for example, the existence of a global anti-Russian conspiracy), both of which do not require persuasion. Furthermore, members of these groups only consume information in one local language (Estonian or Russian) and do not seek additional proof or validation from critical sources. As a result, critical media debunking efforts and efforts in pro-western web sites have a relatively low impact because the majority of the audience does not visit or believe these web sites ("they are all the same"). In this regard, the Russian side is primarily targeting an already receptive audience with a high level of readiness for their narratives, whereas Western countermeasures are primarily targeting groups that are similar to or supportive of Western liberal values in any case. Despite the best efforts of both parties, very few people change their minds or attitudes.

Language is unquestionably the most important variable in analyzing support for Russian hostile narratives in Estonia, followed by geographical location, educational level, and age. As an example: according to a US State Department Global Engagement Center 2020 study, NATO is viewed as aggressive and dangerous by 80 percent of Russian speakers, but only less than 20 percent of Estonian speakers share this view. A similar effect can be seen in how different language groups perceive Russia: roughly 70 percent of Russian speakers see Russia as a normal, trade-oriented, and peaceful partner, whereas less than 30 percent of Estonian speakers do (Veebel 2020).

Additionally, many statements and narratives have convincing, "loaded," or emotional meaning only in Russian language and for native speakers (for example, "*Krym nash*!") and there is no point or willingness from pro-Kremlin media to communicate with non-Russian or pro-Western groups with these. Narratives presented in Estonian, on the other hand, are well

prepared to withstand debunking and are mostly aimed at distracting, confusing, or disintegrating the target society. These narratives may also be based on subjective or hardly measurable criteria (for example, "how well have governments dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic?").

Receptive groups (mostly Russian-speaking) to Kremlin narratives are also geographically concentrated in North-East Estonia and the capital Tallinn (but also in Estonia's third (Narva), fifth (Kohtla-Järve), and seventh (Maardu) largest towns). There is also a socioeconomic factor: the majority of people who are open to Russian narratives come from areas with low economic development, high unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, and social discrimination.

However, based on focus group interviews, researchers are frequently blinded by their own social limits and habits: and it may be difficult for them to understand that someone can turn TV to pro-Kremlin propaganda channel not because he is a fan of Kremlin, but because he wants to periodically watch old Soviet times childhood movies, ice hockey or boxing, or global news, which are not broadcasted on the local Western channels. In some cases, the narratives are only revealed through specific media channels aimed at vulnerable groups who seek them out (for example Russian version of Objektiiv.ee). In addition to active search, there is the option of reverse engineering, which involves defining the most likely hostile narratives for specific groups and areas and determining whether certain criteria support their appearance. As a result, it is a rapidly changing challenge that necessitates both adaptation and agility.

Main Plots of Russian Narratives from 2020–2021

In current subchapter, four specific narratives proposed by the Zignallab narrative tracker in 2021 are analyzed to illustrate the logic and modus operandi of the Russian propaganda and hybrid warfare machine.

Narrative 1: The West is no better than Russia during the withdrawal and subsequent fall of Afghanistan in 2021 is only the most recent convincing example.

This is a recurring narrative (whenever supportive events occur, such as a failed military intervention, mismanagement of a migration crisis, or a

global pandemic)[4] appearing for the first time in Soviet Union propaganda Alternative wordings for this narrative include: a) the United States and the West are no better in their military interventions than the (former) Soviet Union, which lost the war against the Taliban in the 1980s; b) the United States' complete loss in 1975 in Saigon (Vietnam) repeats itself in the same way in 2021 Kabul (Afghanistan); and c) the United States has clearly failed both allies and enemies: they are unable to defend Estonians, as pro-Kremlin sources portray the Taliban's success in sieging and occupying Kabul and forcing the US military to leave immediately as symbolic of the weakness of the Western lifestyle, solidarity, and liberal values, as well as representative of the renaissance of traditional conservative values.

In the Baltic and Estonian cases, the Taliban's success in driving US forces out of Afghanistan reinforces another Russian strategic narrative: "US and NATO are not capable or trustworthy, and will not assist Baltic States." Because there are over one thousand Afghani war veterans from the Soviet era and hundreds of veterans from missions in Afghanistan after Estonian re-independence, the Afghanistan case base narrative has been quite influential in Estonia. The third narrative promoted by Afghanistan events is that "a massive migration wave from Afghanistan, Syria, and Libya will result from Western intervention failures there." When the usual routes from Southern Europe did not work, Belarus and Lukashenko made it happen with direct flights to Minsk. Those narratives fit into the larger Russian narrative that the "Western world with liberal values is in decline, and traditional values will triumph." Based on facts, the West has not found a response to Russian statements (Veermäe 2021). Silence and compliance with the Taliban ("Välisminister Liimets: rahu ja stabiilsus Afganistanis on võtmetähtsusega" 2021) has only made Russian narrative more convincing to vulnerable groups.

Narrative 2: Russia is not alone in its opposition to the Western alliance. Slavic brothers will support and follow Moscow in the face of apparent external danger.

To be a respected global actor, Russia must have and maintain followers-allies. These countries are primarily from the former Soviet Union or Slavic states ranging from Belarus to Serbia. In the end, the Kremlin

[4] See for example "COVID-19 tyranny is destroying the myth of liberal democracy." https://objektiiv.ee/tho-bishop-coviditurannia-pormustab-liberaalse-demokraatia-muudi/

administration requires Ukraine to join and openly support this "Slavic Anti-Atlantic alliance." Previously, Serbia and Bulgaria were active in their anti-European statements and actions; however, Belarus has been a key partner in Russia's anti-European activities since the summer of 2020.

Belarus's significance to Russia should not be underestimated. First, it imposes yet another geopolitical victory for Russia, which can be used in both strategic communication and political negotiations to harm the reputation of the EU and NATO while increasing public support for Putin's regime in Russia. Second, it provides additional long-term guarantees for Russia by institutionalizing ever-closer cooperation between the two countries, allowing Russia to maintain control over Belarus even if Alexander Lukashenko resigns at some point in the future. Third, in order to achieve their objectives, both countries will require extensive cooperation and coordination on the battlefield of modern hybrid warfare.

Since the rigged presidential elections in summer 2020, events, attitudes, and statements in Minsk have been rapidly evolving, culminating in a complete rejection of Western values in December 2021. Lukashenko was able to demonstrate that his authoritarian power is capable of tampering with election results and succeeding with violent actions against widespread and long-term protests. "Slavic authoritarian regimes are stronger than a fragmented West or local (Russian or Belarussian) anarchic democratic forces," according to the central narrative for 2020.

Success in 2020 prompted Lukashenko's regime to engage in even more outrageous behavior, beginning with the forced landing of a Ryanair airliner, followed by a retaliatory migration crisis along Belarus's borders with Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. As a result, the central narrative has become more radical: "Our regimes do not care about the West at all; we are stronger." When combined with the regular Zapad military exercise (the most recent in 2021 to present "the true Slavic military power," this leads to an even more radical narrative: "Russia and its allies are Europe's largest military power."

Narrative 3: To uphold this external enmity, NATO is portrayed as aggressive, while Russia is a victim and last hope for conservative world.

According to Russian strategic narratives (Gerasimov 2013), Russia sees itself as a long-term target of the Western collective hybrid activities.[5] Hostile activities previously aimed mostly against Russian allies have in recent years been seen initiated against Russia itself. This represents Russia's understanding of its relationship with the West. Russia sees itself as a victim, particularly when it comes to its own 'near abroad.' As a result, any activity in this area is interpreted as evidence of the West's aggressive intentions, necessitating immediate and decisive counter-action. As a result, Russia's fears and ambitions are likely to be greater than the West imagines. Not only are there Color Revolutions, but there is also ongoing support for "anti-constitutional actors" (for example, the most well-known Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny), growing military exercises near Russian borders (Defender 2020), funding LGBT+ values propagation, and exposing corruption in the Kremlin.

In the case of Western active engagement activities, the Russian narrative does not allow the nation to remain passive, even if the threat is deemed minor. Russia will either participate in such a game or lose face. This leaves Putin and the Kremlin with no viable options. It should also be noted that in Russia, there are various competing strategic schools, some of which are willing to cooperate with the West, while others would prefer a quick escalation rather than losing face, as happened during Yeltsin's presidency.

Thus, doubling the number of troops in the Baltic States can only be interpreted as an escalation by Russia. While Russia's hybrid and other activities have recently been on the decline, the fact that NATO has organized such an exercise may force Russia to demonstrate its will.

Military exercises on both sides are an important part of NATO and Russia's narrative competition. Regular military drills in Estonia (or the wider Baltic operational area) raise the question of who is escalating and who is responding. Russian "Zapad" exercises have been held on a regular basis since the Soviet era in 1981, but have received increased attention in the last decade, with the most recent one taking place in 2021. At the same time, Defender 2020 is part of NATO's recent initiative to organize larger exercises near the Russian border (in Poland and Norway). In some ways,

5 Related narratives include, "Russia as only or main protector of the rule based international order" and "Russia as only alternative to US global dominance and imperialism."

NATO can be seen as either aggressively escalating (the Russian narrative) or meaningfully responding to Russian escalation after many years of Russian escalation (the NATO and Baltic narrative) ("DEFENDER-Europe 20" 2021).

Narrative 4: Life in Soviet Estonia was at least as good, if not better, than life in more successful former Soviet territories such as Estonia today, in order to undermine more successful former Soviet territories such as Estonia.

According to the Exovera and Zignallab analytics data, Russian narratives about current events are frequently linked with positive events and memories from the Soviet era in order to have a greater impact. In Estonia, there is a specific audience for this group; it is not large and is not growing (in fact, it is shrinking as it consists primarily of people aged 60 and up), but it exists. The main strategy in this case is to exploit the high nostalgia-dependence of Soviet-born generations in order to hook them on contemporary Russian propaganda as well. Surprisingly, this includes both the wealthy and those with a higher level of education.

Narratives that "life in Soviet Estonia was as good as it is today, if not better," are primarily aimed at social groups that enjoyed a good life and privileges in the 1980s, primarily Russian speakers in Tallinn or North East Estonia, and status family members of Soviet-era political, economic, and military elite. They have been socially and economically marginalized since re-independence, with the majority of them not even having Estonian citizenship despite having been born on Estonian territory. As a result, their nostalgia for Soviet times and dissatisfaction with the current Estonian state and society are objectively and rationally understandable. As a result, they are very vulnerable to nostalgia-related Russian propaganda, which promises to bring back the "good old days" of the Soviet Union.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The main innovations and strengths of Russian strategic narrative development and management in recent years have been its multilayered nature, continuity with older Soviet narratives, adaptability, clear commitment to

certain political goals, and pinpointing of Western liberal-democratic institutions and traditions' weak points.

According to this current research, it is difficult to answer whether (and how) NATO and EU governments should try to persuade committed Kremlin supporters to change their minds, or instead focus their resources primarily on groups that are confused (for example, those less than 30 years old from Russian-speaking areas). The main challenge for Estonian and allied governments dealing with Russian strategic narratives for vulnerable groups is that their audience is often uninterested in their debunking, validity, or revealing actual facts. They tend to follow their favorite narratives with follow-ups for emotional, but often socioeconomic, reasons. So, what can NATO allies Estonia, the United Kingdom, and the United States do to improve the situation?

According to their own statements, actual socio-economic circumstances and governmental support would have a much stronger impact in 2020–2021, as revealed during interviews with vulnerable Russian speakers in Estonia in 2020–2021. Finally, and most importantly, active neutral and non-biased research must be maintained. Focus group interviews produced very valuable input of "unknown unknowns" in terms of motivation of vulnerable groups to follow Kremlin sources; similar interviews with problematic groups should be conducted on a regular basis.

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Section IV – Russia’s Interests Abroad

Does Russia have a Grand Foreign Policy Vision Today?

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Abstract

Russian foreign policy has been working on developing a grand narrative that would encompass the multitude of changes taking place globally, particularly around Russia. By the end of the 2010s, what appeared to be a concerted effort to create a Eurasia-focused future-oriented vision had been overshadowed by an alarmist reading of international order. This chapter argues that it was instead replaced by a rather bleak vision of a future of painful transformation and change in which Russia can only rely on its own resources and trust no other nation.

Ever since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Russian foreign policy community has been working on developing a grand narrative that would encompass the multitude of changes taking place globally, particularly around Russia. The goal is the creation of a grand narrative that would be complementary to Russia while also being forward-looking and attractive to Russia's political leadership. Indeed, the mid-2010s marked the end of aspirations to build some version of a European project with Russia as a component, best exemplified in the Greater Europe concept, and logically opened the door to the creation of the so-called Greater Eurasian vision. By the end of the 2010s, what appeared to be a concerted effort to create a Eurasia-focused future-oriented vision had been overshadowed by an alarmist reading of international order focused on its chaotic nature. The COVID-19 pandemic only served to this discourse within Russia's foreign policy community. Why has the Greater Eurasia vision not taken hold, and what are the key features of contemporary foreign policy grand narrative discourse?

From Greater Europe to Greater Eurasia

The events of 2014–2015 posed a major challenge for Russia's political, economic, and intellectual elites; the changes in Russia's communication with

the rest of the world were enormous. Previous concepts and points of mutual understanding in relationships with Western nations were no longer applicable, and confrontation on the ground in Ukraine, as well as waves of sanctions in response, demanded framing, explanation, and, to a certain degree, justification.

The President, together with the Presidential Administration and Russia's Security Council, have been developing a major set of new foundational facts of Russian foreign policy that need to be properly contextualized, linked to previous narratives, and adapted to long-term goals and aspirations previously announced by senior leaders. While the Russian media was fighting on the battlefield of propaganda and disinformation, the Russian foreign policy community centered on a group of institutions[1] that were conceptualizing and contextualizing new foreign policy reality.

The first major reality that required conceptualization was a final departure from the concept of pan-European framework of political, security, and, to a certain degree, economic cooperation. The Western response to the annexation of Crimea and Russia's engagement in fighting in eastern Ukraine caused a major shift in Russia-West relations, with the imposition of sanctions and a general escalation of mutual condemnation. Even though some in Russia's foreign policy community have left the door open to a future return to the Greater Europe context (Kortunov 2018), the overall consensus was that it is no more relevant for this generation of political leaders. As framed by the President of RIAC, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (1998–2004), Igor Ivanov: "The West has always seen the construction of Greater Europe as the expansion of existing Western institutions towards the East. That's why negotiations on Russia–EU cooperation had little to do with finding reasonable compromises. Rather, they were little more than Europe attempting to force Russia to follow the "rules of the game." Russia had to adopt Europe's rules because they were supposed to be clearly superior to any other alternative."

Since the late 1980s, Greater Europe has been Russia's dominant grand narrative, which has allowed for peaceful transformation away from Cold War confrontation but also provided a rich forward-looking agenda of modernization of virtually all aspects of politics. It was defined differently

[1] Two of the most influential foreign policy institutions in terms of engagement and reach are Russian International Affairs Council – RIAC (https://russiancouncil.ru/en/) and Valdai Club (https://valdaiclub.com/). RIAC is traditionally believed to be representing the views of Russian MFA and Valdai Club is often affiliated with the Presidential Administration.

depending on the circumstances, but it always allowed for complementary features that were appealing to both Russian leadership and Russian citizens – Russia was a part of Europe, equal and close to the most advanced societies of the continent. Even after the war in Georgia in 2008, the concept was not discarded, but rather modernized to account for Russia's own political development away from the norms of Western European democracies (Karaganov 2010).

Naturally, by the time Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, it became much harder to advance the idea of a pan-European integration of any sort and scale in a meaningful way, but certain areas of strategic cooperation remained intact until the spring of 2014. The idea of dialogue between the Eurasian Economic Union and the European Union, or even some form of economic integration of the two, was among the last to be abandoned. A replacement grand idea was not difficult to find, as it was already in the making since the early 2010s. The two most relevant tropes here are the idea of Russia's Eurasian Turn and Russia's Asia Pivot. Russia's Eurasian turn, or simply Eurasian integration, was almost its own grand narrative – a combination of small-scale economic integration projects modelled after EU integration and a limited effort to address Russia's Soviet or Imperial past. Officially, Eurasian integration based on the Eurasian Economic Union is an economic project aimed at advancing the economies of Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia. Narrative construction has allowed for the creation of a vision of a growing political role for Russia in integration efforts and attraction as a pole of a "multipolar world." This was part of its foundational idea, pitched by President Putin in 2011 regarding the goal of the Eurasian Union to become "one of the poles of the modern world and be an effective link between Europe and the Asian-Pacific region."

In hindsight, it is clear that the Eurasian idea was not strong enough to stand on its own. The economic capacity of participating countries without Ukraine was not nearly enough to produce noticeable economic growth and prove the benefits of the integration; the philosophical and "ideological" component of the project was viewed quite differently in different parts of the Union. What is more crucial – Russia's confrontation with the West over Ukraine proved to be a major source of concern for every member of the economic union. While in the mid-2010s, Eurasian integration was heavily emphasized and even advanced as Russia's primary foreign policy endeavor, but by the late 2010s, it had nearly become official rhetoric and

remained secondary in foreign policy community deliberations on Russia's foreign policy agenda.

The second component of Greater Eurasia is Russia's Asia Pivot, a set of policies aimed at shifting the focus of Russian economic and political attention towards the Asia Pacific with the initial goal of boosting the economic development of Russia's Far East. A policy of prioritizing Russia's engagement with key Asian powers – China, Japan, and South Korea – after the annexation of Crimea has evolved into a growing focus on deepening ties with China. However, the general framework of expanding Russia's influence over all of Eurasia was promoted as the end goal of this pivot.

2015 was the year when the Russian foreign policy community first outlined a rather flattering vision of Russia's advancement of the Eurasian Economic Union alongside China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) into an economic and political force capable of shaping the entire continent by aligning massive Chinese transportation and trade investment with Russia's resources and infrastructure in the region ("Toward the Great Ocean-3: Creating Central Eurasia, Eurasia, Valdai Discussion Club" 2015). By shaping the discourse of soft bipolarity based on the US-China rivalry, Russian foreign policy thinkers proposed to effectively define the role of Russia as a partner of China in institutionalizing the infrastructure of an emerging Greater Eurasia. Russia's foreign policy thinkers naturally proposed a vision in which Russia can introduce norms that would benefit Russia's own goals and aspirations. In terms of the values (Karaganov and Bordachev 2017), Greater Eurasia was to be a venture, based on the mutual rejection of universalism, respect for sovereignty and noninterference in one another's domestic affairs, economic openness, the creation of a new security architecture, and a dialogue of Eurasian civilizations. Some senior foreign policy experts even argued that the progress toward this new Eurasian identity is organic and natural for Russia, stating, "Now we are filling our proper civilizational niche as a great Eurasian power, an original and self-sustained fusion of many civilizations. And we are becoming ourselves again as we make our way back home" (Karaganov and Bordachev 2018).

Between 2015 and 2018, several competing visions of what Greater Eurasia should have emerged. For one part of the Russian foreign policy community, Greater Eurasia was about Russia's strategic partnership with China, which should help Russia reorient its political and economic orientation away from European Union – a chance to secure a place in the twenty-first century with the aspiring power – not a 'declining collective.' Moreover, it

was an investment in the inevitable – the consequences of Ukraine crises were assumed to define Russia's relationship with the West for decades to come. Thus, orienting to the East was more important in this case, precipitating the agenda and, when possible, setting it, was a justifiable defense strategy. At the same time, fortifying Russia's ties with China or a broader diversifying linkage with the East in the long run should have given Russia a much stronger voice in future negotiations with Europe. Kortunov sums up this position, saying, "Paradoxically, the only realistic path for a Russian return to Europe today is via Asia. In other words, if Russia cannot effectuate a return to Europe — on acceptable terms — on its own, then it may only be through the creation, jointly with China, India and other Asian partners, of a 'Greater Eurasia' that Russia can acquire the expanded negotiating positions and potential it would need for its eventual dialogue with Brussels" (Kortunov 2018).

The consensus was that a Greater Eurasia narrative was a rather comfortable one – based on a Russia-China partnership, it allowed for Russia to secure visibility of full partnership and equality; to take the lead in setting the agenda; and act independently and without condemnation on issues of domestic developments and values. Still, the premise of this Greater Eurasia formation was economic cooperation and the promise of increased Chinese investment, which should have boosted the Russian economy and made it a much safer alternative to the promise of European investment. Additionally, this Greater Eurasia was supposed to bring some type of order, rules of engagement, and structure to both regional and, indirectly, international relations.

The key problem of the Greater Eurasia concept, nearly six years after its inception, is that it remains to be a concept discussed almost exclusively within the Russian foreign policy community; none of the numerous proposals for institutionalization put forward since 2015 have been taken up by either China or other potential partners in this space. The fact that China agrees to play along with Russia's self-perception in the region does not imply that China agrees with Russia's attempts to take lead and define this relationship. Moreover, the key anticipated driver of a Greater Eurasia formation – Chinese economic investment in and around Central Asia – has been less than satisfying to all prospective members of Greater Eurasia. As key proponents of the Greater Eurasia idea in Russia point out themselves (Bordachev 2019), this concept is still too broadly defined.

Since 2018–2019, the central notion of a coming international chaos, the world without poles and "a time of uncertainty" and of a "Crumbling World" that had Greater Eurasia aspirations were put on hold. It was not surprising given that this discourse has been present in the debate, but around 2018–2019, the number of deviations from previously accepted norms became too great and become the new standard. It could be argued that Trump's presidency and active deconstruction of the liberal world order on his part were substantive reasons, but as Russian foreign policy experts would argue, he was neither a consequence of the emerging change nor its cause. It could also be argued that this discourse became the dominant simply because it best represents the thinking of Russia's senior political leadership.

From Big Ideas to 'Every Man for Himself'

A rather skeptical, if not pessimistic, outlook on global governance is not a new feature of Russian foreign policy discourse – it stems from Russia's criticism towards the role of the United States and NATO in global affairs, but by the late 2010s, Russia's concern about the state of world order had become the center of discourse itself, defining the outlook and Russia's own positioning.

The ongoing collapse of global governance and manageability of international order are major themes of this discourse (Barabanov et al. 2020). The vast majority of Russian foreign policy experts agree that the liberal world order that has existed since the collapse of the Soviet Union is no longer stable and reliable – the number of unilateral actions taken by its key members has outweighed its purpose. The failure of value-based approaches to international relations and Western attempts to advance universal values that no longer help in attempts to bring together a collection of international actors under one roof is frequently noted.

Essentially, the dominant position being preached is centered on the idea that we are currently experiencing a period of transformation in which the vast majority of rules of engagement will be reconsidered, and thus Russia must rely on its own resources in order to secure the most favorable long-term conditions. At the same time, it is this period of uncertainty that entails a greater risk of escalations, as economic tools are used as military tools and military threats are used to obtain preferable economic conditions.

This uncertainty was only exacerbated by the pandemic, as it is seen from Moscow, since the entire world reverted to the ideas of regulatory liberalism and even disregarded calls to halt confrontation for the sake of advancing a joint response to the pandemic. Moscow's foreign policy community is convinced that the pandemic will irreversibly change the nature of global governance and, to a certain degree, undermine globalization efforts, necessitating a much greater emphasis unilateral measures of preserving the individual stability of nation-states rather than collective security.

It is interesting to see how the Russian foreign policy community redefined the ultimate goal of international competition ("The Age of Pandemic: Year Two. The Future Is Back: The Annual Report of the Valdai Discussion Club" 2021); it is no longer "imposing agendas and views on others" but about the "accumulation of more resources and surviving the deep crisis afflicting market capitalist economy and global order." The central assumption is that new balancing will require tremendous resources, first and foremost, to sustain the inevitable damage from the coming crisis and to invest in new means of more advanced waging of sanction and trade wars, which are recognized as an unavoidable component of this new emerging order.

There are numerous details about the nature of the ongoing transition and its causes that could spark debate, but several key features appear to represent the views of sizable portion of the Russian foreign policy community and the country's political leadership. There is no 'order' to return to – sanctions or any other tool of coercion that are supposed to bring one country or another back in line with the order are a tool of politico-economic pressure aimed at weakening the 'punished.' The order that existed in the previous thirty years is gone, and it is impossible to reconstruct it. As a result, it makes no sense for Russia to attempt to gain more rights within the outmoded framework when the time has come to claim as many rights as possible within the framework of a new emerging order. The main goal of the day is to survive the fight for establishing this new order when the "everyone for themselves" instinct inevitably kicks in and hostilities flare up. It is worth clarifying that economic component of international relations, as well as the nature of contemporary trade are not being normally questioned; the primary focus is the security and political organization of international relations.

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Although they were quite positive in outlooks on prosperity and security-oriented and future-focused possibilities for Russia attainable by the late 2020s, the grand vision of merging Russia's Pivot to the East and Eurasian turn into a Greater Eurasia project ended up being too far removed from the political realities of the way that Russian political leadership sees foreign policy developments. Instead, it was replaced by a rather bleak vision of a future of a painful transformation and change in which Russia can only rely on its own resources and trust no other nation. Essentially, Russian foreign policy discourse has caught up with domestic discourse of the 'besieged fortress.'

First and foremost, this discourse indicates Russia's intention to invite the United States of America to the negotiation table, where ongoing changes can be discussed, new rules and norms could be established, and some form of mutual understanding could be reached. Moscow is seeking to draw clearer distinctions between 'us' and 'them.' It is clear that Ukraine and Belarus would not be allowed to become 'them,' which is why Russia is actively seeking a deal that would limit NATO and EU enlargement to the east. As existing members states, including the Baltic nations, the previous approach applies – Russia has made its peace and now recognizes those nations part of the West.

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At a Strategic Crossroads: The West Confronted by Russia and China

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Abstract

The United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan marks a clear fault line in global politics. The post-Cold War misdiagnosis of perpetual peace was based on a set of flawed neoliberal assumptions about the world's evolution. Instead of the Cold War's bipolar balance, the United States now faces two near-peer military threats: a rising China and a revanchist Russia. In this paradigm, America and Europe are more dependent on each other today than they have been in the previous three decades. What NATO needs now is a clear commitment from every European member to field their own exercised and usable military capabilities to ensure deterrence holds along the Eastern flank.

The three decades of post-Cold War strategic slumber that rested on a profound misdiagnosis of the meaning of our victory in that "twilight struggle" are behind us, with the United States' hasty pullout from Afghanistan marking a clear fault line in world politics (Michta 2020). Those thirty years have left the democratic community, and Europe in particular, largely disarmed and vulnerable to external pressure to a degree reminiscent of the conditions in Europe on the eve of the 1914 "Great War" that consumed millions and set the stage for the Continent's inexorable decline. The post-1991 misdiagnosis rested on a series of flawed neoliberal assumptions about the world's future evolution, encapsulated in Fukuyama's "end of history" adage and buttressed by the ideology of "globalization" that purported to offer a path forward for American and European corporations to enrich themselves by leveraging labor arbitrage in communist China. Our corporate greed was dressed up with a veneer of "democracy building," for as various and sundry academic theories held, "export driven modernization" would democratize a five-thousand-year-old Chinese civilization, making China – to quote a

US diplomat's comment from 2005 – a "responsible stakeholder in the international system" (Zoellick 2005).

The ideological certitude emanating from Washington was matched by America's overweening sense of *pouvoir*. US foreign policy elites seemed to accept no limits on what the country could do in the world, without much reflection on the question of whether having the military power to do something meant that the country should in fact do it. In fairness, one needs to appreciate the profound trauma that transformed America's view of the utility of military power brought about by the 9/11 terror attacks against New York and Washington, and how they have transformed the country's understanding of national security. The two decades of the so-called Global War on Terror remade the American military away from high-intensity peer-to-peer conflict in the direction of CT operations in secondary theaters in MENA and South and Central Asia. For Europe, these three decades proved to be a time when cashing in on "globalization" was accompanied by demilitarization and an ideological slumber under America's umbrella. Following closely behind the United States' corporatist folly, major European conglomerates migrated their production to China, allowed for massive technology transfer and tolerated the attendant theft of intellectual property as the proverbial "cost of doing business in China," while the PRC market skyrocketed in importance when it came to the European corporate bottom line, with China today holding the privileged and influential position of being Germany's number one trading partner ("The People's Republic of China Is Again Germany's Main Trading Partner" 2021).

The last three decades have seen the return of geopolitics and traditional power indices to the center of statecraft. Allowed unfettered access to the United States' and European technological, educational and R&D infrastructure, China has leapfrogged to a position where it is poised to challenge directly the West's supremacy across the entire spectrum of state power – the PRC increased its GDP by 900% in the thirty years since the end of the Cold War, affecting the most dramatic technology transfer from the West to itself known to man. In the process, it created a radically centralized supply chain network and fostered Western dependence both on Chinese manufacturing and its supplies – the latter became glaringly obvious during the Wuhan virus crisis, where the West learned a painful lesson about what sole-source supply dependence on China meant when it came to medicines, PPE and the like. The process was accompanied by rapid de-industrialization at home with the attendant shrinkage of the country's middle class, and in Europe

the progressive slowing of innovation and the loss of the "technological DNA" that only two decades ago was being smoothly passed along from one generation to the next. In short, the "collective West," especially the United States and Europe – today still referred to as the "Transatlantic Community" – are heading for a major international crisis, possibly war. This is largely of their own making, fueled by the three decades of post-Cold War misguided economic policies and – especially the United States – twenty years of CT warfare in secondary theaters.

The purpose of this chapter is not to review what went wrong and why, though a thorough forensics of the three decades of Western neo-liberal hubris deserves to be published. Instead, it looks at the fundamentals of power that Russia and China – aligned in their opposition to the extant international order – bring to the fight, as well as the residual strength and limitations of the United States and its democratic allies, especially in Europe. It stipulates that while the lack of a coherent Western strategy, especially the folly of "nation-building" in MENA and Central Asia pursued by a succession of US administration after 9/11, has seriously depleted the absolute power of the collective West, in the process skewing the global balance of power while Russia rearmed and China continued to surge economically, the jury is still out on the ultimate outcome of this round of great power competition. The concluding section of this chapter will summarize the key point this author believes should inform our strategy going forward if we want to successfully compete and win in this looming struggle that will define not just the power distribution but also the future of democracy and our way of life. The stakes could not be higher.

The Russia Problem Set

Putin's Russia is a quintessentially revisionist power, intent on rewriting the fundamental tenets of the post-Cold War order and returning Moscow to the heart of European great power politics – undoing the effects of the "greatest catastrophe of the [20th] century" (Osborn 2005). Putin's background as a KGB operative, in combination with his years working in the GDR where he witnessed the implosion of Soviet/Russian presence in Germany and then in Central Europe more broadly, informed his understanding of great power politics and his view that restoring great-power status to Russia is a *sine qua non* of his success as the country's President.

Putin has regarded the enlargement of the transatlantic security and defense community – Russian official documents and propaganda consistently refer to it as "NATO expansion" (Dawar 2008) rather than "enlargement" – as a fundamentally hostile act and a "direct threat" to Moscow's geostrategic interests, aimed at ejecting Russia from Europe's power game.

Russia cannot compete with Europe, the United States, or China when it comes to its economic resources; however, it can compete quite effectively when it comes to military capabilities, especially in light of the fact that the United States has spent the last two decades remaking its Joint Force to serve in the CT campaign, moving military R&D and force structure away from high-end/high-intensity state-on-state conflict. It is in this context that Russia's two cycles of military modernization must be considered; Moscow's selective investment in key technologies, especially new armor, network communications, and hypersonic missile technology, has redefined the overall military balance between the United States and the Russian Federation. Although in absolute numbers Russian expenditure on rearmament appears puny when compared to how much the United States spends on defense – for instance a US budget for one year of fighting the Iraq war amounts roughly to a decade of Russian spending – the competitive advantage the Russian military has enjoyed in terms of purchasing power parity when it comes to new weapon systems and, most importantly, the relative power distribution along NATO's Eastern flank has skewed the balance of power in Europe in Russia's favor. Putin has taken advantage of this shifting power dynamic by not only escalating grey-zone competition and irregular warfare (IW) against the West, but also by deciding to drop all pretense when Russia seized Georgian territory in 2008, Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2014, and today as it threatens to strike into Ukraine yet again.

Another aspect of Russian geostrategic assertiveness in Europe concerns both the economic and political domains. Putin has been thus far successful in sowing divisions within the European Union (and European NATO allies) when it comes to their relations with Russia. Given that, Russia's economic potential is but a fraction of the EU's, Putin has not sought to work with the EU as a whole, focusing instead on bilateralism, especially on Russian-German relations and, to a lesser extent, relations with France. In this foreign policy *Gestalt*, Moscow treats the Baltic states, Poland and Romania – the key countries along NATO's Eastern flank – as non-autonomous players and *de facto* client states of the United States with only limited influence on regional power configuration and policy. In Putin's playbook, leveraging

the security and economic interests of Germany takes top priority in dealing both with the United States and, by extension, the Central Europeans and the Balts. The story of Nord Stream 2 is a textbook example of Putin's approach. Once the pipeline becomes operational, it will in his eyes revalidate his policy design, in the process making Russia the largest supplier of natural gas to Europe, and by extension Germany the largest distributor of Russian gas in the EU. The recent decision by the Biden administration to drop some of its NS2 sanctions effectively also revalidated Putin's assumption that Russia should be able to use its economic relationship with Germany to impact transatlantic relations between the United States and Europe, especially as American attention is shifting ever-faster to the Indo-Pacific.

The current downward trend in European security, especially when it comes to Russia's ability to extract concessions from the EU on its policy priorities, reflects a fundamental shift in how the EU is structured. Brexit marked not only the departure of the EU's second largest economy and the most capable European navy, but it has also rendered the Union itself much more Continental in scope and, by extension, much more "German" in terms of economic power distribution than at any time since the 1970s. It has also transformed the internal dynamic in the European Union when it comes to its future trajectory, with Berlin now clearly intent on accelerating the EU's federalization process by relying increasingly on bureaucratic means and, likely, eschewing national referenda going forward. So long as the United Kingdom was a member, the prospects of such a course of action were largely foreclosed, for London with its preeminent transatlantic orientation and its traditional outward strategic outlook as a historically maritime power would not concede to such a change. In that sense, Brexit has enlarged Putin's room to maneuver in Russia's relations with the EU, leveraging its position as an "indispensable energy supplier," especially today when Berlin's insistence on its *Energiewende* policy and Brussels's "Fit for 55" have all but preordained an end to coal-fired power plants in Europe, with natural gas perceived by the proponents of fighting climate change as a gateway to renewables.

Increasingly, Putin seems to be getting his wish, as bilateralism appears to dominate Russia's relations with Europe. The critical variable here will be how the next "traffic light" government in Germany defines its relations with Moscow. The jury is still out; however, in the summer of 2021, the Finance Minister in the Merkel government and the now-incoming German Chancellor Olaf Scholz called for Germany to establish a new *Ostpolitik*

towards Russia, modelled on the parameters implemented by Willy Brandt in the 1970s (Gehrke 2021).

The China Problem Set

Whereas Russia has positioned itself as increasingly a revisionist European power, the People's Republic of China can be called today both a "power in Europe" and an increasingly global player. Xi is intent not so much on revising the post-Cold War order put in place by the United States as replacing it with one built around Chinese economic and military power, values, and national priorities. In short, while Putin wants a seat at the table where great powers determine the rules of the game, Xi wants to be the rule and norm setter, dominating Eurasia and, in the process, pushing the United States back into the Western Hemisphere. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to speculate whether, as John Mearsheimer posited in 2019, the world is now tracking for two "bounded orders," one run by the United States and the other by China and suspended in an increasingly thinning "international order" (Mearsheimer 2019, 44). Still, it is increasingly clear that three decades of American unchallenged global hegemony have come to an end.

The People's Republic of China is still not perceived in Europe as a military security threat – in fact, with the exception of the United Kingdom, the Europeans seem to be determined not to be pulled into a crisis in the Indo-Pacific. Instead, while China is frequently described in the EU as a "strategic challenge," it is seen as first and foremost a vast near-term economic opportunity for European business even though some on the Continent seem to recognize the threat "Made in China" will eventually pose to their own ability to manufacture and sell at competitive rates. Europe's sanguine approach towards China has taken a bit of a beating in the wake of the COVID pandemic, especially in light of how China behaved initially and as what could have been a localized epidemic spread into a global pandemic (*Bloomberg* 2020). Nonetheless, European corporations remain committed to the Chinese market.

The most important driver of Chinese influence in Europe is its ability to selectively invest in port and transportation hub facilities, and to buy European companies outright. The 2016 Chinese acquisition of Kuka, a premier German robotics company, has been touted by Freshfields, the law firm that helped broker the €4.7 billion deal (the largest Chinese acquisition

on Europe at the time) as a "blueprint for Chinese outbound investment" ("Midea-Kuka: A Blueprint for Chines Outbound Investment" n.d.). More importantly, the decision by the EU to sign with China the so-called Comprehensive Agreement on Investment on December 30, 2020, just as the German EU Presidency was coming to an end and with just weeks before the new Biden administration was about to take office, raised eyebrows across the Atlantic, especially considering the fact that the negotiation had lasted seven years prior. Though currently stalled in the European Parliament, the CAI reflects Beijing's willingness to offer concessions to get the deal signed so as to drive a wedge between the United States and Europe.

Arguably, no other Chinese initiative has a greater potential strategic impact on the future of Europe, transatlanticism, and global power distribution than Beijing's so-called "Belt and Road Initiative." With some 50 special economic zones, especially when considered in combination with the 17+1 program, BRI is a mega-scale project aimed at building a land-based supply chain network which, if successfully protected by China, carries with it the seeds of what I have called elsewhere a "grand inversion" (Michta 2021, 2) of the maritime-to-land-domain relationship that for the past six centuries has favored the West. If China succeeds in this scheme, the European Rimland would cease to be the transatlantic gateway to Eurasia, becoming instead the terminal endpoint of a China-dominated Eurasian empire. The BRI has been augmented by China's greater penetration of the maritime domain, with the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) operating in the Mediterranean, entering the Baltic Sea, and most importantly gearing up to confront the United States in the Indo-Pacific and to punch through the Arctic (In 2019, China launched a program to build 33-tousand tons nuclear-powered icebreakers) (Robitzki 2019).

Last but not least, Chinese infrastructure acquisitions in Europe raise serious questions about NATO's ability to continue to effectively exercise across Europe, and about the United States' ability to reinforce the allies in a crisis. Here, China's complete and/or partial ownership of European ports creates a daunting challenge for NATO planners, and risks undercutting deterrence in Europe.

The Balance

Unlike during the Cold War when the Soviet Union was the only global competitor capable of militarily challenging the United States and its allies in Europe, today America is confronted by two near-peer military competitors while the theater of operations now firmly covers both Asia and Europe. At the same time, after two decades of counter-insurgency and nation-building operations, the United States' military is currently structured to fight in one major and one secondary theater, increasing Washington's focus on the "pacing threat" (Garamone 2021) China poses in the Indo-Pacific. In this changing global security environment, European NATO allies will need to assume the bulk of conventional deterrence and defense that, with the US nuclear strategic umbrella and high-end enablers, ensures a crisis in the Indo-Pacific does not present an opportunity for Putin's Russia to blackmail Europe, extort it, or worse.

The changed global security picture does not mean that the United States intends to retreat from Europe; on the contrary, in order to prevent China from displacing the United States and its democratic allies and dismantling the global liberal order, America and Europe need each other more today than they have in three decades. If the transatlantic community can reach a policy consensus on the imperative for Europe, and especially its largest economies, to properly resource their defense there would be no question that, regardless of whether or not a crisis over Taiwan morphs into a kinetic conflict, deterrence in Europe would hold. The economic and technological resources of Europe, when combined with what EUCOM and AFRICOM bring to the table, would leave little doubt in Moscow that military action against NATO would fail.

Hence, the problem facing NATO when it comes to dealing with Russia – and increasingly China – is inherently political and rests predominantly on European governments. The imperative to rearm can no longer be deflected or postponed. The interminable arguments over the so-called Wales Pledge, i.e., that Europeans will spend 2 percent of GDP on defense by 2024, are clear evidence that we should stop framing defense in GDP percentage terms, for such numbers are largely meaningless when most of defense spending goes to salaries or infrastructure projects. Instead, what NATO needs is a clear commitment by every European member to field specific exercised military capabilities that can then be plugged into a larger operational plan. The ball is firmly in Europe's corner: either its leaders recommit

to re-transforming their militaries to field real, usable capabilities, thereby returning NATO to its original defense mission, or the organization will become a hollowed out political talking shop, increasingly unable to address the urgent security threats confronting the allies.

The opinions expressed here are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

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Belarus – Who will be the Winner if Everyone Loses

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Abstract

The domestic political crisis in Belarus, which has been going on for more than a year, remains at a standstill. The prolonged political crisis has spilled over into the realms of economy and international security. Although it started without geopolitical ambitions, the issue of Belarus has now become more important as a topic of the security and stability agenda in the region. The internal impasse and the resulting inflexible situation do not provide a solution that could arise through negotiations or compromise. Additionally, the different interests and available leverage of external actors also do not offer an easy exit strategy. President Lukashenko has become a vexation for the dissatisfied people of his country, the West, and even for Russia. He has retained power only through extreme internal coercion. As the economic resources of the regime dwindle, the dictator's actions become less predictable. One can expect more unanticipated actions from the regime if this stalemate continues.

A Long Year of Confrontation without Signs of Reconciliation

More than a year after the rigged Presidential election of August 2020, the situation in Belarus remains desolate and with no apparent exit. The regime itself has lost both domestic and international legitimacy. It persists only due to the deployment of extreme violence at home and tacit support from Russia. The people of Belarus, who went out to protest against last year's election results, are also losers. They have demonstrated open discontent with the regime but failed to achieve any real change. One can argue that the protests have given birth to a new Belarusian nation and civil society (Kazharski 2021), but it remains a dream to be realized rather than any current reality. The West is also a loser. In fact, it has been only an observer and has only reacted to the events that unfolded in Belarus. Despite the four packages of sanctions against the regime, both the EU and NATO have not been able to

develop an effective strategy for dealing with the dictatorship. Lukashenko remains in power, and he does not plan to fold to Western demands. Even the Kremlin, which may look like a victor in the current situation, continues to struggle with Lukashenko's stubbornness in resisting Moscow's compulsions. Belarus has undoubtedly become even more dependent on Russia, but Russia's internal fears of uncontrolled 'Color Revolutions' prevent Moscow from taking more decisive actions. As unpleasant as it might be to admit, the situation in Belarus is caught in the midst of the chaos of differing expectations, interests, and leverages.

Despite the abundance of possible theoretical scenarios (Zogg 2021; Bollien 2021; Deen, Roggeveen, and Zeers 2021) – gradual democratization of Belarus; the controlled transition of power 'à la Kazakhstan'; finalization of the Belarus-Russia Union State; the return to 'business as usual'; or even the transformation of Belarus in to 'a black hole' (Giczan 2021) in the center of Europe – no one predict the developments of the situation even for the next several months. This article aims at analyzing the main factors that can affect the trajectory of Belarus and its regional stance. These factors include the domestic balance of power between the supporters of the regime and its opponents, tendencies within the Belarusian economy, and policies of leading external players – those being the West and Russia. Although it looks like the current stalemate will continue for a while, the opacity and high unpredictability of the ongoing processes may increase both internal and external tensions and lead to an unexpected change of course. However, it is essential to emphasize that the course of events will largely depend on how vital interests are reconciled and how much political resolve the different players will devote to solving the issue of Belarus.

Hard Power Withstands Democratic Pressures at Home

The contemporary domestic situation in Belarus is that of open and complete confrontation and stalemate. Lukashenko holds on to power at all costs and has proven this fact by rashly destroying any opposition, forcibly landing international airliners, organizing migration crises, and ignoring most of Belarus' commitments to international law. Domestic opponents – both political opposition and frustrated population – prefer a new election, transfer of power, and the transformation of the country's political system with no role for Lukashenko. Even though there were calls for dialogue

at the initial phase of the crisis, such an opportunity is virtually impossible today. Accordingly, the regime has only been increasing repressions. Conversely, both sides have a different perception of what 'dialogue' even means. Lukashenko understands it as a negotiation on how he can retain power. The opposition perceives the dialogue as a platform to agree on new elections and power transfer. Furthermore, Lukashenko declared any opposition to him terrorists and extremists ("Страна экстремизма. Как из-за протестов в Беларуси ужесточают законы" 2021), thus limiting chances for any dialogue.

As Lukashenko still controls the power structures and the opponents are not ready to shift from their tactics of peaceful protests, a stalemate remains. Interestingly, the driving force behind the protests, i.e., political anger ("'The Protests in Belarus Are a Phenomenon – Their Strength Lies in a Public Anger, Not a Political Vision'" 2020) and dissatisfaction with Lukashenko, has prevented the protesters from formulating an elaborated political vision of a 'Belarus after Lukashenko,' which would have helped to mobilize more supporters of the protests. The protesters also insisted that they were not fighting for a change in the geopolitical orientation of Belarus, which added confusion to the situation, especially to interested external players. Therefore, having in mind only the interests and the balance of power between the regime and opposition inside Belarus, we have a paradigm wherein the government's chances of maintaining the status quo is larger than those of the opposition to change it. Even the ongoing process of constitutional reform ("конституционная реформа" n.d.), which is rhetorically encouraged by the government, is essentially just a time-delaying tactic of the regime with the hope of returning to business as usual and making no concessions. From the regime's perspective, such protests have also happened previously, and Western sanctions have also been in place before. However, the regime managed to keep the situation almost unchanged. Despite sincere and morally just aspirations of protesters, regime change remains a fantastic notion so far – not because it is wrong, but because the domestic balance of hard power is not conducive to such transformations.

The Belarusian Economy under Double External Pressure

In addition to being highly authoritarian in terms of political structure, the regime in Belarus is also strongly centralized regarding its economy.

The economy still resembles a Soviet-style system (Papko and Kozarzewski 2020), which Lukashenko runs almost manually (Михайлов 2021; Заяц 2020), and whose viability depends on Russian support (Newnham 2020). In summary, an important pillar of the regime's stability has been the so-called social contract between the authorities and society: political loyalty in exchange for increased welfare. In recent years, the possibilities for the authorities to fulfil their part of the contract – a provision of a relatively high level of welfare – has diminished. Definitely, Western sanctions have affected this ability. More importantly, the regime's economic capabilities changed due to its relations with Russia. The economic stagnation and growing tensions with Russia (Preiherman 2019), the primary consumer of Belarusian goods, tax maneuvers by the Kremlin (Shraibman n.d.), and a fall in oil and gas prices minimized Belarus's earlier advantages (Папко 2020). Early signs of the declining stat of society and the impact of that on protest potential in Belarus appeared already in 2017 after the so-called parasite protests (Ackles 2017). By blatantly rigging the elections in 2020 and losing the opportunity to appeal to social stability as a source of legitimacy, Lukashenko has multiplied the challenges for the system. If in the past it was possible to maintain stability because the regime did not create excessive problems for the most important external actors and was relatively bearable to the domestic audience due to the 'social contract' (Haiduk, Rakova, and Silitski 2009), the circumstances are different today. Both internal conjecture and external actors' attitudes have changed qualitatively and quantitatively.

Economic dependence on Russia is worth mentioning separately. Although for many years the West has perceived Belarus as a natural ally of Russia, this was hardly always the case. Instead, relations between Minsk and Moscow have been based on pure calculation and rationalism: a 'gas and oil for kisses' deal (Yeliseyeu 2020). During the last decade, particularly after the crisis in Ukraine in 2014, the Russian approach has gradually transformed from one of 'brotherly love' to pragmatism and rational calculation. The previous practice of generously feeding Lukashenko's regime with subsidized oil, gas, and credits has cost Russia quite a lot ("Как Россия потеряла на поддержке режима Александра Лукашенко почти $120 млрд" 2020) but did not bring about expected tangible geopolitical results. Minsk has not recognized Crimea as a part of Russia, has not allowed a Russian military base on its soil, and has delayed the implementation of integration processes as much as possible. Finally, the 'Medvedev Ultimatum' was declared in 2018, which stated that to continue receiving generous support from Russia,

Lukashenko has to take better account of Russia's interests and do more for integration with Russia (Kłysiński, Menkiszak, and Strzelecki 2018). Lukashenko became an increasingly frequent guest in Moscow – not because of increased love but out of the need to negotiate more and more in person with Putin over gas or oil prices. The capacity of Lukashenko to agree with Russia on further subsidization of the regime and the level of future Russia's economic support is a significant factor affecting the direction of developments in Belarus. If Russian support continues and Moscow does not start pushing Lukashenko harder to live up to his commitments, the situation will remain favourable to the regime. If the Kremlin takes advantage of the regime's current difficulties and reduces Lukashenko's support that would significantly reduce the predictability of future developments. To clarify this, we need to look at Russia and its interests as one critical component explaining Belarus' future.

The Russian Factor in the Future of Belarus

So far, Russia has maintained a wait-and-see position – the Kremlin remains the primary external source of support and legitimacy for Lukashenko but refrains from taking radical steps to change the situation. Moscow pursues several interests simultaneously and going too fast or too harsh may be counterproductive at the moment. Therefore, the Kremlin is not trying to rush events so as to not push an irritated Lukashenko into reckless actions. Regarding Russia's interests in Belarus, several are most worth mentioning. Deploying Russian troops in a permanent military base on Belarusian territory has been a strategic Russian goal for many years, but Lukashenko has adeptly avoided that commitment so far ("Учебный центр или авиабаза: в чем суть военного сотрудничества РБ и РФ?" n.d.). Finalizing the creation of the Belarus-Russia Union State, which has been underway since 1999, is also perceived in the Kremlin as a way to make a disobedient Lukashenko more compliant with Moscow's interests (Sivitsky 2019). Taking over some lucrative Belarusian assets (Belaruskalii, oil refineries, MAZ, etc.) (Boulègue 2020) has long lured Russian oligarchs. Though the current situation – total alienation of Minsk with the West – may seem very attractive to achieve these goals, there are also risks.

Although a stubborn Lukashenko is a vexation for the Kremlin, Moscow cannot allow his removal by 'Colour Revolution' (Avdaliani 2020). Belarus

is the last state from the former Soviet Union on Russia's western border to have not experienced a popular revolution. In Kremlin's perception, the next target is Moscow if Minsk falls to a popular uprising. The Kremlin cannot afford that. Ending its support for Lukashenko may signal to the Belarusian opposition that Russia would not intervene if a real revolution starts. Conversely, the annexation of Belarus would only strengthen the Western belief that Russia is an aggressive power. For Russia, that would mean even more problems with the West. As Russian-Western relations have already reached a dangerously high level of tension, both sides would like to stabilize that confrontation at least in some sense. It makes no sense for Russia or the West to continue to stir up conflict over Belarus. Finally, too explicit and excessive support for a dictator like Lukashenko can also cause problems in relations within Belarusian society. Until now, Belarusians have valued relations with Russia well enough. Whether the same positive attitude would remain after Putin openly and fully supports a leader who has lost his internal legitimacy is a serious concern. After all, Belarus is so dependent on Russia that there is no need to rush anywhere.

Consequently, it is in Moscow's interest to stand by and follow the events in Belarus with the possibility to intervene only if Russia's vital interests are threatened. Putin would certainly like to replace Lukashenko with a more Moscow-friendly and cohesive figure. So far, a weak and isolated Lukashenko satisfies Moscow (Astrasheuskaya 2021). Firstly, there is no suitable candidate for Lukashenko's position who would be popular at home and loyal to the Kremlin. For many years, the Belarusian president has worked fiercely to remain the only politician in Belarus. Additionally, he has succeeded in many respects – there are no prominent pro-democratic, pro-Russian players at least somewhat equal in influence and popularity to Lukashenko. Viktor Babaryko, a presidential candidate in the 2020 elections with considerable support among Belarusians, was sentenced to 14 years in prison (BBC News 2021). Therefore, Moscow needs to find an appropriate figure or institutional solution to keep Belarus 'after Lukashenko' under Kremlin's total control. Time is required to do that. Letting Lukashenko survive (for a while) while limiting his ability to regain pre-2020 powers looks like an appropriate Russian strategy to achieve its goals – preventing the uncontrolled overthrow of the regime, keeping the West out, and consolidating Moscow's control in the region. As the regime weakens and desperately seeks support, Russia has opportunities to quietly implement its goals of the de facto military base and make the process of a Russian-Belarusian state creation

irreversible, thus essentially eliminating any possibility of Lukashenko's autonomy – and it will not necessarily be done with fanfare and publicly.

Nothing New on the Western Front

The non-recognition of Lukashenko's regime, solid demonstrative support for the opposition in exile (Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya), and the gradual tightening of sanctions constitute the main strategic directions of Western action towards Belarus. They aim at forcing Lukashenko out of power, stopping repressions, and pushing for a new election. However, Western instruments are not sufficient to cause a transformation of the situation. The effect of sanctions remains ambiguous, but the initial regime costs did not increase significantly in the first half of 2021. Experts predict a potentially more significant impact at the end of the year and early 2022. However, the regime's chances of survival are still high enough even if the economic situation worsens ("New EU Sanctions against Belarus: What Will Be Their Economic Effect?" 2021; "Western Sanctions on Belarus" 2021).

Can it be said that sanctions are the best political strategy within the Western arsenal? It is a necessary but hardly sufficient step, demonstrating that the West is concerned (as the EU's preferred wording usually goes), drawing red lines for authoritarians regarding inexcusable actions, and increasing Lukashenko's costs for further escalation. At the same time, the protracted process of adopting painful sectoral sanctions and their current limited scope ("Most Belarus Potash Exports Not Affected by EU Sanctions – Analysts" 2021) indicates that the West is still undecided on what and how to do with Belarus. There are active hardliners on Belarus policy such as the Baltic states ("Lithuania Wants Sanctions on Belarus for Helping Migrants Cross to EU" 2021), which require that more be done and faster. Nevertheless, despite the forced landing of an international flight and the escalated migration crisis, the Belarusian question is still overshadowed by more strategic issues like relations with Russia and China, permanently urgent problems in the Middle East (Afghanistan most recently), and others. Even with some sanctions present, the political resolve to deal with the Belarusian problem looks insufficient ("Can Belarus Be Free? Yes, But the West Will Need to Show More Resolve – and Less Fear of Putin" 2021). These arguments, taken together, explain the self-restrictiveness of European action. Equally, they point to the fact that current EU policy is the maximum the

West can do – the highest common denominator in the EU under current circumstances. However, this consensual policy is efficient but not effective. Ironically, it was not a Western resolution to deal with authoritarianism in Belarus that led to adopting the fourth package of (sectoral) sanctions but Lukashenko's provocative behavior instead. The forceful landing of a Ryanair flight with 126 passengers from the EU and other countries on board in May 2021 was a signal the EU could not ignore. The launch of the migrant crisis on Lithuanian, Latvian, and Polish borders provided additional arguments for keeping Belarus on the agenda even for the most skeptical EU states. The West is concerned but lacks an elaborated strategy ("EU Sanctions Belarus but Still Lacks a Strategy" 2021). Sending signals like 'we don't like what you do' does not necessarily change the target's actual behavior, which is evident in the case of Belarus. For the West to become a relevant factor that Lukashenko considers before taking provocative actions, a much more proactive policy is needed.

However, these objective limits (explained above) mean that the West realistically does not have much to offer as game-changing measures. Accordingly, the second-best strategy now is keeping the issue alive and maintaining external pressure. The situation is somewhat reminiscent of the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states during the Cold War. At that time, the West (the United States) did not recognize the forced incorporation of the Baltic States, which allowed it to maintain diplomatic missions and to support the institutions operating in exile. Such a policy ultimately allowed the restoration of the independence of the Baltic States when geopolitical circumstances changed. The non-recognition of occupation and support for structures operating abroad was an important factor that, under changed conditions, worked in conjunction with the domestic resistance movements and helped re-establish Baltic statehood. Although different from the Baltic States during the Cold War, the situation in Belarus has similar features. The West does not recognize the Lukashenko regime but refrains from decisive action due to the unfavorable balance of power in relations with Russia. The West also supports actors and institutions of the Belarusian opposition in exile. Although it does not have sufficient leverage and political will to initiate change now, a policy of non-recognition and support can be strategically far-sighted. First, it allows to keep up the pressure on the regime and forces it to make mistakes. Second, it supports opposition actors and enables them to keep the issue on the international agenda. The Baltic states had been waiting for a change of circumstances for more than 50 years. That is

the downside of such a strategy. Nevertheless, they eventually were able to reassert their independence, which was an achievement itself. When most of the theoretical preconditions for sanctions to be effective are absent in the Belarusian case (Jonavičius 2021), the proposed policy may seem unambitious. However, it can be the one that allows the West to remain involved, demonstrate support for democratic movements and processes, and maintain the possibility of becoming more active when the opportunity arises.

Lukashenko's Window of Opportunity

So far, Lukashenko still possesses the monopoly of violence, Russian support still cushions the Belarusian economy, and limited sanctions themselves have an intangible effect. As a result, albeit with increased costs, Lukashenko has room not to react to Western demands and pressures. Perhaps the most striking result of the Western sanctions on Belarus has been the reduced freedom of manouevre of Lukashenko in relations with Russia. As Lukashenko's behavior has shown, the dictator has become desperate and taken most unpredictable and dangerous courses of action instead of negotiating and making concessions. The most recent events give an impression that an intensification of the conflict is a deliberate strategy for Lukashenko. The aim of this strategy may be to involve Russia as much as possible in its confrontation with the West and to raise the stakes for Western capitals by intimidating them with growing problems with Russia. The Belarusian leader founds himself in a *zugzwang* situation – whatever he does to suppress domestic opposition worsens relations with the West. Deteriorating relations with the West, in turn, lead to shrinking options in relations with Russia. The diminishing capacity to resist Russian pressure essentially destroys the sovereignty and independence that the dictator has cherished for so long.

Why is the escalation of the crisis in the interest of Lukashenko? There are two reasons. First, increasing the possibility of the conflict in the current context may be helpful for the regime to deter the West from taking more radical steps, such as harder sanctions or other kinetic steps. Lukashenko has been smartly trying to present Western pressure against him as inevitably harming Russia's interests. By trying to involve Russia in his confrontation with the West ("Russian Troops to Be Deployed to Belarus in Case of Threat of War – Lukashenko" 2021). Lukashenko plays on the fears of major European states not to irritate Russia. Second, there is an apparent

domestic reason to escalate the tensions, as it keeps the security services and the army under complete control in case of repeated domestic unrest. This gives additional justification for maintaining a high level of preparedness for the security services, which is necessary to prevent protests at home – the well-known 'rallying around the flag' effect.

An ideal option for the regime in the existing situation would be the return to 'business as usual' – with Lukashenko in strict control over internal processes and Belarus continuing to balance between Russia and the West without associating itself too closely with either of them. Lukashenko has become accustomed to living this way for decades, so it would be most rational for him to change the situation as little as possible. Though not impossible, this scenario is hard to realize in a pure form. Lukashenko's recent actions suggest that he has chosen to exercise maximum control over internal processes and demonstrate his importance to Russia. That importance is emphasized by presenting Belarus as Russia's last ally, warranting Russia's military and geopolitical commitment. Probably to convince Russia, Lukashenko even publicly stated that Belarus is no longer a neutral state ("Lukashenko Opines on Mentioning Belarus' Neutrality in New Constitution" 2021). This multivector foreign policy has long been a factor in the regime's limited space for maneuver in relations with Russia. Lukashenko has repeatedly defended the neutrality and sovereignty of Belarus as his essential values earlier, which had acted as rhetorical twists and turns designed to create negotiating levers with both Russia and the West ("Беларусь скоро перестанет стремиться к нейтралитету. Зачем это Лукашенко?" 2021). Abandonment even of rhetorical neutrality also means the end of the declarative multivector foreign policy. In turn, Belarus is left face to face with the Kremlin.

To avoid such an unpleasant confrontation, Lukashenko desperately seeks leverage to preserve his status. Lukashenko plays a dangerous game with almost no other options (acceptable from its point of view) under the pressure of both internal and external circumstances. Losing the previously established basis for internal legitimacy, Lukashenko and his circle rely on the only remaining pillar of support at home – the loyalty of security structures and their brutal response to any manifestation of opposition. The protesters and the free media in general, civil society institutions, or any expression of free thought are considered a threat to the regime. This domestic terror is effective in the short term, but its consequences are unpredictable in the medium to long term. Consequently, becoming a police

state complicates access to previously available external sources of stability. Having played the balancing role of buffer between Russia and the West for many years, Lukashenko has essentially lost that possibility today. Paradoxically, the use of repression averted a revolution (so far) but eliminated the option of flirtation with the West as a counterweight to Russia's uncomfortably increasing pressure. As a result, Lukashenko's window of opportunity to return to business as usual is narrowing. The desperate autocrat is looking for any way to survive and will certainly not choose the means or calculate their costs for Belarus or its people. Having the 'Zapad 2021' military exercises in mind, this room for provocation increases significantly.

* * *

The situation in which Lukashenko has pushed the country is difficult to predict and remains unsustainable. The dictator is determined to take virtually any action to maintain the regime and guarantee his personal survival. International obligations or internal moral brakes essentially do not constrain him. Under constant domestic pressure and increasingly isolated from the West, the regime remains face to face with Russia, which has supported it so far. However, Russia's interests are increasingly at odds with Lukashenko's plans, and Moscow's arsenal is much broader and equally morally and internationally unrestricted. At the current stage, the Belarusian leader is desperately looking for ways to maintain the necessity of his role in the system and thus ensure a greater personal immunity regarding any future actions by the Kremlin. In relations with the West, Lukashenko is trying to get Russia into the game to deter the West from imposing further restrictions and restrictions. His actions to date – excessive violence, reckless dealings with opponents, grounding international flights, and creating international (migration) crises – are proof of this unpredictability. A cornered, unpredictable dictator determined to take any action for survival makes all attempts to predict the future difficult to justify by a rational logic.

In a broader perspective, that means virtually any option of future developments remains open – from Ceaușescu in Romania to Gaddafi in Libya, Maduro in Venezuela or even Kim Jong Un in North Korea. Even the overthrow of Plahotniuc by the joint efforts of Russia and the West in Moldova is not an impossible scenario in Belarus, as Lukashenko is currently causing a nuisance for almost everyone. However, any of these scenarios imply significant risks, and every relevant player prefers to wait for others' mistakes

rather than to take the initiative and act first. Stuck in a corner and feeling the reluctance of outside actors to act decisively, Lukashenko is desperately looking for ways to strengthen his position and is not afraid to make the most unexpected and dangerous decisions.

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Conclusion

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In many ways, we live in a new world. The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath reshaped societies all across the globe. Many of the restrictions imposed to contain the virus were mirrored across the West and in Russia on the domestic level, and they were justified by their respective authorities with much of the same technocratic and procedural language. It should have been able to establish additional fora for collaboration and cooperation in such a depoliticized environment. This chance, according to a broad institutionalist interpretation, should have bled into other areas of the Russian-Western interaction, allowing for the establishment of a possible détente. Despite the promise of this new world, international relations have continued to follow the same patterns that they did before the pandemic.

Considering these shifts, the opinions expressed in the preceding chapters beg an essential question: is it even possible to reach a shared understanding? The pandemic presented an unprecedented opportunity to do so, but it did not materialize into anything consistently workable. In a distinct vein, practical interactions between the West and Russia unrelated to the pandemic demonstrated that concessions to the worldviews of both sides are possible, even though such concessions can create some discontent. From the deliberations on the current escalation in Ukraine to remarks on the transit of gas through Belarus, it has been shown that at the very least, an understanding of why the other player acts the way it does based upon its own professed logic can be established. Nevertheless, these practical rhetorical concessions for the sake of interaction and preserving an open line of communication do not mean that any credence is given to the opposing side's concerns. Maybe that is all we can hope for.

In this volume, we have addressed developments and changes within Russia, ranging from sources of domestic support and discontent to perceptions of the international system. We delved into Russia's deepening partnership with China and what this means for the future global balance of power. We surveyed Russia's informational influence and narrative control

in the Baltics and beyond. We looked at both specific cases of these transformations as well as systemic trends in general. Yet, we still remain locked in the same paradigm from 2015, when the first Conference on Russia was convened.

Despite our efforts to find common ground, we are left with two inimical worldviews: one Western and one Russian. The Western image of the ideal world is one that is governed by rule of law and liberal democratic norms, the tenability of which has been shaken by the loss of Afghanistan, inconsistencies between professed values and necessary sanitary regimes, and a widespread internal loss of trust in institutions. Conversely, the Russian perspective sees an inevitable shift toward a global concert of great powers and mutually exclusive spheres of influence, all the while ignoring the dangers of riding the dragon to reach this multipolar Promised Land, which has been enshrined in the Russian foreign policy imagination since at least the late 1990s.

One issue is common between these two ideal world orders. Realities on the ground will always complicate their actual realization, and each side can blame the other for any flaws or imperfections. Whether it be the supposed Western support for Color Revolutions in Moscow or the Kremlin's machinations to strengthen populist parties in the West, each side serves for the other as a convenient scapegoat for very serious domestic woes that have much deeper roots than simple foreign interference.

At the present, ostensibly unifying global concerns such as the COVID-19 pandemic (and possibly more, such as climate change and environmental protection) have only served to widen the chasm between Russia and the West. Internationally, Russia still perceives the West, particularly its leadership with the United States at the helm of NATO, as the greatest threat to its interests. As a result, understood as zero-sum game, any former Soviet territories that become allied with the Western are regarded as a loss. To counter such ostensible security threats, Russia modifies its doctrines, continues the multigenerational ideological struggle through educational programs, develops malicious narratives about the West, and established geopolitical alliances in which one defining factor stands out above all others: security cooperation defined by a common vision of shared enemies. Furthermore, a more assertive, revisionist, and determined Russia in the face of declining domestic capacities is implied by a variety of new hybrid tactics. However, one has to wonder if the diminishing economy, shrinking population, forceful measures by the regime, and even narrower and

sanctioned elites do not act as compelling enough reasons to prioritize internal issues over global intervention.

Nevertheless, The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, has demonstrated how quickly new paradigms – both external and internal – can emerge in times of unanticipated crisis. We have seen how a pandemic alone was insufficient to prompt such a change in Western-Russian relations. Perhaps only the next unexpected global crisis will provide the impetus for meaningful cooperation between Russia and the West.

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